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A NEW AESTHETIC ARGUMENT FOR THEISM

Noah McKay

I outline and defend a version of the aesthetic argument for the existence of God, according to which theism explains our capacity for subjective aesthetic experience better than its major competitor, naturalism. I argue that naturalism fails to adequately explain the nature and range of our aesthetic experiences, since these are amenable neither to standard Darwinian explanation nor to explanation in terms of more complex sociobiological mechanisms such as sexual selection or between-group selection. "I concede that aesthetic experience may be an evolutionary spandrel but argue that the conjunction of this thesis with naturalism is highly improbable given the prevalence of beauty in the natural world." Theism, on the other hand, furnishes a robust personal explanation of aesthetic experience, since on theism God has both good reasons to bring such experiences about and the power to do so. I address an objection to the theistic explanation from broadly negative aesthetic experiences, arguing that God plausibly has many reasons to allow these. I contend that this formulation of the argument is superior to other extant versions, since it does not depend on controversial probability judgments, dubious analogies between natural phenomena and human artifacts, or objectivism about aesthetic values.

1. Introduction

When grand aesthetic thrills rush upon me—when I gaze at the stars above the Swiss Alps, lose myself in a musical swell, or watch the sun set over the Rocky Mountains—I almost invariably find myself thinking: *There must be a God, or this would not be happening*. I would not describe these episodes as perceptions or apprehensions of God (although I have no doubt that some people perceive God in or through beautiful things, and I suspect that I may have done so once or twice). They are more like rough-and ready inferences; when I am in the throes of an aesthetic experience, I just cannot imagine that it is anything less than the work of divine providence. Most certainly, it cannot be the mere product of impersonal, material forces. The purpose of this essay is to determine whether there is anything to these inferences, or rather whether these inferences can be developed into a cogent argument for theism.

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I think they can be. In the following sections, I will expound and defend an aesthetic argument for the existence of God:

1. Human beings are capable of having and do have profound aesthetic experiences in abundance.
2. Naturalism does not adequately explain (1).
3. Theism adequately explains (1).
4. Therefore, all else being equal, theism is more probable than naturalism.

Obviously, the premises of the argument need defending. But first, a few clarifications are in order: by "theism," I mean the view that there is an all-powerful, all-knowing, morally perfect, incorporeal Creator of the universe who desires for humans to know him and to love what is good. By "naturalism," I mean the view that there is no such being and that only the physical world exists. I leave these definitions intentionally broad, though I acknowledge that naturalism and theism come in many narrower forms. Since theism and naturalism are the two reigning paradigms in contemporary metaphysics, I will stick to comparing these two. More work (and more space) would be required to show, for instance, that the evidence of aesthetic experience favors theism over pantheism or idealism.

"Aesthetic experience" is an ambiguous phrase: it has been stretched to apply equally to the sight of the Aurora Borealis and to the sight of a plastic lobster resting on a rotary dialer.[1] I am going to narrow the field a bit. The way I am using it, "aesthetic experience" refers to the experience of awe, reverence, and delight that typically accompanies the perception or contemplation of something beautiful. (Perhaps there are experiences that deserve to be called "aesthetic" that do not fit this characterization, but if there are, I am not concerned with them in this essay.) These experiences, or their components, come in varying degrees of intensity: for instance, I may react with greater awe, reverence, and delight to an impassioned recitation of Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" than to the sight of a robin outside my window, depending on my tastes. And when I perceive a daffodil in the grass, the accompanying aesthetic experience may be predominantly one of delight, and comparatively less one of awe or reverence—although those components are still present—whereas the reverse may hold when I gaze upward at the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral. A good explanation of (1) must account for this whole range of aesthetic experiences, from those of the merely pretty to those of the overwhelmingly sublime. (As you might expect, the latter are more difficult to explain than the former.) I do not intend this as an analysis of aesthetic experience, but rather as a general characterization of the kinds of aesthetic experiences I will focus on.

[1] I once saw an artwork like this at the Tate Modern. It was meant, according to the plaque beneath the display, to immortalize the artist's lobster fetish. Perhaps there is an aesthetic version of the problem of evil lurking here.

Aesthetic experiences are distinct from aesthetic apprehensions or aesthetic judgments. Having an aesthetic experience in response to a perception of an object is distinct from judging that object to be beautiful, though such experiences and judgments usually go hand-in-hand. An axiological skeptic might be moved to awe by a brilliant sunset but bitterly refuse to judge that it is beautiful, for fear of succumbing to delusion. And a person who finds a painting dull or confusing might nonetheless judge it to be beautiful if enough trusted authorities judge it to be so. Similarly, having an aesthetic experience is distinct from apprehending mind-independent aesthetic properties. Suppose our skeptic is right that there are no such properties. It does not follow that he cannot react to a sunset with awe, reverence, and delight.

Aesthetic experience is also distinct from artistic ability. Many scholars have pointed out that producing artworks involves a wide range of adaptive skills, such as creative imagination, attention, spatial reasoning, and mind-reading, and some have argued that we can explain artistic ability by explaining the evolution of these more basic skills.[2] This sounds highly plausible to me. However, I am concerned with our capacity for aesthetic experience, not artistic ability. These are obviously distinct; many of us (myself included) are able to appreciate, or even be overwhelmed by, the beauty of great artworks without being able to produce them. And most artists are able to produce artworks that they themselves do not find beautiful (although, for obvious reasons, this rarely happens). The point is that the ability to make something and the disposition to respond to it subjectively in a certain way are almost always independent. Our ability to make artworks cannot explain our tendency to have aesthetic experiences any more than our ability to grow food explains our ability to taste it.[3] Furthermore, aesthetic experiences of the kind I am interested in are not responses to artworks in particular; they are just as often produced by natural phenomena. So, even if an explanation of our ability to *make* art would suffice as an explanation of why we *like* art (which is doubtful, in my view), it would not necessarily suffice as an explanation of our capacity for aesthetic experience.

With definitions out of the way, a few distinctive features of the argument deserve comment. First, it is abductive: it weighs competing hypotheses based on their explanatory power. Note that the argument is not intended to demonstrate the various components of theism—for instance, that God is all-powerful or all-knowing. I am not trying to build theism from scratch. Rather, the argument is supposed to show that theism, considered as an already-complex hypothesis, satisfactorily explains (1) and that (1) is therefore evidence for theism. Second, the phenomena

[2]Consoli, "Emergence of the Modern Mind"; Zaidel, "Evolution of Aesthetics and Beauty"; Hirstein, "Evolution of Aesthetic Experience."

[3]Perhaps the naturalist will object that making art requires the ability to predict what will generate aesthetic experiences in others, and this predictive ability requires a capacity for aesthetic experience. I think that is true, but it presupposes a capacity for aesthetic experience on the part of those viewing (or hearing, etc.) artworks. It cannot explain this capacity.

to be explained are subjective experiences or dispositions to have such experiences. This is in contrast to most other versions of the argument from beauty, which posit objective facts about aesthetic value and seek to explain these facts or the reliability of our judgments about them. (I will compare my argument to some of these versions below.) For convenience, I will sometimes use objectivist language, but I will not make use of objectivist premises.

Third, although theism does not follow from (1)–(3), (4)—which is, notably, much weaker than theism—does. Fourth and finally, the conclusion of the argument is epistemic and relativized: accepting (4) does not commit one to theism, or even to the claim that theism is more likely true than false, or even to the claim that theism is on the whole more probable than naturalism. Accepting (4) also does not commit one to any claims about the absolute probabilities of theism or naturalism given (1). But accepting (4) *does* entail recognizing that the phenomenon of aesthetic experience constitutes a good reason to prefer theism to naturalism (even if it is potentially outweighed by countervailing reasons).

2. Defending the Premises

In this section, I will offer a very brief defense of each premise of the argument, with the caveat that responding to objections will require substantial augmentation later on.

If you do not already believe (1), I probably cannot help you. But I suspect that all, or nearly all, of my readers will have had at least one experience of the kind referenced in (1), and most will have had several. At the very least, it is easy to elicit testimony about aesthetic experiences from almost anyone. So, I will assume that (1) is not a matter of controversy.

The argument for (2) goes like this: if naturalism is true, then our cognitive traits (along with most of our other traits) are the products of eons of evolution. So, the explanation of those traits is a Darwinian one—they must have provided our distant ancestors with some significant adaptive advantage that empowered them to outperform other primates in the struggle for survival.[4] (Another possibility, which I will discuss in due course, is that they are spandrels. Let us bracket this for a moment.) But it is not plausible that aesthetic cognition in particular provided our ancestors with this kind of advantage. Alvin Plantinga puts the point nicely:

> Take our love of beauty, for example: here it isn't easy to see what an evolutionary explanation would look like . . . There is the glorious grandeur and beauty of mountains—Mt. Baker, for example, or Mt. Shuksan, or the Grand Teton, or any of a hundred more. There is the splendor of a craggy

[4]As an anonymous reviewer pointed out to me, standard neo-Darwinism is not part-and-parcel of *all* varieties of naturalism. Some naturalists might be open to semi-Hegelian views according to which there are irreducibly teleological forces at work over and above Darwinian processes. For a view along these rough lines, see Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*. These versions of naturalism could well be less vulnerable to my argument.

> ocean shore, but also of a tiny highly articulate flower. Alan Shepard, the first American in space, gasped at the sheer beauty of the Earth as seen from space. It is hard to see how a capacity to find marvelous beauty in such things would be of adaptive use to our hunter-gatherer ancestors.[5]

Prima facie, naturalism looks to be in explanatory trouble. But a few popular solutions have been proposed. It has been widely claimed, for instance, that aesthetic sensibilities enhanced our ancestors' fitness by helping them to identify suitable environments or useful objects. Thus John Barrow:

> Here, one recognizes the importance of cues like cloud formation, changes in temperature and weather outlook, and seasonal variations in the colour and vitality of plant life, together with the water levels in rivers and streams. Sensitivity to these environmental indicators has a clear adaptive advantage over insensitivity. The presence of trees, greenery, and water offers an instant evaluation of the suitability of a potential habitat.[6]

This proposal is not without empirical merit; Dennis Dutton points to statistical evidence that humans have an aesthetic preference for landscapes that resemble the fertile savannah our evolutionary ancestors purportedly inhabited.[7] And recent studies in the burgeoning field of neuroaesthetics suggest that some of the brain processes involved in the pragmatic appraisal of ordinary objects are also involved in aesthetic experiences.[8] Some evolutionary psychologists have also speculated that certain aesthetic attunements gave our ancestors the ability to keep closer track of time. A primate who noticed the approach of dusk or the onset of spring and was able to discern the rhythm of war drums would, one might argue, do better than a primate who lacked these capabilities. And these skills might be linked to an aesthetic appreciation for sunsets, colorful foliage, and music.[9]

These proposals do little or nothing to weaken the rationale for (2), for at least two reasons. First, they fail to identify scenarios in which aesthetic experiences are truly fitness-enhancing. In order for a heritable trait to truly enhance an organism's fitness, it must give that organism an advantage that the organism's other traits, taken together, do not. In other words, it must contribute an advantage *over and above* those contributed by the organism's other traits. Otherwise, the trait in question will make no difference to the organism's survival or reproductive success. Furthermore, it is not sufficient for the trait in question to be truly fitness-enhancing that it confers *some* adaptive advantage on the organism in *some* conceivable circumstance. It must give the organism an advantage that strongly impacts its ability to survive and reproduce compared to members of the same species who do not have the trait.

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[5]Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, 132.
[6]Barrow, *Artful Universe*, 94.
[7]Dutton, "Aesthetics and Evolutionary Psychology," 697–98.
[8]Brown and Gao, "The Neuroscience of Beauty."
[9]Barrow, *Artful Universe*, 94; Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, 132–33.

Do the aesthetic sensibilities envisaged by Barrow and others meet these conditions? I do not think so. While it is highly plausible that what Barrow calls *sensitivity* to environmental factors like the setting of the sun and the blossoming of trees is fitness-enhancing, it is far less obvious that *aesthetic appreciation* of these phenomena in particular is fitness-enhancing.[10] After all, I do not have to be moved to tears by a sunset to notice that the sun is setting; I am sometimes intensely drawn by the smell and sight of food, despite the fact that I rarely or never react to these perceptions with awe or reverence; and I am capable of judging an environment to be fertile or desolate, safe or dangerous, and of acting on that judgment without having any aesthetic experience at all (not all green fields are beautiful, and not all rocky ravines are ugly). Humans regularly display high cognitive sensitivity to things without reacting with awe, reverence, and delight. And it is terribly difficult to think of a realistic situation in which aesthetic appreciation of a phenomenon would have provided our ancestors with a significant adaptive advantage that a non-aesthetic kind of sensitivity would not have provided. Indeed, there is reason to think that aesthetic appreciation presupposes other kinds of sensitivity: I cannot find something beautiful without first noticing it and, at least in most cases, paying attention to it. So, it is doubtful that there is any adaptive work left over for aesthetic experience to do. But this implies that a capacity for aesthetic experiences is not truly fitness-enhancing.

Perhaps the naturalist could argue that aesthetic experiences bolster non-aesthetic kinds of sensitivity. After all, some extraordinarily beautiful things "grab" our attention or arouse our desires in a way that they would not if they were not beautiful. And this might enhance fitness in an indirect way, by amplifying those adaptive advantages that accrue to these non-aesthetic kinds of sensitivity.

I do not think this reply will work, since there is not a very strong connection between finding something beautiful and finding it striking or desirable. Plenty of things are striking—in the sense that they "grab" our attention—that are not beautiful, like loud noises, odd shapes, or bright flashes. And not all beautiful things are striking: a tranquil field full of wildflowers is beautiful, but probably will not grab the attention of passers-by who are otherwise occupied. Things are striking, it seems, in virtue of their surprising, unusual, or alarming sensible properties, not because they are beautiful (although it is possible that many or most of the sensible properties that make things beautiful also happen to make them striking). Of course, it is plausible that there is a distinctively aesthetic kind of strikingness, the kind we are talking about when we say that something

[10]I am interpreting "sensitivity" to mean broad cognitive responsiveness to something. So you are sensitive to something if you tend to notice it, consider it, desire it, fear it, and the like. If Barrow means something more than this by "sensitivity," then his claim is not obviously true. If he means by "sensitivity" some kind of aesthetic sensitivity, he is just begging the question.

is "strikingly beautiful." But if that is what the naturalist means by "striking," then he will have to show that being struck aesthetically, as opposed to non-aesthetically, is fitness-enhancing. But that is exactly the problem his rejoinder was supposed to solve in the first place.

Could aesthetic sensitivity amplify adaptive desires? I have my doubts. While it is true that beauty renders things desirable, it does so in a distinctly aesthetic way. I might find a sunset to be aesthetically "desirable," but I do not find it desirable in the sense that I want to consume it or possess it. When I delight aesthetically in an arrangement of fruit, I do not want to *eat* the fruit. Insofar as I desire the fruit for its beauty, I desire to *keep looking at* the fruit. And it is hard to see how that distinctly aesthetic kind of desire could be adaptively advantageous. Most certainly, it does not amplify my carnal desire for nutritious food. (Maybe finding the appearance of the fruit appetizing would do so, but I doubt that is an aesthetic experience of the kind I am concerned with.) So this is not a promising route to showing that aesthetic experience is fitness-enhancing.

There is a second, more serious difficulty with these evolutionary-psychological accounts: they are a very poor fit with the range of aesthetic experiences humans in fact tend to have. We do not in general reserve our aesthetic esteem for things that are safe or useful. Desert landscapes, poisonous animals, and snow-capped mountain peaks are among the most beautiful sights on Earth, despite the fact that they are, on the whole, hostile to human life. My favorite example in this regard is the sea swallow, also known as the blue angel, a variety of sea slug with a deadly sting. It is the most beautiful living creature I have ever seen—I won't even try to describe it. (I encourage you to search for an image yourself.) Needless to say, an aesthetic fascination with sea swallows probably did not help any prehistoric hominin survive or reproduce.

Furthermore, we are aesthetically attuned to many phenomena that had little or no relevance to our ancestors' survival or reproduction: distant nebulae that can only be photographed by telescopes, for instance, or deep-sea creatures like the bioluminescent comb jelly. Our evolutionary forebears were so far removed causally from these phenomena that no reaction to them, aesthetic or otherwise, could have played a role in their struggle for survival. Most genres of music probably fall into this category, since they are of relatively recent provenance. "Perhaps," suggests Plantinga, "we can see how love of something like heavy metal rock could be adaptively useful, possibly like the marshal airs that encourage troops going into battle. But Mozart's Ave Verum Corpus? "Bach's B-minor Mass"?"[11]

In practice, our aesthetic preferences for hostile or indifferent phenomena often manifest in what is, from a Darwinian perspective, maladaptive behavior. Many climbers have risked their lives for the promise of a panoramic view from a mountaintop. Many artists and musicians have

[11]Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, 132.

toiled for years in the pursuit of beauty, to the detriment of their financial security or reproductive success. (Raphael, Botticelli, and Van Gogh were all single.) I hope to one day dwell in the mountains of Colorado, despite their infertile soil, rough terrain, extreme weather, and relative lack of oxygen, because they are profoundly, magnificently beautiful. None of these behaviors is fitness-enhancing; in a tenuous struggle for survival, they might get a vulnerable hominin killed. And plenty of other, less extreme aesthetic pursuits—stargazing, for instance, or picking wildflowers—are at best a waste of time from a Darwinian perspective.

Of course, there is room for the naturalist to argue that our aesthetic preferences for hostile or indifferent phenomena are a necessary consequence of our aesthetic preferences for fertile land, nutritious food, and the like. But it is hard to see how this could be: a sea swallow bears no visual similarity to an open field, and a nebula is utterly unlike anything you will find on the savannah. And it is even more difficult to think of an adaptively useful parallel to Mozart's "Ave Verum Corpus" (especially since it features no percussion). The number and variety of hostile or indifferent things in the universe that we find beautiful utterly dwarfs the number and variety of useful things we find beautiful (if only because most of the universe is beautiful and at the same time hostile or indifferent to human life). But even if the naturalist is right, he has unwittingly undermined the very adaptive advantage claimed for aesthetic experience. If, in order for our ancestors to develop aesthetic preferences for suitable habitats, useful objects, and informative environmental cues they also had to develop aesthetic preferences for unsuitable habitats, useless or dangerous objects, and irrelevant environmental cues, then these traits should have cancelled out, adaptively speaking. There is no Darwinian sense to be made, it seems, of the range and variety of our aesthetic experiences.

So, (2) seems to be on rather solid ground, at least for now (I will revisit this premise when I consider objections to the argument in later sections.) What about (3)? This premise is, at least *prima facie*, highly plausible. Whether or not we are objectivists about aesthetic values, I expect it is uncontroversial that aesthetic experiences *themselves* are intrinsic goods. (At least, it should be uncontroversial that, if theism is true—and, consequently, there really *are* such things as intrinsic goods—then aesthetic experiences are intrinsically good. And that is all I need for my argument.) And this is not merely because they are pleasurable; the distinctively aesthetic nature of such experiences is itself something we value. If God does exist, then, he has reasons to populate the mental world with aesthetic experiences, simply because they are good in themselves. But beyond that, aesthetic experiences are sometimes described as revelatory of a higher reality, or even revelatory of theism: biblical authors, such as the APOSTLE Paul and the Psalmist, suggest that natural beauty testifies to God's power, majesty, and divinity.[12] And among theists, aesthetic

[12]Rom 1:20; Ps 19:1.

experiences are often described as occasions of longing for or communion with God. Thus Eleonore Stump:

> Beauty is a road to God for us because . . . it arouses feelings in us which make us long for God's presence or produce in us peace even in a fallen world or render us joyful in the good we find around us . . . Somehow the process of evolution and God's design of us has made us such that we apprehend beauty through our senses; and, having apprehended beauty in this way, we long for an incorporeal God and rejoice in him.[13]

If aesthetic experience provides epistemic and spiritual access to God, motivates right worship, and stirs our religious affections, then God has powerful reasons to equip human beings with aesthetic faculties. And of course, God has the power and knowledge to guarantee that (1) obtains. So, theism provides a satisfactory explanation of (1).

So much for my initial defense of the argument. I will now offer some reasons to think that it is not only sound but is probably the best route to showing that beauty is evidence for theism.

3. Alternative Aesthetic Arguments

Mine is by no means the first attempt to produce an aesthetic argument for God's existence. Although this area of natural theology has been broadly neglected, it has a few recent pioneers. In this section, I will briefly survey alternative versions of the argument, raise potential (or extant) objections to those versions, and argue that the approach I have taken is immune to these objections.

The most oft-cited aesthetic argument for theism made in recent years is presented by Richard Swinburne in his book, *The Existence of God*. Although Swinburne purports to offer nothing more than an initial sketch of an argument, his sketch is robust, if brief. The argument is explicitly Bayesian: that is, Swinburne argues that, where "T" stands for theism, "B" stands for the existence of a broadly beautiful world, and "K" stands for relevant background knowledge, $P(T/B\&K) > P(T/K)$. In other words, the existence of a broadly beautiful world renders theism more probable, epistemically speaking, than it would be otherwise.[14] (While Swinburne thinks that the argument is strongest on the assumption that beauty is objective, he notes that it can be rephrased so that it is about humankind's capacity to experience the world as beautiful.)

By far the most serious weakness of Swinburne's argument is its Bayesian component. For in order to show that $P(T/B\&K) > P(T/K)$, Swinburne must show that $P(B/T\&K) > P(B/{\sim}T\&K)$. In other words, he must show that the world is more likely to be about as beautiful as it is given theism than given atheism. But in order to show that, he must have some idea of the value of $P(B/T\&K)$. And this means he must have

[13]Stump, "Beauty as a Road to God," 24.
[14]Swinburne, *Existence of God*, 190–91.

some idea of how likely God would be to create a world that is about as beautiful as ours.

That is a pretty tall order. To make matters worse, recent work in the epistemology of religion suggests that this kind of knowledge is positively unattainable. Over the past couple decades, Stephen Wykstra, Michael Bergmann, William Alston, and others have developed a popular solution to the evidential argument from evil for atheism, called "skeptical theism." Skeptical theism, in a nutshell, is the view that, given our enormous epistemic limitations, we should assume that we are in the dark with respect to what possible goods and evils there are, what necessary connections hold between these possible goods and evils, and what amounts of good or evil are possibly manifest in particular states of affairs. And this implies that we are in the dark regarding the morally justifying reasons God has or might have for permitting evil.[15]

Hud Hudson has argued that a similar skepticism is warranted with regard to aesthetic values. For precisely the same reasons advanced by Wykstra, Bergmann, and Alston—which Hudson considers to be "independently immensely plausible"[16]—we should assume that we are in the dark with respect to what possible aesthetic values and disvalues there are, what necessary connections hold between these possible values and disvalues, and what amounts of beauty or ugliness are possibly manifest in particular states of affairs.[17] (To accommodate aesthetic subjectivism, we could state this in terms of possible distributions of aesthetic experiences, rather than objective aesthetic properties.) But this assumption completely undermines our confidence in conditional probability judgments like the one required by Swinburne's argument. So, for those who take skeptical theism seriously (which is probably most theists, and at least one naturalist with a dog in the fight[18]), the Bayesian approach is a non-starter.

Mark Wynn has proposed a different form of the aesthetic argument drawn from the work of the early-twentieth-century philosopher F. R. Tennant. Wynn states the argument thus:

A. If nature has its origins in forces which are indifferent to aesthetic values, then it is no more likely to exhibit beauty *in general* than are the works of human beings, whenever these works are made without artistic intent.

B. But nature is uniformly beautiful, whereas the products of human beings are rarely beautiful in the absence of artistic intent.

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[15]Wykstra, "Rowe's Noseeum Arguments"; Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism"; Alston, "Argument From Evil."

[16]Hudson, "Swinburne's Aesthetic Appeal," 68.

[17]Hudson, "Swinburne's Aesthetic Appeal," 75–77.

[18]Rowe, "Evidential Argument From Evil," acknowledges that skeptical theism is plausible and is sufficient to undermine his early versions of the evidential argument from evil.

C. So the premise must be denied: we should suppose that most probably nature does not derive from forces which are indifferent to aesthetic values.

D. In turn this suggests that nature is the work of a mind, and more particularly of a mind attuned to aesthetic kinds of fulfillment.[19]

Wynn takes (A) to rest on an analogy between human artifacts and the natural world. Although he addresses some Humean objections to (A), he begins by assuming that it is in principle possible to move analogically between the natural world and human artifacts.[20] But this is doubtful, since there is a stark disanalogy between them: while the natural world featured causally in the evolution of our cognitive traits, most human artifacts did not. And this disanalogy is highly relevant, since it means that natural beauty, unlike artificial beauty, is potentially explicable in terms of Darwinian forces, rather than artistic intent.

Consider a parallel argument: artificial mixtures of ingredients are unlikely in general to be nutritious or tasty apart from culinary intent. But natural foods are generally nutritious and tasty. So, by analogy, natural foods are probably the work of a mind attuned to culinary kinds of fulfillment. This argument is formally identical to Wynn's and suffers from precisely the same disanalogy. And clearly, no naturalist would find it compelling.

So unless Wynn can preserve the analogy by showing that natural beauty is not, in fact, explicable in Darwinian terms—that is, unless he can show that something very close to (2) is true—(A)–(D) will not go through. So (A)–(D), if it is going to be successful, will have to be parasitic on the key premise of (1)–(4). (To his credit, Wynn recognizes that evolutionary-psychological accounts of aesthetic experience are damaging to his argument and tries to address them. But in doing so he slips into straightforwardly abductive language and begins to treat (A)–(D) as an abductive argument.[21] If that was his intent all along, he and I may not be far off.)

Third, Phillip Talon has offered what might be labeled an objective-abductive aesthetic argument for theism. Talon defends aesthetic objectivism on grounds that aesthetic judgment, approval, and disapproval are best understood in a cognitivist way. He then argues that aesthetic objectivism is a better metaphysical fit with Christian theism than with naturalism:

> To sum up, if the Christian God exists, who is beautiful in His very nature, we would expect there to be objective beauty. Because this God is the creator of the world, and it reflects His nature, we would expect the world to be invested with a great amount of objective beauty.[22]

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[19]Wynn, *God and Goodness*, 20. I have changed Wynn's numbering to lettering to avoid confusion between my argument and his.

[20]Wynn, *God and Goodness*, 21–22.

[21]Wynn, *God and Goodness*, 27–35.

[22]Tallon, "The Theistic Argument From Beauty and Play," 334.

The greatest weakness of Tallon's argument is its dependence on aesthetic objectivism. This is not to say that Tallon's arguments for objectivism are poor; I think they are rather persuasive. But aesthetic objectivism is a highly controversial thesis, to put the matter lightly,[23] so the appeal of Tallon's argument is limited.

Fourth and finally, in his famous lecture, "Two Dozen (or so) Arguments for God," Plantinga briefly outlines an argument from aesthetic knowledge for theism. It goes (as best I can tell) like this: if naturalism is true, there is no reason to suppose that our aesthetic judgments match up with the aesthetic values there actually are. But if theism is true, we would expect God to enable us to grasp aesthetic truth. So, if we are going to say that our aesthetic judgments are objectively true, we should prefer theism to naturalism.[24] So far as I can see, this is a good argument. But, like Tallon's, it depends on aesthetic objectivism for its cogency, so its appeal is limited.

The argument I have proposed is immune to the objections raised above. Unlike Swinburne's argument, it does not rely on Bayesian calculations; unlike Wynn's, it does not depend on a dubious analogy between the natural world and human artifacts; and unlike Tallon's and Plantinga's, it does not depend on aesthetic objectivism for its force. So, in these respects, it is preferable to alternative versions of the argument from beauty. Of course, there are plenty of other objections that might be raised to (1)–(4), and the distinctive features of (1)–(4) may invite entirely unique criticisms. In the next section, I will do my best to address some of these.

4. Objections

In this section, I will try to anticipate objections to (1)–(4). Most of the objections I will consider are directed against (2), although I will address challenges to (3) in the latter part of the section. I will conclude that none of them seriously diminishes the force of the aesthetic argument for theism.

4.1. Objections to (2)

In section 2, I mentioned a few proposals made by evolutionary psychologists that might feature in Darwinian explanations of aesthetic experience. While I concluded that these accounts do little or nothing to explain (1), other, more sophisticated evolutionary accounts exist that might do a better job. According to these proposals, the evolution of our aesthetic attunements was not driven by run-of-the-mill natural selection operating on individuals, but by more complex Darwinian forces: most notably, sexual

[23]According to David Chalmers and David Bourget, aesthetic objectivism is a minority position among analytic philosophers, standing at roughly 41% ("What Philosophers Believe"). That is not terrible—it is much higher than I expected—but it is not stellar, either.

[24]Plantinga, "Plantinga's Original 'Two Dozen (Or So) Theistic Arguments,'" 478.

selection and between-group selection.[25] If these mechanisms adequately explain our aesthetic experiences, then (2) is false and the aesthetic argument fails. But I will argue that they do not.

Sexual selection was first proposed as a driving mechanism of evolutionary change by Darwin himself, in *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*. Sexual selection occurs when a given trait is favored, not by environmental pressures *per se*, but by the mating habits of females.[26] The favorite example of this is the peacock's plumage: it is clumsy, makes hiding from predators difficult or impossible, and serves no obvious functional purpose beyond attracting peafowls. But every peacock has it, because peafowls will only mate with males who have brightly colored feathers. So, we might say that the peacock's feathers are fitness-enhancing, not because they help the peacock to survive, but because they bolster his reproductive success.

David Rothenberg, among many others,[27] has argued that, over millions of years, animal species became progressively more beautiful in response to sexual-selective pressures. This process, Rothenburg suggests, was driven by a feedback loop, which began when the female population of a given species developed an aesthetic preference for a particular trait. Since the females predominantly selected mates who carried the favored trait, the next generation of the species carried the genetic material for *both* the favored trait *and* the aesthetic preference for it. As this cycle repeated, the aesthetic taste of the population narrowed, and the favored trait became more uniformly and sharply manifest in the male population. Eventually, members of the species evolved to be magnificently beautiful.[28]

It is easy to see how this kind of explanation could be applied to humans' aesthetic preferences for certain physiological features. Dutton and Zaidel go further and apply it directly to the human capacity for artistic expression: prehistoric men who were capable of impressive artistic feats were judged to be more competent, physically and cognitively, than their peers by young females. After thousands of generations, courtesy of the genetic feedback loop Rothenberg describes, the whole human population had developed both the capacity for artistic expression and a genetically encoded appreciation for art.[29]

So, does sexual selection furnish a Darwinian explanation for (1)? By my lights, not even close. There are several critical problems with the account; I will stick to three of them. First, while it may explain why humans find certain traits or behaviors sexually attractive, it does not explain why

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[25]For two excellent surveys of evolutionary accounts of aesthetic cognition to which I am heavily indebted, see Nadal and Gomez-Puerto, "Evolutionary Approaches," and Zaidel, "Evolution of Aesthetics and Beauty."

[26]Darwin, *Descent of Man*, 241–99.

[27]See Zaidel, "Evolution of Aesthetics and Beauty," for several examples of theories that appeal to sexual selection.

[28]Rothenburg, *Survival of the Beautiful*.

[29]Dutton, "Aesthetics and Evolutionary Psychology"; Zaidel, "Evolution of Aesthetics and Beauty."

we find them beautiful. Aesthetic appreciation and sexual attraction are clearly distinct: I think the Garden of the Gods is very beautiful, but I have never wanted to mate with a sandstone formation (presumably, nobody has). I am sexually attracted to my wife, but I have occasionally found myself contemplating her beauty in a sexually disinterested way (these almost always go together, but the point is they are distinct). And I am sometimes sexually attracted to her even though I can't see her, or even when I am not thinking about what she looks like. Furthermore, humans have clear sexual preferences for traits that are not even plausibly objects of aesthetic experience—stereotypically, for instance, women are attracted to men who are assertive, confident, and funny. Clearly, then, explaining why we find something sexually attractive is not at all sufficient to explain why we find it beautiful (or vice-versa).

Second, sexual selection explains, at best, only our preferences for certain traits or behaviors within our own species. Sexual-selective pressures had absolutely nothing to do with our aesthetic responses to, for instance, frozen lakes or orchids. And it is even difficult to see how they could have fostered an aesthetic appreciation for art*works*, rather than just art*ists*–after all, artworks, on Dutton's and Zaidel's accounts, were nothing more than indicators to females of a *male's* fitness. It simply does not follow, from the fact that a female finds a male's artistic talent sexually attractive, that she also finds his artwork beautiful. So this explanation fails to account for the full range and variety of our aesthetic experiences. (Perhaps it is possible to extend these accounts to say that our receptiveness to beauty in other species is the result of sexual-selective pressure on the psychological makeup of a common evolutionary ancestor. But that is a pretty wild stretch, and it has limited explanatory power, since it is only relevant to living organisms who are our close evolutionary cousins. Frozen lakes, orchids, and artworks are still problem cases.)

Third and finally, if sexual selection is truly driven by the aesthetic preferences of females, then it does not explain aesthetic experience—it presupposes it. If the female population of a species must independently develop aesthetic criteria for mate-evaluation before sexual selection can be operative, then sexual selection, considered as an explanation of (1), cannot even get off the ground. What explains the phenomenon of aesthetic experience among the female population in the first place?

So much for sexual selection. The naturalist is not quite out of options yet: even if neither run-of-the-mill natural selection nor sexual selection will do the trick, perhaps between-group selection will. E. O. Wilson, the intellectual patriarch of sociobiology, has argued that natural selection is operative at more than one hierarchical level of the natural world, and that under certain circumstances selection *between* groups within a species is as important (or potentially more important) for evolutionary development as selection *within* those groups.[30] This "multilevel selection theory" was

[30]Wilson and Wilson, "Rethinking the Theoretical."

implicitly utilized by Darwin, and has been explicitly utilized by sociobiologists since, to explain the evolution of altruistic behavior.

Consider two hominin sub-populations, A and B. Suppose that several of the members of A display altruistic behavior, while none of the members of B do. Although it might be the case that the altruistic members of A are at an adaptive disadvantage relative to other members of A, the strong social cohesion they foster may allow A to outperform B in a struggle for resources. So groups with higher proportions of altruistic individuals will tend to survive and reproduce more successfully than groups without them. And this might be enough to offset the individual maladaptivity of altruistic behaviors, so that altruism eventually spreads horizontally through the whole population.

Fair enough. But is this model any help in explaining (1)? Perhaps. The naturalist might argue that communal artistic expression promotes social cohesion, or even that shared aesthetic values do (just watching a sunset together might accelerate group bonding). But this is, in the end, a rather implausible proposal. Recent studies have shown that altruism is at least partly a learned behavior, and that humans tend to display it when others around them do so.[31] So it is plausible that, by spontaneously initiating altruistic relationships with others, a single hominin could reinforce altruism in a broader group. But aesthetic experiences are not like this (At least, not nearly all of them are.) Children are rarely *taught* to find the natural world beautiful. And it seems preposterous to suggest that anyone *could* be taught, for instance, to weep in genuine aesthetic wonder at the night sky (maybe this could be done by deliberate, prolonged conditioning, but that has almost certainly never happened). Indeed, there is statistical evidence to suggest that "aesthetic responses to nature are in certain important respects culturally invariant."[32] This implies that our proclivity for aesthetic reactions to natural phenomena is not learned but rather innate. In other words, a hominin who developed the capacity for aesthetic experience could not just teach this capacity to his fellows. So in order for a group of hominins to share a communal aesthetic, they would have had to individually, spontaneously develop, not only the capacity for aesthetic experience, but the capacity to have similar aesthetic experiences in response to similar phenomena. That makes the group selection hypothesis, at least with reference to aesthetic experience, rather implausible.[33]

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[31]Cortes Barragan and Dweck, "Rethinking Natural Altruism."

[32]Wynn, *God and Goodness*, 24.

[33]It is worth noting that between-group selection has been proposed as an explanation for storytelling: see Nadal and Gomez-Puerto, "Evolutionary Approaches," 175, for an example. Some stories—like pagan creation myths, for instance—certainly tend to strengthen group cohesion, but it is unclear whether they do so because they produce aesthetic experiences. More likely, it is because they suggest to listeners that they share a common origin and purpose. In any case, this kind of account does little to shed light on our aesthetic preferences for non-narratival forms of beauty.

Furthermore, it is worth asking: how dramatically would shared aesthetic experiences improve a sub-population's evolutionary prospects? Haven't we already seen that some aesthetic pursuits are maladaptive from a Darwinian perspective? And don't controversies about aesthetic values have the potential to weaken social cohesion? And is it really plausible that a communal aesthetic would so strengthen the social bonds of a community that it was significantly more likely to, say, win a war? Or win enough wars to overtake the entire human gene pool? I have my doubts. Whether the capacity for aesthetic experience would be favored by between-group selection seems to me so uncertain that it cannot support a satisfactory explanation of (1).

So it does not seem like there is a viable Darwinian explanation of aesthetic experience available. But how worrying should this be to the naturalist? Not very, you might think: it does not follow, from our inability to think of an adaptive advantage that accrues to aesthetic experience, that there is none. While there is a grain of truth to this reply (certainly, it does not *logically* follow that aesthetic experience is not fitness-enhancing), I propose that our inability to think of any such adaptive advantages is relatively strong evidence that there are none. We humans are uniquely equipped to judge what kinds of things tend to promote our own survival and reproductive prospects and whether a given trait or behavior—e.g., the capacity for aesthetic experience—falls into one of these kinds. Indeed, these sorts of judgments are foundational to rational action: if someone recommends a course of action to me, I must first discern whether it would be advantageous in some way. If I cannot think of any advantage that accrues to the action, I will (properly) conclude that in fact no advantage accrues to it and that I ought not to perform it. And this is precisely the same reasoning behind (2). We cannot think of any adaptive advantage that accrues to aesthetic experience; so, probably, there is none.

If you are not convinced, consider the problem from another angle: while the move from "I can't think of an x" to "probably there is no x" is oftentimes specious, it is not always so. If "x" stands for "a yacht that I own," the inference is sound. If I had bought a yacht, you can bet I would remember doing it. I think the inference to (2) is like this unproblematic inductive inference. As I mentioned above, we humans are uniquely equipped to recognize what kinds of things help us to survive and reproduce, since we have had to discriminate between advantageous and disadvantageous behaviors, environments, and objects for the whole of our evolutionary history. So, if we cannot think of any way in which something might be advantageous for us, it probably isn't.

At this point, the naturalist might propose that our capacity for aesthetic experiences is an evolutionary spandrel. That is, although aesthetic experience is not itself fitness-enhancing, it is a byproduct of some trait that is fitness-enhancing, just as being inconveniently top-heavy is a byproduct of having a large brain. I think this is the best option available to naturalists who are trying to make sense of aesthetic

experiences.[34] However, it gives rise to a new and serious problem for naturalism: what is the explanation for the remarkably close fit between the natural world and our aesthetic sensibilities? Why, in other words, do we find nature so spectacularly beautiful? If our aesthetic faculties were selected directly for their adaptive utility, then an explanation is ready at hand: since aesthetic experiences help humans to survive and reproduce, natural selection favored aesthetic sensibilities that resulted in greater numbers of such experiences. But if aesthetic sensitivity is an evolutionary spandrel, this explanation is not available. It is just a freak accident that we happen to find the natural features of the world we live in to be magnificently beautiful.

Perhaps this is no cause for worry: accidents happen, after all, even very fortunate ones. But if such a close match between our aesthetic preferences and the natural world would be a highly *improbable* accident, that would substantially weaken the explanatory adequacy of the spandrel hypothesis. And in fact, there are excellent reasons to think that such an accident would be improbable. Wynn's work is crucially relevant to this point: although I have already given reasons to doubt the soundness of his analogical argument for (A), I think there is a sound inductive generalization to (A) in the neighborhood. Consider the set, S, of all of the human artifacts that have been made without any aesthetic intent. This is uncontroversially a sample of what we might call "aesthetically indifferent objects"—that is, objects that were neither made to conform to the aesthetic sensibilities of humans nor determinant of the content of those sensibilities. (Note that it is also a very large and diverse sample—that will matter shortly.) Now consider the proportion of these objects that tend to give rise to profound aesthetic experiences. Call this proportion n. There will be broad agreement, I think, that n is very small. This is largely because it is difficult to make beautiful things: only a small subset of the possible arrangements of material parts into medium-sized objects are beautiful. From this sample, we can generalize to the following conditional:

> (P) If a given set includes only aesthetically indifferent objects as members, the proportion of beautiful objects in that set is roughly n.

Note that this move requires no analogical reasoning. It is a straightforward inductive generalization of the kind that standardly features in social-scientific literature—for instance, when someone concludes, based on a survey, that such-and-such a percentage of a state's population votes Republican. Of course, not every set of aesthetically indifferent objects has a proportion of beautiful objects roughly equal to n, any more than every set of Georgians has an equal proportion of Republicans. But most of them do, so long as they are sufficiently large. So while (P) is not true

[34] See Hirstein, "Evolution of Aesthetic Experience," for a recent attempt to tease out the connections between aesthetic experience and other, adaptive cognitive traits.

universally, it is a trustworthy rule of thumb, especially since S, the sample from which it is drawn, is a large and diverse sample. And as the proportion of beautiful objects in a set diverges from *n*, it becomes more and more epistemically improbable that it has only aesthetically indifferent objects as members.

Now consider the set, S*, of all (actual) natural objects or phenomena that are sensibly and conceptually accessible to humans. We will all agree, I think, that the proportion of beautiful objects in this set is greater—indeed, dramatically greater—than *n*. Tennant puts the point eloquently:

> On the telescopic and on the microscopic scale, from the starry heaven to the siliceous skeleton of the diatom, in her inward parts (if scientific imagination be veridical) as well as on the surface, in flowers that "blush unseen" and gems that "unfathomed caves of ocean bear," Nature is sublime or beautiful, and the exceptions do but prove the rule. However various be the taste for beauty, and however diverse the levels of its education or degrees of its refinement, Nature elicits aesthetic sentiment from men severally and collectively; and the more fastidious becomes this taste, the more poignantly and lavishly does she gratify it.[35]

But this presents the naturalist with a grave problem. Given (P), S* probably has some members that are not aesthetically indifferent. Indeed, if we judge the proportion of beautiful objects in S* to be vastly greater than *n*, then it is almost certain that some of the members of S* are not aesthetically indifferent. This is strong evidence against the spandrel hypothesis. For if aesthetic judgment is an evolutionary spandrel, and if naturalism is true, the whole natural world is aesthetically indifferent: natural objects were neither produced by an intentional agent with our aesthetic tastes in mind, nor did they shape the content of those tastes, since that content is nothing more than a recent and arbitrary offshoot of some other, unrelated adaptation. Thus, the spandrel hypothesis is probably false.

So much for objections to (2).

4.2. Objections to (3)

While (3) might initially appear uncontroversial, the naturalist can offer at least two plausible challenges to it. First, he might object, "You claim that your argument does not depend on controversial Bayesian judgments. But that is not right; (3) states that theism adequately explains (1), and explanatory power should be analyzed in terms of conditional probability. So your argument suffers from the same defect as Swinburne's. In order to establish (3), you must be able to show that if there were a God, he would probably grant us the capacity for aesthetic experiences. And you cannot do so."

This is not an adequate analysis of explanatory power, since we often make (sound) abductive inferences without forming probability

[35]Tennant, *Philosophical Theology*, 91.

judgements. This is particularly true of inferences to personal explanations. A person's reasons for performing an action may explain that action whether or not the probability of the action given those reasons is known.

Suppose my wife has made a chicken salad because she is hungry. In this example, H—"Alexandra is hungry"—explains E—"Alexandra has made a chicken salad." But P(E/H) might be low or inscrutable for me in this scenario. I may have no beliefs about whether my wife likes to eat chicken salad, or I may believe that my wife usually does not eat chicken salad when she is hungry. But even in this case, H is a perfectly adequate explanation of E. And H is a discernibly better explanation of E than, say, the hypothesis that my wife is not hungry, or that she is thirsty, or that she is late for an afternoon meeting, despite the fact that I cannot assign precise (or even approximate) conditional probabilities to E on any of these alternative hypotheses. It is sufficient, when offering a personal explanation of some state of affairs, to show that a person has good reasons to bring it about and has the power to bring it about. And it *can* be shown that God has good reasons to bless humans with aesthetic experiences and the power to do so.

This claim is not as strong as it may appear: my point is merely that an abductive argument need not assign probabilities in order to be a good argument. This is compatible with the view that Bayes' theorem and the probability axioms adequately describe rational degrees of belief.[36]

If this reply satisfies the naturalist, he might still object that (3) is false because theism does not adequately explain the prevalence of broadly negative aesthetic experiences, such as revulsion, horror, and shock. But this objection is based on an unfounded premise: it is not obvious that God would create a world in which aesthetic experience was uniformly positive. There are good reasons to give humans the capacity for revulsion, shock, etc. Otherwise, we could not be revolted by senseless violence, perversion, or evil in general. (Of course, we could still find them objectionable in non-aesthetic ways. But surely a brutal rape is not merely morally but also aesthetically abominable, and it is better to be offended both morally and aesthetically by it.) Furthermore, negative aesthetic experiences are sometimes constituents of more complex positive aesthetic experiences. Tragedies would not be beautiful without their tragic parts.

I think there is another promising explanation of negative aesthetic experience the theist can offer: it is not obvious that God could have created humans with the capacity for positive aesthetic experiences without also granting them the capacity for negative aesthetic experiences. After all, you cannot be struck by beauty unless you notice that it is there. But that plausibly entails the ability to notice when it is not there. And if it is

[36]Lipton, *Inference to the Best Explanation*, has argued that abduction is consistent with Bayesian constraints and may even function as a heuristic for fixing prior and conditional probabilities. Though for a rather persuasive case that abduction is *superior* to Bayesian updating, see Douven, "Inference to the Best Explanation."

sufficient for something to be ugly that it be unbeautiful in almost every way, then the ability to notice whether something is beautiful or not covaries with the ability to notice that something is ugly.

So, if God has good reasons to create objects that are ugly, then the above objection fails. For then God would have reasons both to create ugly things and to empower us to experience their ugliness. And in fact, God plausibly does have good reasons to make some things ugly—to make them more efficient, for example, or to ensure that human beings are not unduly interested in them. Such aesthetic trade-offs are quite common: concrete barriers and barbed wire are not beautiful, but that does not mean that their inventors suffered from aesthetic dysfunction. It just means that the best concrete barriers and the best barbed wire happen to be ugly.

I conclude that these objections fail and that (3) remains on solid ground. If my defense of (2) is satisfactory, and if (1) is true (it obviously is), then (4) follows. All else being equal, theism is more probable than naturalism.

5. Conclusion

To recap: In this essay, I have defended a new abductive aesthetic argument for theism and tried to show that it is the best route among extant alternatives to demonstrating that beauty is good evidence for the existence of God. I have argued that naturalism fails to adequately explain the nature and range of our aesthetic experiences, since these are amenable neither to Darwinian explanation nor to explanation in terms of more complex sociobiological mechanisms. Theism, on the other hand, furnishes a robust personal explanation of aesthetic experience, since on theism God has both good reasons to bring such experiences about and the power to do so. To reiterate: I do not think the argument is rationally compelling, or that it is able to establish all or even several of the distinct elements of theism. But I do think it is able to show that, on the whole, our capacity for aesthetic experience, and the number and variety of aesthetic experiences we tend to have, provide a good reason to prefer theism to naturalism.

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