

How Should Christians Be Stewards of Art?

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Introduction

In this essay, I address the question, “How should Christians be stewards of art?” I have in mind here the visual arts in particular (drawing, painting, and sculpture), though my answer to this question may be applied beyond this sphere. My strategy throughout is overtly theological. I will employ core philosophical and theological insights from the Augustinian tradition in order to argue for objective values in art, and, in light of how such values are grounded, arrive at an answer to the question of Christian stewardship.

I begin with the preliminary question: Does art have any grounding in reality, or is it a mere social construct? I begin here because in order to answer how we should be stewards of art, we must know what it is we intend to steward. As I see it, this question hangs on one’s understanding of predicates of value. Overtly subjective or deconstructive notions of art often build on the assumption that value-judgments are not about the artwork but about the onlooker’s taste. That is, when you say, *This is good art*, or *This is bad art*, *This piece is beautiful*, or *This piece is ugly*, you are merely expressing personal like or dislike. If, however, it can be established that predicates of value have objective grounding in reality, then a case can be made that the art to which these value judgments are applied also has objective grounding.

We can make initial headway by turning to moral values. Because Christianity presumes the objective reality of moral values, it is relatively uncontroversial to suggest that the realm of art is not exempt: one ought not create pornography,

for example, or, asserted positively, one ought to honor God in all things. Thus, objective values can gain an initial entry into the artistic sphere via the moral sphere.

However, does the realm of objective values end with morality? Certainly not—or at least not for the Christian. Christian theology has long held that the true, the good, and the beautiful are part of the real; our faculties of reason apprehend intellectual realities that are just as much a part of reality as what our senses apprehend. This concept, known as realism, contrasts with nominalism, which treats intellectual realities (such as general nouns and predicates of value) as mere names projected on reality. Realism has been the dominant position throughout Christian history and has been assumed in core areas of confessional Christian doctrine. Thus, I, for one, am a committed realist, but I will not here appeal to confessional considerations in defense of realism. Instead, I will attempt to introduce some of the more compelling reasons to presume realism in reference to art.

In *De Principiis*, Origen suggests, in defense of realism, that we know the sensible world through our bodily faculties' asserting themselves on corporeal realities. Why then, says Origen, should we deny those incorporeal realities on which the mind asserts itself? Such suspicion robs reason of the dignity due it, subordinating it to our lower faculties, which we share with beasts.¹ In short, Origen's contention is that we should accept those incorporeal realities to which reason testifies, just as we accept the empirical world by the testimony of our senses.

C. S. Lewis makes a similar case in *The Abolition of Man*. Discussing a recent book on grammar, Lewis notes the authors' (pseudonyms: Gaius and Titius) emphasis on accuracy. They demonstrate accurate grammar by scrutinizing a story from Coleridge. Coleridge recalls witnessing two people before a waterfall. One says the falls are pretty; the other sublime. Coleridge says the latter is right. But Gaius and Titius (GT) suggest that Coleridge should have said the waterfall gives him also a feeling of sublimity. Lewis points out that the underlying assumption of GT is that "all sentences containing a predicate of value are statements about the emotional state of the speaker."² Yet, contrary to GT, Coleridge believes he is speaking about the waterfall. Were he speaking about his feelings, the predicate would be the opposite of sublimity—*he has humble feelings*. Lewis argues that GT's view is highly innovative, because the traditional view, common among all ancient cultures, is that there is something true and real in the realm of values and that our feelings may be appropriate or inappropriate relative to that reality. Hence, "Aristotle says that the aim of education is to make the pupil like and dislike what he ought."³

For our purposes, I would like to hone in on Lewis' insight concerning reflective statements. The tendency to dismiss value judgments about art as statements about one's feelings is not uncommon, but Lewis helps bring to light a fundamental flaw in this strategy. If I say a work of art is sublime, such a statement requires modification in order to refer to my feelings—*I have humble feelings*. Notice, however, that this modification does not succeed in making my feelings the referent of *sublime*; instead, *sublime* is now entirely without a referent. In this modified form, I have a feeling of being humbled, and, from this feeling, I infer that the artwork encountered is sublime. If we reject the reality of sublimity, though, my inference is false, and the term *sublime* becomes meaningless. More important, however, are the ramifications for my faculties. If I have a feeling that a work of art is sublime, but there is no such thing as sublimity, then my faculties communicate the existence of something that does not exist. In short, if GT are right, then my faculties are malfunctioning.

We therefore face a choice. Either our sense of values is grounded in reality, or we must dismiss values *and* the faculties that testify to them. The latter option faces two very serious hurdles. First, on what grounds do we dismiss sublimity, or beauty, or any other predicate of value, as chimerical? It would seem the only way to falsify the testimony of our faculties to these realities is to step outside ourselves—which is impossible. Second, to dismiss our rational faculties as unreliable begs the question: Why accept our lower corporeal faculties as reliable? If no satisfactory answer can be given, we are left to either embrace the testimony of our higher faculties, as Origen commends, or accept perpetual skepticism. Faced with such options, a realist view of values commends itself as supremely reasonable.

If, then, realism is right, and if predicates of value have objective grounding, what are the implications for art? To answer this question, I turn to the metaphysic of Saint Augustine.⁴ This metaphysic begins with the unbridgeable divide between God's pure actuality and the pure potentiality of matter. The term *matter* in this context identifies the substratum that is receptive to various properties. It is pure potentiality, which may be instilled with any number of perfections and formed (by God) into any number of things. Yet, matter has no innate properties of its own; whatever perfections are made manifest are instilled from without by the deity. Contrast this with God, who is omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient. These perfections are innate in his nature and cannot know increase. Between these poles of being—pure potentiality and pure actuality—creation is formed.

Creation is conceived by Augustine as the divine act by which matter is drawn from pure potentiality to ever-increasing stages of actuality. Matter takes

on various properties, and in this way, the great chain of being is manifest, as is a full range of ontic perfections. Rocks, for example, have very limited perfections, possessing existence and accidental properties such as color. Plants stand above rocks, possessing not only existence but also life and capacity for growth. Higher are creatures that possess not only existence, life, and growth but also animation and limited capacities of will. Higher still is humanity, which possesses perfections common to irrational animals as well as the remarkable faculty of reason, and on it goes.

A fundamental assumption of this vision is that there is in fact a hierarchy of perfections. It assumes that existence and life is superior to bare existence; it assumes that the faculty of reason places man, a rational animal, above the perfections of irrational beasts. Notice that this hierarchy also presumes the reality of values, for *superior* and *inferior*, unless read as mere assertions of power, are predicates of value. To say that a rational animal is superior to an irrational animal in an ontological sense is intelligible only if objective values are granted. Lest there is any hesitation at the notion of ontic superiority, consider the question: Is God superior to creation? If this question beckons an unflinching yes—which it no doubt does—this reply itself affirms the reality of objective values.

To apply this metaphysic to art, we may consider the etymology of the word. The term *art* has its roots in the notion of skill or a practice learned. Though we are here focusing on the visual arts, it is appropriate to speak of the art of cooking, the art of painting, the art of sewing, the art of filmmaking, or even the art of lovemaking. This notion of skill offers a point of contact with the above hierarchy of perfections.

This connection becomes evident when considering human potentiality, as contrasted with divine actuality. Consider, for example, divine omnipotence. It was stated above that God cannot be any more powerful than he is by nature. Yet, a human possesses a capacity to be stronger through exercise of various sorts. The same concept applies in the realm of skill. A child has a certain potential to learn music—some greater potential than others. Yet, unless that potential is nurtured, it does not move into actuality. Should it be nurtured, however, that potential becomes a manifest skill—it moves into actuality. That skill can be further nurtured toward increase or neglected to decrease. The implication is that skill sets are actual properties. When developed, a skill constitutes a manifest property or perfection that the creature previously lacked.

The ontic status of skill gives us a foundation for discussing the objective grounding of art. Art, if used in reference to a person's craft, has an apparent ontic reference, namely, the property that has been cultivated and nurtured from

mere potentiality into whatever degree of actuality. Moreover, it is the cultivation of this potentiality that makes the cultivator an artist—a person who possesses artistic potential and has nurtured and developed that potential into artistic skill. As for art in the sense of a created object, artwork is the product of the cultivated skill of the artist possessing said skill. Succinctly put, artwork is the outward manifestation of the inward perfections of an artist.

Understood in the above way, art is grounded relationally, analogous to the relationship between creation and Creator. What makes us creatures is that we are the manifest product of the power and perfection of our Creator. Our identity is defined in relation to his creative power, which is the source of our very existence. To be sure, this does not mean that simply because a self-proclaimed artist calls some object art, that it is art. To the contrary, the foregoing guards against this error. If a work is art, it is so because of its grounding in a cultivated skill set; the declaration of its maker does not make it so. If a product is disconnected from its relevant skill, the art label is in reality groundless.

Now, we must also discuss the interplay of cultivated perfections in the sense of skill and moral values, on which we touched at the outset. Augustine is clear that virtue is among the perfections one may cultivate, and vice among the privations he may suffer. Thus, while one may cultivate an abundance of technical artistic perfections, this in itself does not guarantee excellence, for artistic values are not limited to technique. If twisted morally, these goods are severely tainted. A photographer may cultivate skills conducive to his craft and display all manner of excellence, but if these skills are used for pornography, his craft is corrupt. Its genuine goods have become utterly disconnected from their source and ultimate end—God.

This last point raises one last feature of the Augustinian worldview worth considering, to wit, the notion of final cause. Final cause presumes that things exist for specific ends—the eye for seeing, the tongue for tasting, and so on. With reference to man, God is his chief end. In the context of art, we need not over-spiritualize final cause by suggesting that the Christian artist is restricted to Bible illustration. Instead, I think it more sober to think in terms of the central question of this essay, namely, stewardship.

Keeping in mind the foregoing, Christian stewardship of art begins in recognition of the fact that all that we have, we have received. If a Christian has artistic potentiality, this potentiality, like life itself, comes from the hand of God. In the truest sense, it is entrusted to us, and we ought to use it for the glory of God—our source and *telos*. This involves both avoiding vicious misuses and cultivating perfections germane to the artistic craft. Stewardship, in short, is

the meeting ground of the Christian artist's moral-spiritual obligations and his obligation to cultivate the potential with which he has been entrusted, all with a view to the glory of God.

Although I am inclined to think of artistic stewardship first and foremost as the task of those to whom such potential has been given, there is certainly such a thing as patron stewardship. It goes without saying that financing of art is an invaluable resource to the Christian artist. I will not press this point because I think it gets pressed enough. Instead, in reference to patronage, I would like to beckon discernment. A Christian patron should be concerned with the same ideals about which I have spoken above. To support the arts because it is somehow to the betterment of society fails to recognize the erosion of the art world and the increasing rarity of artists, properly defined. Should Christian patrons fund the arts? Certainly. But when art is rarely found, stewardship is best manifest by withholding funds.

I close with an exhortation. I would exhort those who are concerned with seeing a renewal of Christian art to consider whether involvement in the contemporary art world as it stands is in fact good stewardship. I would bid readers to consider the possibility that Christian stewardship of art may require something more extreme. It may require withdrawing from the secular art world in favor of something wholly different.

Rather than focusing on whatever deficiencies may saturate the modern art world, I will instead focus on something that is quite different, and is so in a way that is exceedingly Christian. I have in mind the gothic cathedrals of Europe. The cathedrals, at their best, do not aim at the glory of the individual. Their works are largely anonymous. Artists engaged in their respective crafts in complimentary unison, displaying the harmony of the body of Christ. Artists and masons labored endlessly, knowing they may not see the completion of the whole. Often works were produced in locations where no human eye would ever see them, for the artist's primary audience was God. The artwork itself displays breathtaking perfection over every inch. The end result is far beyond the abilities of a single individual, and its purpose is to elevate onlookers to God. It beckons its viewers to participate, not just in observation but in worship. Holding before my mind's eye the cathedrals I have viewed in person, I am convinced that this conjoining of artists and patrons, of spiritual devotion and intense cultivation of artistic perfections, of teleological function and unsurpassed excellence is the example *par excellence* of Christian stewardship of the arts.

Notes

1. Origen, *De princ.* I.i.7.
2. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man, or Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 3.
3. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 10. See Aristotle, *Eth. Nic.* 1104B.
4. Due to space limitations, I will not litter my treatment of Augustine's metaphysic with citations. I offer a more lengthy and nuanced treatment of this metaphysic, complete with thorough citations, in Nathan Jacobs, "Contra Clayton: Toward an Augustinian Model of Organism," *Faith and Philosophy* 25, no. 4 (October 2008): 376–93.