

## Divine maximal beauty: a reply to Jon Robson

MARK IAN THOMAS ROBSON

*Head of Philosophy, St Robert of Newminster RC School, Washington, Tyne and Wear,  
NE38 8AF, UK*

*e-mail: robson.m1@sunderlandlearning.net*

**Abstract:** In this article I reply to Jon Robson's objections to my argument that God does not contain any possible worlds. I had argued that ugly possible worlds clearly compromise God's beauty. Robson argues that I failed to show that possible worlds can be subject to aesthetic evaluation, and that even if they were it could be the case that ugliness might contribute to God's overall beauty. In reply I try to show that possible worlds are aesthetically evaluable by arguing that possible worlds are maximally rich representations of possible events. I further argue that nothing in God's being can be aesthetically non-evaluable since God must be maximal beauty – a beautiful maximality which needs no ugliness. Finally I show in what sense Christ's heavenly scars can be beautiful.

In a recent article, Jon Robson has challenged my argument that there is a clear contradiction between the notion that God contains within Himself all possible worlds and the idea that God is perfectly beautiful.<sup>1</sup> My argument tried to show that a mainstream trend of thought in (analytic) philosophical theology should be rejected. I tried to show that we should not believe that God contains within Himself a whole host of possible worlds which He examines, and then selects from as a kind of prelude to creation.

In order to make my case against the possible worlds view, I imagined God telling the 'stories' of His possible worlds to a pilgrim eager to explore the wonders of the divine mind. Some of the stories that God tells are lovely, beautiful, and sublime. The pilgrim is astonished and delighted and awestruck at the beauty of God's thoughts. Other stories tell of all kinds of horrors – there are rapes, murders, and sadistic barbarity beyond the wit of man to imagine. The stories are so full – so excruciatingly minute in their details – that they exactly represent what these events would have been like were they to have been actualized. The pilgrim now realizes that God is not wholly and completely beautiful since many of His thoughts are horrendously ugly.<sup>2</sup> In God's mind, then, there are possible worlds

that would transport us to the highest realms of joy, and possible worlds which would make us retch and vomit in horrified disgust.

The now worried pilgrim asks if these stories are drawn from any source outside of the mind of God, and God replies that every thought originates from the resources of the divine mind alone; not one inspiration is drawn from elsewhere. I came to the conclusion that a God who contains such ugly stories cannot be wholly and completely beautiful. The moral that I draw from this is that orthodox theists should reject the possible worlds model of the divine understanding, and furthermore concentrate less attention on arguments about God's power and knowledge. God's beauty should be more central in philosophical theology, not some kind of weak, background notion that is barely acknowledged.<sup>3</sup>

Robson has two main arguments against my position, and a parting *tu quoque*. To begin with, he seeks possible motivations for my conception of God's beauty (which I characterize as 'complete and utter beauty'), and suggests that the following principle could serve as my motivation for characterizing God's beauty in the way that I do:

For any object  $x$  and any proper part of that object  $p$ , if  $p$  is ugly then  $x$  is not perfectly beautiful.

He argues that this principle is implausible since there are many examples of things which are ugly in some of their parts, but nevertheless they are beautiful overall. Indeed, the ugly parts may well be needed in order to make the whole thing more beautiful. He gives as an example the ballet *The Rite of Spring*. He says,

The ballet itself is very beautiful but contains sections, in Stravinsky's complex and dissonant music as well as Nijinski's often awkward and ungainly choreography, which taken by themselves would be very ugly. Yet, an attempt to remove those sections, or replace them with some sanitized alternative would somehow miss the point of the work entirely and rob it of its, admittedly complex and somewhat non-standard, beauty.<sup>4</sup>

It is obvious, therefore, that many things have parts which are ugly, but the whole can nevertheless be beautiful. The challenge to my position can then be stated: perhaps those possible worlds which are ugly can be part of a beautiful, divine, overall vision. It is an interesting challenge. I think Robson is correct in pointing out that my argument was not robust enough to disallow the possibility that God's beauty could be of such a kind. In other words, I had not adequately guarded my thesis from the notion that God's beauty might need ugly parts – parts which somehow coalesce together to form a beautiful whole. In order to remedy this, I will try to give reasons for thinking that God's beauty must be such that no part whatsoever is ugly. I will try to analyse and give voice to the notion that God is maximal beauty – a beauty than which no greater can be conceived.

Robson's next argument says that I fail to show that possible worlds are sufficiently analogous to stories. If this is true and possible worlds are not appropriately analogous to stories, then, a crucial part of my argument is insufficiently supported. To be more precise, I cannot move from the idea that if a story is horrendously ugly then its possible counterpart (the possible world) must be ugly as well. Robson suggests that if possible worlds are aesthetically non-evaluable, then, it could be the case that possible worlds containing such representations as rape, murder and child abuse are not ugly. In reply, I will first argue that God's stories will be aesthetically evaluable if they are to do the job they are meant to do. They are supposed to make it the case that God knows exactly what He is doing in the creative act. They must, therefore, have sufficient richness of representational content. Given enough representational content we have more and more reason for believing that the representations will be aesthetically evaluable. After that, I will focus on the idea of the maximal beauty of the divine. My basic argument will be that nothing in the being of God can be aesthetically non-evaluable, for if there were such regions of aesthetic emptiness God, it seems, could be more beautiful, which contradicts the supposition that He is maximal beauty. If possible worlds are in God in some fashion (which is the usual understanding), then, they *must* be subject to aesthetic judgement.

Robson's final argument says that if I am correct, then, it follows that all classical theists would be in the same boat, not just those who explicitly espouse the notion that God contains within Himself all possible worlds. Robson says that God's knowledge of what actual people might do would infect God with ugliness. This ugliness is perhaps not the full-blown, horrendous ugliness of some possible worlds, but it is nevertheless a muddying of the waters of God's purity. Unfortunately, although I think this an interesting criticism and well worth answering, it is too large to be dealt with in this article. So we will have to concentrate upon giving answers to Robson's first two objections.<sup>5</sup>

I will begin by concentrating on the second of Robson's arguments. Then, using the insights gained from the reply to that, move onto a consideration of his first argument. There will then be a short excursion into more theological territory where I discuss the beauty or otherwise of Christ's heavenly scars.

### **Are possible worlds analogous to stories?**

The second of Robson's arguments is our first port of call since it is potentially the most damaging. If Robson is right – if possible worlds are not appropriately analogous to stories – then it follows that anything I say about the ugliness of stories will simply be irrelevant as a claim about the aesthetic status of the divine mind. My argument, it would seem, cannot even get off the ground. Let us look carefully at what Robson says. First, he acknowledges that many writers use the idea of possible worlds being akin to stories as 'a discursive

and pedagogical tool' but that it is important not to 'get carried away by these instructive metaphors.'<sup>6</sup> He goes on to say: 'Stories and possibilities are entities of different kinds and establishing a point about the former will not, without further argument, establish anything about the latter.'<sup>7</sup> There are, he points out, clear differences between possible worlds and stories. Stories, for example, are typically selective. The author of a story selects some events, and not others, for inclusion. One of the stories that I mentioned in my essay is the story of what would happen if the Nazi empire had attained supreme dominance over the entire universe and over countless aeons subjected the weak and innocent to torture and mayhem. Robson says: 'It is easy to picture this world as being a piece of alternative history writing gone wrong, a snuff tale filled with gleefully descriptive accounts of the imaginative and gruesome tortures the intergalactic Reich imposes on its numerous victims.' But the possibility I envisage is not a story since it is all-inclusive. Everything in such a possible world is included. 'And I mean', says Robson, 'everything; every thought that ever crossed the mind of a fourteenth century peasant, every squashed beetle, the exact trajectories of every piece of dust.'<sup>8</sup> If God were to *select* from all these other details the ones which included the torture and murder of billions upon billions of innocent people, then we might well complain that His selections were perverse. But possible worlds are not like that at all. They are maximally inclusive. They cannot, therefore, be stories, or, more precisely, they cannot be seen as being sufficiently analogous to stories for my argument to succeed.

Robson goes on to point out other disanalogies between possible worlds and stories. Possible worlds 'are not artefacts, they have no narrator, they are not told in any particular style (primarily because they are not told at all), very many of them . . . lack any reference to the actions of persons or to any relation of consequence . . . and they have neither theme or unity of subject matter'.<sup>9</sup> The upshot of all this is: *we can judge the beauty or ugliness of stories but we have no idea whether possible worlds are aesthetically evaluable or not*. In other words, the analogy between possible worlds and stories is not the kind that allows us to make the leap from one to the other. Robson is honest about his own agnosticism on this point: 'I have no idea how to go about settling the question of whether an abstract entity such as a proposition, or a set of propositions, is itself ugly.'<sup>10</sup> But, given that we do not know whether or not possible worlds are ugly (or beautiful), we cannot be a position to assert, as I did, that there is a clear contradiction in saying God contains all possible worlds and is, at the same time, completely beautiful. My case against possible worlds is, therefore, unproven.

In reply let me try to show in what way the analogy between possible worlds and stories is appropriate and allows us to say that if the story is ugly the possible world is ugly as well.<sup>11</sup> Robson himself, as we saw, calls the metaphor 'instructive'. We are looking in what way it is instructive. First let us to look at one of the fundamental motivations behind possible worlds talk. Why do so many theologians

and philosophers feel that they want to employ the notion of possible worlds? It seems clear that at least one major reason is that they want God to know exactly what He is doing when He creates the world. If all the worlds that could be actual are laid out in some way in the divine mind, and God can ‘see’ each one of them, or comprehend the possible truths<sup>12</sup> each one contains, then God is in a position to select which one is to be actual. He can reject those whose evil is extreme, and even if, contrary to what Leibniz would have us believe, there is no *best* possible one, God could still make one with an overall positive value. Such a God will suffer no surprise or novelty when any particular world is actualized.<sup>13</sup> How do possible worlds provide God with the knowledge of what would come to be were He to actualize that world? The most plausible answer is that possible worlds *represent* what would happen if that world were to become actual.<sup>14</sup> Stories are, of course, similar in this respect. Stories, like possible worlds, represent what could be the case. Part of the enjoyment and terror of stories is the thought, ‘What if this were to become real?’ As Robson has rightly seen, there are important disanalogies between possible worlds and stories. A possible world story, for example, has its representative content increased to a maximal extent. Nothing is omitted from this kind of story or representation of what could be. However, all that I need for my argument to work is for the central idea of representation to be shared by both possible worlds and stories. Even if there is no theme or unity of content in a possible world maximal ‘story’, there is still representation. We know that certain actual states of affairs are ugly. If the representation (possible world or maximal story) of these states of affairs is rich enough, then it follows that the representation is ugly as well.<sup>15</sup> We have here the typical possible worlds account of creation: God uses possible worlds in order to find out *exactly* what worlds would be like if they were to become actual. Not one part of the actual world is a surprise to God, says the possible worlds theist. Possible worlds or maximal world-books are that to which He looks in order to understand fully what could become actual. It is vitally important that we understand that, under this view, a possible world is not just some vague indicator of what could be; it is not just a gesture towards some amorphous, indeterminate nebula. God, according to this model, knows exactly what the world will be like by looking at its maximal representation.

In order to see this more vividly, think of Tom. He is a very fastidious, ultra-cautious person, and he wants a building designed and made. Being *extremely* cautious, he asks the architect to give him a plan of the proposed new building, which will specify right down to the last detail what the new building would be like. The architect duly complies and gives Tom an immense list of the new building’s properties. It will have seventeen windows, eleven doors, four-foot-high newel posts at the foot of the three grand staircases; it will have rooms of such and such an area and colour, etc. The list is maximal and specifies everything about the proposed house. If possible worlds are like this, or analogous to this, then it might be plausible that they themselves are not beautiful or ugly. It is, after all,

only a list. But will Tom be satisfied with only a list? He is, you will recall, very fastidious and ultra-cautious. He wants to know *exactly* what the house will be like. He does not want a vague list; he requires something much richer. The model for the house must be as like the house as is possible; otherwise the actual house might contain surprises. The plan must be maximally representative, not just in specifying everything that the house will contain, but what each thing in that house will be like. Tom hates surprises, so he even wants to know what the house will smell like, and feel like to touch! No novelty or serendipity for Tom! Fortunately, the architect is technically savvy, and writes a computer program using the latest virtual reality techniques. The program hooks up directly into Tom's brain and feeds him the representative content. He can now 'walk' around the house, 'smell' the house's scent, 'feel' its brickwork. He can scrutinize the house completely, and so nothing in the actual house will now surprise him.

It seems that something like this must be true of God. If God is to know *exactly* what His creating will create, something analogous to virtual reality (maximal representation) will have to be in God's mind. Such a set of images, 'sights', 'sounds', and 'smells' will be ugly if the resultant actual thing will be ugly since in a very strong sense the actual thing is a copy of the virtual or possible thing. God's 'stories' must, it seems to me, be as rich as this; they are so detailed that they are exact representations of the story's events right down to the last detail. If God's possible worlds (or maximal stories) are as rich as I have suggested they must be, then many of the 'stories' He contains will be extremely ugly. I conclude then that Robson's objection to my argument is unsuccessful.

Let us turn now to another argument which, as promised, pursues the notion of God's maximal beauty. My strategy is to move from the specific question of whether or not possible worlds are appropriately analogous to stories. I will argue that, given the usual metaphysics of the Christian understanding of possible worlds, they *must* be the kinds of objects that are capable of being aesthetically judged, and, furthermore, they must be the kind of thing that is beautiful.<sup>16</sup> If any reader is dissatisfied with my first argument, she can concentrate on this one. The issue of whether or not divine maximal possible worlds are appropriately analogous to stories can be completely bypassed.

Here is the argument in a nutshell: *there can be nothing aesthetically non-evaluative in the being of God, and since the God of possible worlds is envisaged as having these possibilities 'in the region of eternal truths' which is in the 'Understanding of God', they cannot be aesthetically empty.*<sup>17</sup> We could (perhaps) get to this conclusion by way of the idea that God is perfectly simple, but again, that would lead us into very complex questions. In that case we would have to explore precisely what is meant by God's being simple. My route is less complex. I ask this question: Can God be anything else but *full* of beauty? Can there be anything which would be neither beautiful nor ugly in the being of God? Let me put the question in another way: if God is maximally beautiful can there be anything in

God which would leave the spectator (or participator) of (or in) the being of God aesthetically indifferent? To my mind, this cannot be the case. I am not sure that even in the created, finite realm there is anything that is aesthetically neutral. As Gerard Manley Hopkins so memorably said, 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God.' Interact with the world, and, like foil being shaken, it will shine and spark with joyous exhilaration.<sup>18</sup>

A fortiori, there can be nothing in the being of God that does not excite aesthetic appreciation, astonishment, and wonder. Robson's agnosticism about the potential aesthetic non-evaluability of possible worlds is implicitly allowing a kind of aesthetic vacuum into the heart of God, a kind of region where beauty is entirely absent. To be sure, there isn't any ugliness either, but to entertain the possibility that there is a sort of vapid colourlessness at the heart of the divine being does not seem to do justice to His maximal nature, a maximality which surely must include beauty as well as other attributes like power and knowledge.

I am appealing, then, to a kind of principle of plenitude in relation to the beauty of God. He is not just wholly and completely beautiful, but also *fully* beautiful as well. There can be no 'part' of God that is not (so to speak) crammed full of beauty. His aesthetic plenitude is such that He 'bursts' and 'spills' beauty. It follows from this that if possible worlds are in the regions of God's understanding then they must also be bursting with beauty. They cannot be aesthetically non-evaluable, which is precisely what Robson is allowing as a possibility in his agnosticism about whether abstract entities such as possible worlds can be subject to aesthetic judgement. It seems to me that if God contains possible worlds then they *must* have aesthetic value. Robson's argument seems to suggest that God could be partly empty of beauty. It seems to me, however, that any proper conception of the beautiful plenitude of the divine being cannot allow this. This idea will be seen more clearly in the next part of my reply, which attempts to respond to Robson's argument about the relationship between a beautiful whole and its proper parts.

### **Could ugly parts be needed in God's beauty?**

Recall that Robson says that the following implausible principle may serve as my motivation for claiming that ugly possible worlds ruin the beauty of God:

For any object  $x$  and any proper part of that object  $p$ , if  $p$  is ugly then  $x$  is not perfectly beautiful.

That this is implausible I am happy to acknowledge. It is implausible since, as Robson correctly points out, there are plenty of examples of beautiful wholes which contain ugly parts. Indeed, we can say that there are plenty of beautiful wholes that *need* ugly parts. As we saw, Robson uses the example of the ballet *The Rite of Spring*. But we need to note that the principle alluded to above is *not* the principle to which I am committed – I am committed to the idea that



*God's* beauty is such that it can contain no ugliness. In other words, I agree that the principle that Robson suggests could motivate my account is very implausible when it comes to what we might term earthly beauty – the kind of beauty that we, as fallen beings, appreciate and find appealing. The finite beauty we find in the mundane world often needs ugliness to act as a kind of foil.<sup>19</sup>

This, I think, points to something deep about our appreciation of the beautiful. We are fallen beings and our appreciation of the beautiful has been radically affected. Because of this, any principle that is true of earthly beauty is not necessarily going to apply to the beauty of God. After all, His beauty is not just the best kind around as if His beauty is the undisputed supreme champion at a cosmic beauty contest. His beauty is the beauty that somehow allows or lets other things be beautiful. God's beauty is 'off the scale' so to speak. The principle that Robson points to as being implausible is implausible precisely because it begins 'For any x'. But when talking of God's beauty we are not talking about 'any x', we are talking about the very source of all and consequently the logic or grammar of His beauty must be very different. It seems to me that God's beauty needs no foil or counterpoint to set it off. It *must* be unalloyed beauty.

Now Robson could well respond at this point in the following way: 'All this is grist for my mill. That the grammar of God's beauty is very different from earthly beauty is precisely the view I have defended in my agnosticism about whether or not possible worlds are the kinds of thing that can be subject to aesthetic appreciation. If God's beauty is so "other" – so radically different – we cannot claim to know what His beauty consists in. If God's beauty is, indeed, "off the scale" we must be agnostic as to whether it can be subject to any kind of aesthetic "measurability".'<sup>20</sup>

Robson here could be seen as aligning himself with an ancient tradition. God's reality is hidden by an impenetrable cloud of unknowing. As we ascend the path toward the Final Mysteries of God's beauty, speech gives way to silence. I respect this silence, but I do not think that those believers who adopt the typical theistic version of possible world semantics are entitled to be quite so dumbstruck. After all, they say so much about what is going on in God's mind. God has, it is claimed, whole hosts of perfect and maximal representations of what could be. These perfect representations contain enough representational content for God to know what each actual world will be like right down to the last detail. If this is true, then, as I have argued, we surely can talk about the beauty or otherwise of these representations. Robson could, I think, be entitled to agnostic silence, but I don't think others who espouse divine possible worlds can lay claim to a similar muteness.

Let me, at this point, try to give the reader a lively sense of what the unalloyed beauty of God must be like by giving two contrasting 'visions' of God's beauty. I am doing this largely because it is so difficult to respond to the kind of agnosticism that Robson puts forward in his article. Robson, in effect, is saying, 'For all we know, horrendous and unspeakable horrors might contribute to and



make God's overall beauty even more beautiful.' This strikes me as massively implausible. Part of what I am doing in the following accounts of God's beauty is to expose and make plain the implausibility. Before we start, however, I need to give fair warning that I will talk about *parts* or *aspects* of God's beauty. This goes against an increasing sense of uneasiness I have about the idea that God is not perfectly simple. I find myself more and more persuaded that the notion of the simpleness of God is a crucial formal 'attribute' of deity and so talk of parts is, in the final analysis, false.<sup>21</sup> However, given our finite understanding, we can do little but speak as if God's beauty had parts or aspects, and so that is what I will do in the following contrasting accounts of God's beauty.

What, then, could the beauty of God be like? God's beauty must (at the very least)<sup>22</sup> inspire a deep attraction, a profound charm and a deep devotion, but at the same time, its purity and holiness would provoke dread and terror. You would be tempted to feel as if you were nothing were it not for the fact that there, in the beauty's radiance, is a deep love, so intense that you are filled to the brim with the certainty that the Source of All regards you as of infinite importance.<sup>23</sup>

As you change the direction of your gaze, varied realms of new beauty surprise and delight and stupefy. If you concentrate your attention on one part, it has such endless, breathtaking depth. It is like an infinitely dense fractal – new, more profound, more intricate and more exquisite delights enrapture you as you plunge deeper and deeper. It is a kaleidoscopic wonder of such magnificent intensity. There are beautiful meanings and puzzles, codes and ciphers that delight and send the intellect spinning. There are patterns and harmonies. No part, no matter how minuscule, disappoints – each delights in ways the earth-bound mind could not have dreamt of. There is no ugliness to offset the beauty. There is no need of that. This is God's beauty after all. Our attempts at beauty are tainted. They are 'bleared, smeared with toil'.<sup>24</sup> Our versions of beauty often have to use shade and darkness to bring the light of fullness to the fore, but God's brightness needs no contrast for its intensity to shine. You laugh with joy, and for the first time, without the slightest trace of sorrow.

Some aspects of God's beauty are like music or narrative, and so their wholes unravel chapter by chapter or movement by movement.<sup>25</sup> Each part falls seamlessly into place. Some pieces are initially puzzling, and thrill you with delight at their strangeness. Then they are seen in their varied and varying contexts and then a new depth of appreciation begins its dizzying, awe-inspiring cycle again. And the delight would be all the more intense given that the root of the experience began in such puzzlement. Other parts inspire deep dread and a vertiginous awe. There is what you can only say is a terrible beauty. Here we have something too awesome for even the resurrected mind. *But God's beauty is such that, even if you were to explore for all eternity, no part would, to the right-minded, inspire loathing or hatred.* No matter where you looked, no matter where you delved, God would be completely and utterly and fully beautiful.

Contrast this with the idea that Robson entertains as a possibility. You are the eager pilgrim in the heaven of God's beauty. You come across yet another brilliant aspect in the geography of God's radiance. You change the direction of your gaze and, for a terrible instant, as the profiles of two ranges of mountains come together their lines form a scene of the most terrible and sickening horror and depravity. Not one detail is omitted from the nauseatingly ugly scene. Nothing is left to the imagination. You are appalled and physically sick. But it is gone immediately you adjust your vision. You see that it is a necessary part of the overall beauty. *That* mountain range could not exist unless *that* scene was there as a kind of background. Its terrible lines and contours are 'needed' for the overall beauty to be as wonderful as it is. You try not to revisit that part of God again, but the memory haunts you as you explore the rest of the divine mind. You are, of course, a little wary. You are never quite sure whether the next scene in the divine mind will require a bit of horror to make it more beautiful. From other now-less-than-eager explorers you learn that there are whole hosts of these scenes representing every horror possible. They tell you that these loathsome parts are eternal, and, indeed, are a necessary part of the very being of God.<sup>26</sup>

It seems clear to me that given a choice between these alternative conceptions of the beauty of God, the first one should be preferred. God's beauty is such that it needs no horror. There are instead awe-inspiring, never-ending oceans and depths of radiance. There may be a terrible beauty (more of this below). But there is no 'need' for ugliness. In contrast, Robson's speculations about the relationship between beautiful wholes and their parts allows for the possibility that there are horrors in heaven. I do not see how this is even remotely plausible. I would be extremely surprised to enter heaven to find that God's overall beauty somehow demanded the existence of local scenes of aesthetic depravity, as if Zion needs Sodom and Gomorrah in order to be beautiful.

### **Christ's heavenly scars**

What I want to do here is deal with what could be a counter-example to my general position about the aesthetic purity of God. An important problem – at least for a Christian theology/metaphysic – is how one could include a theology of the Cross within any idea of God's beauty. The Cross is the beauty of the most perfect, self-sacrificial love and it is the utter horror of an innocent being tortured to death. That this innocent is also God incarnate – the very creator of the wood and the iron which racks His body – only serves to augment the horror. So where is the Cross in all this – where is the Cross in my picture of heaven's unsullied beauty – a beauty that is supposedly beauty through and through? Haven't I sanitized heaven to the point where it becomes a superficial sentimentality, a place of saccharine pleasure entirely without depth?<sup>27</sup>

To examine any theology of the Cross is bound to be too large for an article such as this. Indeed, it raises a whole host of other questions, not least of which is this: should we understand the Cross to be an eternal aspect of the beatific vision? Personally, I do not think so. This to my mind eternalizes a moment of horror – the Cross, for all its terrible beauty and horror, did not happen for its own sake. It happened to effect something else – salvation. It seems, then, correct to distinguish that which is an essential part of God and that which is contingent upon the way the world is. Christ's sacrifice would not have taken place without a prior act of human rebellion. In a sense then, the Cross is 'external' to God. Of course, Christians want to affirm that the love and fidelity which drove Christ to the Cross are eternal, but whether they want to see the Cross itself as a permanent aspect of the Deity is a difficult question.<sup>28</sup>

We need to limit our ambitions here, and find something potentially ugly which is somehow part of God. Let us look, then, all too briefly at this more specific question: *Christ is in His ascended body in heaven, but His body bears the scars of the events on earth. Will these scars somehow ruin the beauty of heaven?*

Countless sermons and hymns say that Christ's heavenly scars are not ruinations or blots. But how can something so ugly be so beautiful? Does this accommodation of the ugly with the beautiful tell against my account of God's complete, utter, and full beauty? Does it show that some things really are more beautiful if there are some local aspects which are ugly?

My reply is to maintain that 'ugliness' can sometimes be transformed. Not everything which appears ugly really is so once all is known. Christ's heavenly scars are not just scars. They are testimonies to sacrifice and a love which defies all limits. Christ's scars are, we may say, witnesses to the drama of salvation and its victory. If they were not, if they were just scars, then, they would be ugly; they would only be unsavoury reminders of the vulnerability of the flesh and its inability to heal fully. But the events of the whole salvation drama transform them down to the core. This is not a matter of an ugly part being somehow accommodated into a whole and in doing so making the whole more beautiful. The whole thing must be deeper than that. There a kind of *transfiguration* going on.<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps the following account from a different (though related) area would help clarify my thinking about how we should regard the aesthetic status of Christ's heavenly wounds. James Kellenberger relates this particularly disturbing practice in the Sudan – the live burial of the spear-master.<sup>30</sup> After a set of religious ceremonies an old spear-master is lowered into the ground and the people throw cattle dung onto his prostrate body until he is completely covered except for a small hole. He slowly suffocates to death beneath his prison of excrement. Now were a typical westerner to witness this, she would be horrified and appalled. She would, no doubt, think it a morally depraved action, and regard it all as rather horrifyingly ugly. However, there is more going on than merely what we see.

Kellenberger informs us that the Dinka believe that the spear-master is the highest spiritual authority, and that by performing this 'sacrifice' of their beloved spiritual master, his spirit will pass through the hole and not be lost by the community. His presence will be preserved and passed on. The spear-master, when he first takes on that position in his society, knows that this will be the way he will die, and chooses the time of death when he is old and frail. Cattle dung, for the Dinka, is not repulsive, but in their cattle-dependent culture it is a source of 'curative and restorative powers'.<sup>31</sup> It takes a leap of the imagination to see it through different eyes, but I think we can just about see the event from the perspective of the Dinka. They surely do not think that the event is ugly, but perhaps see it as rather beautiful. They certainly find it ethically acceptable, and so might we were we to share the background beliefs that imbue the event with a spiritual significance.

On the surface then, we might say, the action is one thing, and appears to have a certain aesthetic quality. On another it is a wholly different thing, and can have a different aesthetic quality, and that once we know this, the initial reaction can be shown to be wrong-headed. We have, so to speak, not seen it with the correct interpretative spectacles on. As I say, beauty is not always on the surface, and what is initially apparently ugly can be shown to be beautiful.<sup>32</sup> Now do we have ugly *parts* which somehow are needed to get the whole thing more beautiful, or is it more subtle, more interconnected than that? Do the Dinka see a murder, which is then transformed into a sacrifice? Do the Dinka see aesthetically depraved parts mixed with some beauty and see that the ugliness helps to make the whole aesthetically better? I think not. There is a transfiguration happening, a fundamental change in the whole and not just at the level of parts.

It is important to realize that I am not advocating a kind of subjectivity about beauty here. I think that what the Dinka are doing is, in reality, objectively ugly, and, of course, ethically unacceptable. The Dinka are wrong in almost all their background beliefs, and so what is happening is not actually a real transfiguration. It is only an apparent one. There is, of course, a danger in this approach to beauty. Might we not re-describe everything – even the aesthetically and outrageously appalling – in such a way that it is imbued with a kind of allure?<sup>33</sup> Yes, we can. This is probably why we do so many wrong things. We re-describe them to ourselves so that they take on a veneer of respectability. And there is a similar danger in the theological context too.<sup>34</sup> We sanitize horror and make it kitsch. Much religious imagery sometimes seems like that. However, it seems to me that, even given the dangers of misdirected re-description, we can see the central point that beauty and ugliness are not just surface phenomena. There will be deep beauty in heaven, perhaps, in some ways, a terrible beauty, but not horrors which are horrors through and through. We must remember that if possible world talk is true there will not be just a few eternally discordant notes, not just a few ungainly dances,

but whole hosts of horrors right at the very heart of heaven. These horrors remain in God for all eternity. My view is that this is not so, and we must reject the notion that God contains possible worlds.<sup>35</sup>

### Conclusion

A summary of the argument might be helpful. Robson argues that possible worlds are not sufficiently analogous to stories for us to be confident whether they are aesthetically evaluable. I had two arguments here. One said that if possible worlds have enough representational content for God to know exactly what He is doing in creation, then possible worlds must be, in some sense, *copies* of actual worlds. If a possible world or maximal story represents ugliness, the representation must be ugly. Otherwise God won't know what could be. My next reply said that possible worlds must have an aesthetic status since there could be nothing aesthetically neutral in the being of God. Robson also said that, for all we know, it could be the case that God's beauty was such that it needs ugly parts. After all, this is true of many beautiful works of art such as *The Rite of Spring*. I argued that this might be true of earthly beauty, but God's beauty cannot be like that. God must, I reiterated, be completely, fully, and wholly beautiful. Finally I considered a possible counter-argument within Christian theology. Doesn't the resurrected Lord have scars in heaven? If so, aren't there ugly things in heaven? I countered by saying that Christ's scars are not ugly. They are transfigured to the core by His free self-sacrifice and His desire for our salvation.<sup>36</sup>

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## Notes

1. Robson (2011). And Jon Robson's reply: Robson (2012).
2. I presumed throughout the article that possible worlds are in God – in His understanding. There is no separate plenum from which God draws His inspiration. I take it that this is a part of the normal, theistic understanding of the relationship between possible worlds and the being of God.
3. Robson (2012), 515, agrees that there should be a redistribution of emphasis.
4. *Ibid.*, 519.
5. I think at least the beginnings of an answer lie in the metaphysics of modality I present in Robson (2008). We might, for instance, ask the question of who 'owns' the possibility that, say, the actual Jack the Ripper think one more ugly thought. I think God is thinking about things which are 'external' to his mind. I do not believe He is internally representing anything here, but thinking about actual things and their real possibilities. The intentional object of God's thinking is the real Jack the Ripper, his inclinations, his habits, and his psychological makeup. These are real things which are always understood to be outside God in some way or other – at least if we are not pantheists.
6. Robson (2012), 523.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, 524.
9. Robson (*ibid.*) cites Currie (2010) on these criteria.
10. Robson (2012), 524.
11. It might be helpful to remind ourselves of the pervasiveness of the metaphor of possible worlds being stories. We have Robert Adams (1979), Plantinga (1973), and Plantinga (1976). John Divers (2002), 178–179, calls this position *book-realism* and adds the following philosophers to our list: Jaakko Hintikka, Andrew Roper, and Richard Jeffrey.
12. William Lane Craig argues that there are many problems with the visualization metaphor, and prefers an account where God simply knows truths. He contrasts what he calls perceptualist models of God's foreknowledge with conceptualist accounts, and prefers the latter. See Craig (1999), 121–123, and Craig (2001), 133–134. I think that God needs something at least analogous to pictures or images if His idea of, for example, a yellow ball is going to have any semantic content. How will God know what hue Adam's skin will possess if He does not have some kind of image? See Robson (2008), 74–80.
13. The idea of actualization is weird. However, we have grown accustomed to its strangeness, and hardly think it worthy of comment. One of its many ambiguities is this: when God actualizes a world, is it that

very divine idea that is made real, or is the possible world a kind of maximal *model* for the world that comes to be? Are possible worlds *themselves* made real, or are they complete *models* for the real? The whole force of the word ‘actualized’ seems to favour the former reading, but then we have problems. If we do not want to be pantheists, we must say that in some sense the actualized world is ‘outside’ the divine mind, and so in actualization God is literally losing a bit of His mind. Even the most enthusiastic advocate of kenosis would blanch at that idea. I argue that the alternative idea of copying has unfortunate theological implications in Robson (2008), 133–140. However, others see the contrast between pantheism, emanation, and creation to be more nuanced than this simple sketch suggests. See Burrell (2013).

14. Actually we might question the strict accuracy of this statement. Possible worlds are understood to be logically prior to their actual counterpart. But the verb ‘represent’ implies that the logical priority is the other way round. This seems to me another confusion surrounding possible worlds talk. See Robson (2008), n. 16.
15. Now I have argued elsewhere (*ibid.*, 11–15 and 135–137) that this seems to imply that the actual world becomes only a kind of *copy* or perfect imitation of the possible world. In other words, the possible world which is selected for actualization is copied out and made real. Of course, many advocates of the possible world view would prefer to use more exotic vocabulary instead of the much blander and clearly much less exciting idea of ‘copying’. So they might say a particular possible world ‘obtains’, while those which are not realized by God ‘do not obtain’. Those that are not selected remain as mere ‘unactualized’ (as opposed to ‘actualized’) possible worlds. I think it up to the Leibnizians to show how ‘actualization’ or the mysterious process of ‘obtaining’ is different from copying. But, in doing so, they must show how it is possible for a model (the possible world, maximal state of affairs, or whatever) to provide God with a complete and rich enough understanding of that world without it being a copy of its actual counterpart.
16. The rest of the argument is this: since it is obvious that not all possible worlds will, in fact, be beautiful our only option is to reject the idea that there are possible worlds in the mind of God.
17. The quotations are from the originator of the possible worlds idiom Leibniz (1902) [1714], sect. 43, p. 260.
18. Hopkins (1970), ‘God’s grandeur’. Hopkins seems to be suggesting that God’s beauty in the world is often underneath the surface, so to speak. The world is *charged* with the grandeur of God, rather than actually sparking. We must shake the foil. We must tread the olives to extract the oil, and without the encumbrance of shoes, directly feel the ooze of its richness. Of course, Hopkins also knows that the world can be very ugly as well. Grim testimony to this can be found in his *Dark Sonnets*.
19. On an autobiographical note, I can report that when I wrote the original article an early draft contained an attempt to capture some of the beautiful stories that Wisdom could tell Her pilgrim. These stories were meant to capture the merest glimpse of the noble grandiloquence and unquenchable beauty of the divine mind. To my vanity’s chagrin, I quickly found out that this is an impossible task. My ‘beautiful’ stories became sentimental, inane, and sickly sweet. Certainly I could not write a story that was completely and wholly beautiful and at the same time prevent it from being cloying and indeed rather ugly. It was much easier to write tales of perverse horror. As we all know, this problem has assailed far greater minds: Milton’s Satan is a lot more exciting, glamorous, and beautiful than the Spock-like logician that Milton has playing the role of God.
20. Robson makes this kind of criticism of my position in correspondence.
21. See Burrell (1986), 38–50. See Ayres (2004), ch. 15. The term ‘simpleness’ is one which Burrell prefers over the more usual ‘simplicity’.
22. These are meant to be *minimum* conditions of the divine beauty. I am not attempting to describe the fullness of the actual beatific vision. Words will surely not be enough.
23. Interesting questions arise here about the relationship between freedom and the beatific vision. Can the saint in heaven avert her gaze from the contemplation of the Godhead? The orthodox view is that the heavenly saints are impeccable or incapable of sin, which suggests that they cannot but look upon the glory and beauty of God. These issues are pursued by Gaines (2003).
24. Hopkins (1970), ‘God’s grandeur’.
25. See Begbie (2000) for his argument that some kind of analogue of temporal succession is an essential part of our conception of God.



26. Orthodox believers in divine possible worlds usually subscribe to the idea that whatever is possible is necessarily possible.
27. An excellent essay which deals with exactly these themes is Begbie (2007), 45–69. See also Herman (2007). Herman's ideas are especially interesting in this context. Walford (2007) has many specific examples of how art tries to represent the world's fallen nature.
28. Hans Urs von Balthasar tries to accommodate two competing currents in his thought here. He wants two apparently contradictory things to be simultaneously true. The event of the Cross is entirely the act of God. It is not a mere adjunct to the Deity – as if it were 'accidental' in my sense. But he also wants it to be because of our presumably contingent actions. This passage seems to capture this tension well: 'the action taking place between heaven and earth is not one-sided – for example, the mere pouring out of bowls of wrath from above – for where does the Lamb's supratemporal wound come from, if not from his destiny on earth?' (Balthasar (1994), 71). Note the idea of a supratemporal wound as if the Christ's wounds are a timeless aspect of the Godhead, but also the notion that somehow it is contingent upon the way the world is. Overall, however, Balthasar's theology sees the Cross as eternal. It is taken into the very life of the Trinity. Christ is, he says, eternally infinitely distant from the Father. See Kilby (2012), 99–104. See her very penetrating comments on Balthasar's views on the value of suffering (*ibid.*, 115–122).
- Balthasar's idea of theodrama has been a central inspiration in the ideas that follow. However, what I say here should not be read as any kind of interpretation of his work. Such a task is well beyond the limits of a short essay, and well beyond the limits of my scholarship. For a short overall account of Balthasar see Nichols (2011). For more detail see Nichols (2000).
29. D. Z. Phillips gives an account in one of his lectures of a poem – it is a splendidly patriotic poem and gives its readers immense pleasure in the beautiful way it captures the spirit of loyalty to kin and country. It turns out one day that we find the author was a traitor to his own country. Now what was beautiful and moving becomes ugly and treacherous. It is possible, therefore, that there could be two identical 'patriotic' poems with the same words and cadence, etc. A was written by a patriot and B was written by a traitor. It seems plausible to assume that A would be beautiful, while B would be ugly. (Think of two Helens of Troy identical in every facial feature – one is a natural beauty, the other made by a kind of Mengelean plastic surgery where each skin graft came from unwilling donors.) It seems natural to say that B has the superficial appearance of beauty without actually being beautiful. In order to counter this, one could say that the origin of a work of art is irrelevant. However, it does seem part of what I mean by beautiful that we must, so to speak, delve beneath the surface. After all, are not many evil things superficially lovely and attractive and beautiful? If they are not, why do people feel such attraction for them? (In his superb *Beauty of the Infinite* (2003), 24–25, 141 Hart seems to imply that beauty is always a surface phenomenon. I think that beauty – *real beauty* – has to be all the way down.) Kant would disagree with the idea that beauty relies upon things external to the object. He would claim that a *pure* judgement of beauty would distinguish between my disapproving of the *existence* of such a face (or such a poem) with my disinterested appreciation of its beauty. See Kant (2007) [1790], pt. I, sect. 1, § 2. Presumably he would think both Helens of Troy equally beautiful, and both poems inspiring. See Walton (1970), 334–367, for a defence of the view that aesthetic appreciation depends on more than the physical attributes of the artwork itself. I thank Jon Robson for the Walton reference.
30. Kellenberger (2001), 52–56. Kellenberger is defending his Principle of Ascent which says: 'Ascending values tend towards universality: as the level of abstraction of a moral value increases, the breadth of its application and acceptability increases' (*ibid.*, 51).
31. *Ibid.*, 53. Kellenberger is here quoting from Kekes (2001), 125–126.
32. Think of such initially repulsive Christian phrases like 'washed in the blood of the lamb', 'His body broken for you', etc. Christians find such phrases beautiful.
33. Kellenberger (2001), 57–60, sees this danger.
34. For example, in that bestseller of the late nineteenth century, *Quo Vadis?* by Henryk Sienkiewicz, there are such graphically long and detailed descriptions of the executions and the tortures that the Christians endure that it becomes disturbing. There is a kind of unsavoury celebration of the pain and suffering. (However, we must not lose sight in our world of anaesthetics and pain-killers that other times have had to endure more pain. The edification of pain might have been a balm that they needed.)

35. What is the alternative to possible worlds? I would say that possibility is not determinate. There are no things in possibility like possible worlds or possible Hitlers. Possibility is not, we might say, composed of atoms. This is the main modal claim which I attempt to pursue in Robson (2008).
36. I am very thankful to Jon Robson for responding so clearly to my article, and for his generous comments on earlier drafts of this essay. He made me see things more clearly. I am also thankful to Phil Robinson for his perceptive criticisms and comments. Fr Tony Curren has made valuable contributions in discussions over Christ's scars. His knowledge of Christian art has helped me a lot.