

Questions About the Perception of “Christian Truth”: On the Affective Effects of Sin

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Abstract

This article engages David Bentley Hart’s critique of coercive “demonstration” in apologetics in favor of Gospel proclamation in the mode of “persuasion.” More specifically, I evaluate Hart’s articulation of persuasion as a discourse that is primarily aesthetic and traffics primarily in *beauty*. After expressing an appreciation for Hart’s critique of the traditional apologetics of demonstration, I suggest that Hart’s own proposal still has elements of an “apologetic”—a kind of natural “aesthetic” theology, but a natural theology nonetheless. I conclude by extrapolating the Reformed critique of natural theology (based on the “noetic effects of sin”) to include a critique of Hart’s aesthetic quasi-natural theology by providing an account of the “affective” effects of sin.

Keywords

Apologetics, natural theology, aesthetics, violence, beauty, David Bentley Hart

How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace.

Romans 10:15 [Isaiah 52:7]

David Bentley Hart is, at heart, an evangelist. And *The Beauty of the Infinite*¹ is really a book for evangelists, for Gospel heralds, because at the end of the day, and from the beginning of the book, Hart is most interested in providing an account of “the power of the Christian story to *persuade*” (414).² The core of his thesis is that

¹ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003). All parenthetical references in the text refer to this work.

² This is not to suggest that is an evangelistic book, as if it were some kind of mammoth tract we could hand out to passers-by.

the Gospel is a peaceable, non-coercive persuasion because Christ, as the beauty and rhetoric of God, provokes our desire rather than seeks to overpower our will or reason: "Because he is no beautiful soul, no withdrawing and perishing beauty, Christ offers, in himself, a peace that enters history always as rhetoric, as a persuasion, as a gift that can be received only as a gift" (413). Countering contemporary ("postmodern") accounts of hermeneutics that construe rhetoric and interpretation as inherently violent, Hart is out to make sense of the admittedly audacious claim that only Christian rhetoric is peaceful—that it is unabashedly aimed at conversion, but that this discourse aimed at conversion is not coercive or governed by mechanics of power.

In this respect, Hart's project is fighting on two fronts (forgive the belligerent militaristic metaphor for a project aimed at peace): on the one hand, he wants to challenge the "postmodern"³ (or Nietzschean) account of rhetoric as ultimately reducing to violence (power-over) and war. He challenges this hermeneutics of violence on theological grounds (the doctrines of Creation and Trinity yield a very different account of relations and language), but also most interestingly for what we might call their resultant politics: the hermeneutics of violence can end up only advocating a false humility allied to skepticism which really precludes one from saying anything *particular*—anything specific or contentful.⁴ In other words, the only way to *not* be violent in discourse is to not say anything—or at least not say anything as if you actually believe it to be true. "By Lyotard and Caputo both," Hart comments, "one is reminded of how much unreflective conventional liberalism underlies the 'radicality' of this hermeneutics" (425). Thus he rightly notes that despite all their talk of difference, this hermeneutics of violence ends up "advocating a strategy of simple liberalism, a social hygiene for preserving the openness of a marketplace of ideas" (423). In particular, this supposedly "post-modern" account ends up resorting to one of the mainstays of liberal, Enlightenment politics: the myth of some kind of secured neutral space: "In order for there to be this letting be of different voices, a

³ I will let this slippery term stand as employed by Hart, for lack of space to complicate the issue. That said, as a scholar of Continental philosophy, I find myself in deep agreement with his assessment of what is ultimately going on in the work of Lyotard, Derrida, Vattimo, and Caputo—despite some of their own protests to the contrary. For my own critical accounts on the same themes, see James K.A. Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), pp. 87–129 and *idem.*, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), pp. 49–60 and 108–116.

⁴ As Hart puts it, "When Caputo describes radical hermeneutics as a kind of humility, a frank expression of ignorance, it is difficult not to conclude that, for him, this style of ignorance is the only acceptable form of humility" (431). What is most worrisome is how many Christians have been taken with this mode of false humility as a way of undoing their fundamentalist past.

certain neutral space must first be secured: so much difference must be converted into indifference, so many voices must be suppressed; the consensus of the forum always excludes the overly garrulous fabulist, the storyteller who knows too much" (422).⁵ Contra this false humility which is really a skeptical ignorance, Hart wants to retain the thick particularity and conversionist impulse of Christian rhetoric while at the same time arguing that this particularity and goal of persuasion is not violent or coercive (427).

But this evokes the second front on which Hart is battling: while he advocates an unapologetic Christian proclamation as a mode of persuasion aimed at conversion, the mode of this proclamation is not at all triumphalist vis-à-vis expectations of effectiveness. Boldness, here, does not translate into domination (though the "postmodern" account must equate the two⁶). The bold and unabashed narration of the Christian story is not an announcement that is made in order to dominate or colonize public discourse.⁷ The Gospel herald is not out to rule—is not even out to "win" an argument, since Christian rhetoric operates outside of the agonism of hermeneutical war. So rather than a discourse which seeks to master all others by appeal to a rational legitimation, Christian rhetoric is ultimately a mode of *martyrdom*: "Theology must, because of what its particular story is, have the form of martyrdom, witness, a peaceful offer that has already suffered rejection and must be prepared for rejection as a consequence" (441).

It's here that I think Hart's account is most illuminating and deeply challenging, precisely because its hard to see how so much of the "Christian rhetoric" that pervades our public discourse could be

⁵ Hart goes on to then note the way in which this "radical hermeneutics" plays right into the hands of the market (431–434). This is echoed in Alain Badiou's astute analysis of the way in which postmodern celebration of difference is everything capitalism could have hoped for: "What inexhaustible potential for mercantile investments in this upsurge—taking the form of communities demanding recognition and so-called cultural singularities—of women, homosexuals, the disabled, Arabs! And these infinite combinations of predicative traits, what a godsend! Black homosexuals, disabled Serbs, Catholic pedophiles, moderate Muslims, married priests, ecologist yuppies, the submissive unemployed, prematurely aged youth! Each time, a social image authorizes new products, specialized magazines, improved shopping malls, 'free' radio stations, targeted advertising networks. . ." (Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003], p. 10). Nothing is more interested in difference than the market.

⁶ That is, insofar as Derrida's account simply equates particularity with violence, any "thick" (i.e., particular) story will be violent insofar as it is proclaimed. For further reflection on this, see James K.A. Smith, "Determined Violence: Derrida's Structural Religion," *Journal of Religion* 78 (1998), pp. 197–212 and *idem.*, "Determined Hope: A Phenomenology of Christian Expectation," in *The Future of Hope: Christian Tradition Amid Modernity and Postmodernity*, eds. Miroslav Volf and William Katerberg (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 200–227.

⁷ The difference between the (rational) apologist and the (aesthetic) herald, I might suggest, is that the latter acknowledges the rational "contestability" of his story. On the recognition of contestability as a condition for pluralism, see William Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 9.

described as allied to martyrdom. To the contrary, this more common Christian rhetoric is invoked in complete accord with the hermeneutics of violence, plays according to the logic of domination, and is precisely interested in ruling the public sphere. In such modes of discourse, "Christian rhetoric" is marshaled to win an argument, to justify a coercive configuration of the public sphere, or to underwrite a foreign policy which is the exact antithesis of "martyrdom."⁸ If Hart's unapologetic Christian rhetoric is opposed to the thin skepticism of "postmodernism," it is equally opposed to the bastardization of Christian rhetoric that is ultimately coercive. The figure that embodies his opposition on both fronts is the martyr.⁹

It is at this juncture that I would like to explore a little further *with* Hart, affirming the core of his project precisely by raising a concern. I'll try to get at this under the rubric of "apologetics"—a longstanding temptation for evangelists.

One (admittedly provocative) way of describing the bastardization of Christian rhetoric as coercion rather than martyrdom is to consider the revival of natural law and natural theology that has accompanied the rise of the Religious Right in the United States.¹⁰ Both natural law and natural theology—allied to what I'll call "apologetics"—presume the possibility of *demonstration* of "Christian truth" because they presume a universal, neutral reason as the basis for "proofs."¹¹ And it is precisely this presumption of a universal (or common) reason that makes possible not only demonstration, but coercion. Apologetics, I would suggest, is always linked to coercion because it assumes a justification or warrant for Christian belief that is susceptible to (universal, rational) demonstration. Therefore, if the hearer of such "proofs" fails to receive/believe them, then the hearer is *at fault*—has just opened herself to the charge of being ir-rational, and therefore actually *in need of* coercion in order to do what is good or right.

But here Hart rightly recognizes that "Christian thought always already stands in what might be considered a 'postmodern' position" with respect to the logic of demonstration (3). Because Christian

⁸ Martyrdom would be the antithesis of Constantinianism, which is the primary mode of "Christian rhetoric" in the public sphere today.

⁹ Cp. the role of the martyr in Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 195–197.

¹⁰ I have explored this in more detailed in my "Empire, Ekklesia, and Evangelical Public Theology: A Reformed Objection to Natural Law," forthcoming.

¹¹ The notion of "apologetics" is largely left unqualified in Hart. One could, however, note the difference between a "negative" apologetics (which seeks to simply level the playing field and show that all "stories" operate on the basis of contingent, shared sets of commitments) and "positive" apologetics (which presumes a universal reason which yields universal justification or warrant, as in "natural theology"). When Hart (and I) refer to "apologetics," he seems to mean the latter. The former (which would include Reformed epistemology) is not susceptible to the same critique.

theology "has no stake in the myth of disinterested rationality," it is rightly suspicious of "the great project of 'modernity'": "postmodern theory confirms theology in its original condition: that of a story, thoroughly dependent upon a sequence of historical events to which the only access is the report and practice of believers, a story whose truthfulness may be urged—even enacted—but never proved simply by the processes of scrupulous dialectic" (4). Indeed, this is at the core of Hart's account: "the church has no arguments for its faith more convincing than the form of Christ" (3) and "no means whereby to corroborate its wildly implausible claim, except the demonstrative practice of Christ's peace" (2–3)—which is why she doesn't engage in apologetic discourses of demonstration, but rather kerygmatic proclamations of invitation. The church "stands before the world principally with the story it tells concerning God and creation, the form of Christ, the loveliness of the practice of Christian charity—and the rhetorical richness of its idiom. Making its appeal first to the eye and heart, as the only way it may 'command' assent, the church cannot separate truth from rhetoric or from beauty" (4).¹²

I take it that Hart would be sympathetic to my claim that apologetics—linked as it is to demonstration—always colludes with a kind of coercion. And I also take it that Hart would suggest that the move from demonstration to persuasion, from apologetics to aesthetics, undercuts any linkage of Christian rhetoric to coercion, and thus would make non-sensical any employment of Christian rhetoric as a tool of domination in the public sphere. If all we're doing is telling a *story* in a way that we hope is winsome and inviting—even compelling in a way—then such proclamation, even when it is aimed at *conversion*, is not coercive because it has renounced the universality of a logic that would be needed to corroborate such coercion (and to dominate those who reject the logic). Martyrs aren't out to win arguments. In sum, the move from apologetics to aesthetics is meant to undo the Constantinian projects of natural law and natural theology, and thus undercuts the logics of coercion associated with them.

So to circumvent the violence of "demonstration," Hart moves the mode of Gospel proclamation to *persuasion*, and more specifically, to the matter of *beauty*¹³: the evangel is proclaimed on the basis not of its rationality or demonstrative power, but on the basis of

¹² Here Hart echoes Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 1: "If my Christian perspective is persuasive, then this should be a persuasion intrinsic to the Christian *logos* itself, not the apologetic mediation of a universal human reason." This notion of postfoundationalist narration and out-narration is also why it is not entirely surprising that some have explored overlapping sensibilities in Rorty and Hauerwas.

¹³ This is *not*, however, an abandonment of "truth;" indeed, beauty is "inseparable from truth" (3). It does, however, represent a move away from thinking about the *cognitive* as primary with respect to truth. It is, we might suggest, a Pascalian move.

"the suasive loveliness of Christian rhetoric" (5) which reflects that "Christ is a persuasion, a form evoking desire, and the whole force of the gospel depends upon the assumption that this persuasion is also peace" (3). Now, it is here that I want to locate a certain ambiguity in Hart's project. While he rightly rejects "apologetics"—that is, coercive discourses of demonstration that are primarily "rational"—his articulation of a Christian *aesthetics* as an alternative may still harbor elements of an apologetics which presumes a certain objectivity or universality. In other words, even if he moves the primary locus for the "perception" of "Christian truth" from the cognitive to the affective (from the logical to the aesthetic), there seem to be some lingering aspects of the apologetic in his account of beauty.¹⁴ In particular, some of his claims about beauty seem to attribute to beauty just the kind of universal "force" that made him see demonstrative programs based on universal reason coercive. For instance, when Hart claims that "Beauty is objective" (17), he glosses this by saying that beauty "can be recognized in spite of desire"¹⁵ and that "[t]here is an overwhelming givenness in the beautiful" (17).¹⁶ Furthermore, it is because of "the attractiveness of the beautiful" (17) that "Beauty evokes desire" (19) and reveals God's "glory" as "something communicable and intrinsically delightful" (17). It is "the *indomitable* event of beauty" (437, emphasis added) that shines through "creation's open and overwhelming declaration of God's glory" (21).

Well, yes and no. Even if we might affirm this claim regarding the objectivity of beauty, there is a correlate set of questions about the *perception* of this beauty which tend to be downplayed by Hart. For instance, while God's beauty objectively evokes desire, are there subjective conditions that are necessary in order for that operation to happen?¹⁷ Even if it doesn't operate according to a coercive logic of demonstration, are there not also subjective conditions that are necessary in order for a story to "evoke" affirmation? Even if we affirm the intrinsic "attractiveness" of the beauty of Christ, is it not still legitimate to ask: attractive for whom? And how? If Christ offers

¹⁴ I don't mean to claim that Hart's interest or goal is a coercive apologetics, but only whether his account of aesthetic attraction could, if it fell into the wrong hands so to speak, be employed *as* a kind of natural theology.

¹⁵ Actually, there seems to be a frustrating editorial glitch in this line, as it literally reads "it can be recognized in de-spite of desire." Granted, my 'smoothing' of the quote above is only one possible rendering.

¹⁶ This sense of "overwhelming givenness" brings to mind the sort of hyper-objectivity that one might associate with Jean-Luc Marion's account of the givenness of phenomena—precisely a donation that overwhelms (and therefore undercuts) hermeneutic conditions. I hope to develop this intuition further elsewhere.

¹⁷ I'm trying to formulate this in way that will evoke parallels in Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*. Or we could also replay this in terms of discussions about the sacraments (does beauty operate *ex opera operato*?), in which case my position will replay Calvin's doctrine of the Eucharist to a certain extent.

himself as a gift, are there not conditions for the reception of a gift (cp. 413)?

Now, despite this talk of objectivity, manifestness, and "in-domitability," in other places Hart qualifies the effects or effectiveness of Christ's beauty. For instance, in discussing the power of Christ's beauty to non-coercively evoke desire, he notes that "desire must be also be cultivated; the beautiful does not always immediately commend itself to every taste; Christ's beauty, like that of Isaiah's suffering servant, is not expressed in vacuous comeliness or shadowless glamour, but calls for a *love* that is charitable, that is not dismayed by distance or mystery, and that can repent of its failure to see; this is to acquire what Augustine calls a taste for the beauty of God (*Soliloquia* 1.3–14). Once this tasted is *learned*, divine beauty, as Gregory of Nyssa says, inflames desire. . . And, as Augustine also remarks, it is what one loves—what one desires—that determines to what city one belongs (*Enarrationes in Psalmos* 2.64.2)" (20, emphases added). But there are important questions to be asked, then: what makes this love possible? How is this "taste" learned? What effect could this beauty have for those who belong to the city of the earth? How does the "invitation" to another city happen, particularly since the overarching concern here is *evangelism*?

One can see a beginning of an answer later when Hart suggests that "the allure of this beauty must of course be visible to those outside the circle of the faith, as it unfolds into *fuller* expression, but the Christian vision of beauty can be *more* truly recognized, more deeply understood, more richly explored, only as one is appropriated by the language in which it unfolds itself" (34). But what of this language of *degrees* of seeing? Is this a difference of degree, or kind? Even if beauty is (objectively) visible, is it *perceived* as such? Is it not the case that it can be "seen" without (really) being seen? Here biblical language regarding an objective givenness that is not perceived as such is intriguing (Is. 53; Is. 6:10; Luke 8:10, where the aesthetics of the parable is also a concealing; Matt. 13:13–16: blessed are the eyes that can see what is "objectively" given to everyone, including those who can't see.) I think the language of *degrees* of seeing in Hart's account misses what might biblically be understood as a difference of *kind*—indeed, the very difference between perception and non-perception.

So while he makes some qualifications, these don't seem to temper his other claims, or at least don't make up for failing to ask about the subjective conditions that are necessary for the perception of the beauty of "Christian truth." There might be a couple of reasons for this:

1. Hart's account does not provide much of an account of the effects of sin on perception, even *aesthetic* perception. (Of course, leave it

to the Reformed panelist to raise the matter of sin and depravity!). In this regard, one could replay a little move from the Reformed playbook which is usually run against natural theology.¹⁸ Here I want to use it against the latent aesthetic natural theology that one could derive from Hart's account. The Reformed tradition has long lodged an objection to natural theology¹⁹ because of what it has described as the "noetic effects of sin."²⁰ While the Reformed tradition would affirm a certain "givenness" or "objectivity" of God's revelation in creation, the effectiveness of this natural revelation is mitigated by the epistemic effects of sin on the perceptual capacities of sinful perceivers. I want to suggest that in the same way that there are cognitive or noetic effects of sin upon "understanding," there are also affective effects of sin upon aesthetic "perception."²¹ The "objectivity" of beauty—the givenness of God's revelation in creation—does not translate into "objectivity" as it is commonly meant (that is, openly and universally perceived by all). The givenness of God's beauty in creation is "objective" in the sense that it is true of the object of perception; that is, it is true that "since the creation of the world his invisible attributes are clearly there to be seen" (Rom. 1:19), but this does not mean that they *are* seen as such or for what they are. In fact, Paul suggests the contrary: that despite the objective "givenness" of God's beauty in creation, this beauty is *not* seen, but rather suppressed (Rom. 1:21). Thus beauty is not as "indomitable" as might be suggested, precisely because it can be obfuscated, suppressed and ignored by those who lack the (renewed) perceptual capacities to see it as such. This undercuts any possibility of an aesthetic natural theology (and the attendant politics²²) that would replace a cognitive natural theology that Hart rejects.

2. Questions about the conditions for the perception of Christian truth might also be downplayed because of a limited role for the Spirit in Hart's account. When Hart rightly invokes Augustine's claim that our "taste" for God must be learned and cultivated, and that this requires the proper direction of our *love* (20), it seems important

¹⁸ Though I think one could generate the same critique from resources in the Orthodox tradition, particularly in the account of the corruption of *nous*. My thanks to Terence Cuneo on this point.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Alvin Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology" in *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* (1980).

²⁰ Again, for a ready example, see Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 213–216.

²¹ It would be interesting to develop this from a dialogue with Jonathan Edward's semiotics.

²² In other words, an aesthetic proclamation could still be *coercive*. Couldn't one suggest that fascism is often driven by an aesthetics that assumes something about the perceptive capacities of the *Volk*, and therefore marginalizes and excludes those who can't see?

to recognize that for Augustine, and Paul (I think), the proper formation of this love (and thus the proper direction of our desire and cultivation of taste) remains intimately linked to the Spirit's being shed abroad in our hearts (Rom. 5:5).²³ In other words, the subjective condition of possibility for the perception of God's beauty is the regeneration by the Holy Spirit. The aesthetics of Christian truth demands a more fully developed pneumatology and ecclesiology—perhaps a specifically pneumatological ecclesiology (a new Pentecost!). While the beauty of creation does have a certain "givenness," in order to see this for what it is requires the renewal of the Spirit and the (re)formation of our perceptive capacities through the practices of the community of the Spirit, the Church.

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²³ Since such is located ecclesially, this point also undercuts any temptation to enlist an aesthetics for a Constantinianism of the beautiful.