March 22, 2013

Religion as Aesthetic Practice: Aesthetic Experience and the Paradox of Religious Toleration

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/kevin_lee/37/
Introduction

My paper considers whether an analysis of aesthetic experience might contribute to an understanding of religious toleration. “Religious toleration” is a foundational belief for contemporary American liberal democratic theory. In fact, it is the fundamental principle that is enshrined in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. Nonetheless, a remarkable and unsettling feature of contemporary social thought, has been the claim that at its root, religious tolerance rests on an irresolvable paradox that goes directly to the justifications for it. There have been several recent works, for example, Brian Leiter’s “Why Tolerate Religion?” and Martha Nussbaum’s “The New Religious Intolerance” that point out this paradox and suggest the existence of a growing intolerance towards religion. In this sense, liberalism might be said to be facing a “crisis” and a “post-liberal” era might be dawning.

Religious toleration is not a modern liberal invention, but it did gain new meaning in modern thought. My paper begins by considers the contours of the arguments of toleration advanced by the two modern philosophers who were the principal architects of religious tolerance in American thought: John Locke and John

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Stuart Mill. Simply put, Locke’s most famous augment is that one cannot force another to believe what a religion holds most dear, and therefore coercive force should not be used against religion. Mill, on the other hand, has a more nuanced argument involving the marketplace of ideas and the intrinsic value of religious pluralism. Both of these arguments, although they are somewhat contradictory, have been foundational in American jurisprudence and have contributed to the great variety of approaches that one finds today.

In recent works, religious toleration is generally treated as a special case of moral toleration, where religion is viewed as a particular type of moral sentiment. It suggests a paradox where the acceptance of competing moral convictions must be tolerated on moral grounds. For example, in a recent review of David Heyd’s collection of essays, *Toleration: an Elusive Virtue*, Jeremy Waldron explains the paradox this way: “We tolerate a practice when we judge it to be [morally] wrong but nevertheless refrain from acting against it in ways that we would normally. On Waldron’s understanding, the paradox consist in the apparent contradiction that it seems to be morally required to tolerate what one believes to be morally wrong. Typically, philosopher like Bernard Williams have sought solutions to the paradox by drawing hierarchical distinctions among various levels of “moral” reasons, some of which must be reasons of a higher order that ground and limit toleration. The debate is set out in terms of gaining understanding by examining the grammar and

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3 David Heyd (ed.) Toleration: An Elusive Virtue
syntax of the propositions that contain expressions of moral meaning. As with much
contemporary Anglo-American jurisprudence, language is viewed as expressing
intentional awareness.

It is not surprising that aesthetics, or theories about the nature of beauty,
have had little influence on these debates. Aesthetics, as a topic for analytic
philosophers, had little influence in the twentieth century outside of theorizing
about art and various artistic forms. Many Anglo-American analytic philosophers
sought to clarify the meaning of “beauty” and its associated concepts, but have not
sought to apply the lived experience of beauty to understanding the nature of
philosophy or other nature of other areas of philosophical investigation. While some
Continental philosophers have found beauty to be a topic with broad importance,
their work has had little influence on the Anglo-American jurisprudence of religious
tolerance. (OUTSIDE OF WONDERFUL CONFERENCES LIKE THIS ONE). This is
unfortunate however since aesthetic theories have much to offer to the discussion.

Aesthetic theories challenge the conventional understanding of analytic
philosophers about the nature of conscious awareness, the significance of emotive
affectation, the limitations of language, the nature of experience, and many
associated questions. They do this by suggesting aspects of human awareness that
are poorly captured in analytic philosophy, and these missing insights hold
implications for thinking about the relationship between religious conflicts and
religious liberty.

My essay examines the epistemological claims that aesthetics experience
makes and suggests how it might contribute to understanding the nature of
religious toleration. It argues that aesthetic experiences point beyond what can be conceptualized and may suggest a givenness to experience that is not been considered by analytic jurisprudence, since Given-ness is a term of art for phenomenology. It suggests some implications of considering aesthetic experience for religious toleration.

**Locke’s Foundationalism**

I am particularly interested in the paper with Nicolas Wolterstoft’s reading of Locke, who he believed was seeking to provide new foundations for a society that has was in transition. Wolterstoft suggests that Locke faced the crisis ‘of a people schooled to consult tradition who now [found] their tradition fractured’ (xix). Locke sought ‘new “foundations” for knowledge and belief that could be discovered’ because the ‘wisdom of a (supposedly) unified tradition could no longer be consulted to resolve one’s quandaries’ (3). Once the hegemony of tradition was fractured, rival traditions sprang up, and ‘people were being schooled into becoming unreflective partisans of their own party and of its particular tradition. They were being schooled into uncritical acceptance on the authority of the “say-so”of the deliverances of the leaders of their own faction.’ (4) These faction eventually resulted in ‘antagonisms [which] erupted into civil war’ (7). Locke’s crisis, then was ‘the anxiety of having to govern our belief in general, and settle our moral and political quandaries in particular, when our once-unified tradition has fragmented into partisan quarrels’ (181) Wolterstoff views Locke as
offering a capacious conception of the ethics of religious belief, but he doubts whether the attempt to develop a foundationalist philosophy succeeds.

Locke’s attempt to resolve the crisis he faced turned on his theory of understanding, which in turn rests on his concept of ideas. For Locke, the tabula rosa of the mind is written on by experience, but the Whatever perceptual cognition we have of external objects, it involves immediate awareness of sensory ideas. Since the direct perception of sensory ideas enables recognition and awareness of those objects. This means that Locke’s foundationalism rests ultimately on an intentional conception of awareness.

For those unfamiliar with the term, intentionality has a technical meaning in the philosophy. Generally, contemporary analytic philosophers of mind believe that consciousness is constituted by the mind being directed toward some object of awareness. Intention comes from the Latin “intention” which means to be directed towards. Intentionality is belief that consciousness is constituted by the mind being directed toward some object. A non-intentional theory holds that there mental states where one has awareness of something is not reducible to an object. Non-intentional states are at least in part ineffable, since they exceed what can be formally expressed in concepts. Non-intentional states exist where the mind apprehends something that is ineffable and mysterious.

Locke’s attempt to respond to the crisis of his time rests on his theory of experience, which for him is intentional—ideas are written into the blank page of the mind. It is this aspect of Locke’s theory that is questioned in this paper.
Recent Theories of Cognition

One reason to reconsider aesthetic experience now is that it has gained renewed attention among philosophers working on philosophy of mind who suggest that meaning might exceed conceptualization and formal expression. That is to say, there might be powerful experiences that persons find to be deeply significant that cannot be correlated to distinct mental objects or reduced to formal conceptualizations. One example is a group of theories of “embodied cognition.” This is a term associated with George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, who explored what they called “embodied consciousness” in their book, *Metaphors We Live By*. This book was instrumental in advancing awareness that contemporary philosophy has underappreciated the significance of embodiment for understanding the nature of conscious experience. In Mark Johnson’s recent work, *The Meaning of the Body*, he argues that contemporary philosophy has excluded from consideration aspects the sorts of ineffable experiences that are the sort that pre-modern writers often found to be most significant. He refers to experiences that are characterized by being “non-intentional” in the sense of it being difficult to discern what it is that the mind is directed toward.

While the terminology might be imprecise and the account of contemporary philosophy of mind might be disputed, Johnson is correct, I think, to argue that Anglo-American analytic philosophers have looked for meaning only in what is capable of being expressed in concepts. His point is that modern thought has largely denied the existence of non-intentional mental states, or even if they conceded that
such mental states might exist, they found them to be meaningless. This thesis was advanced by many analytic philosophers, including AJ Ayer, John Searle, and Willard Quine, each of whom rejected non-intentionality, but for somewhat different reasons. Johnson’s argument suggests that these philosophers have not appreciated the significance of embodied consciousness, which Johnson believes can be explored by considering the experience of beauty.

Some of examples are useful here. One illustration of what Johnson has in mind is developed by the enigmatic philosopher, Stanley Cavell, develops another example in his collection of essays, “Must We Mean What We Say?” Cavell asks what Romeo means by saying that Juliet is the Sun. This statement is literally nonsense. Juliet is metaphorically the sun for Romeo, but how does the metaphor work? How do we know what the metaphor means? Cavell argues that it is only meaningful to one who can imagine, either through experience or creative insight, what it would be like to love another in the way that the attributes of the sun—warmth, light, nurturing, etc.—would apply. Shakespeare is calling his audience into an imagined love that has meaning beyond what the words convey. The full meaning of Juliet is the Sun is not communicated by the words but evoked by the author in the hearts of like-minded lovers. It is a metaphor that seeks to draw on experiences that exceed the conceptual expressions of meaning.

Christian Neo-Platonism and the Experience of Divine Beauty

Locke sought foundational beliefs apart from religious tradition, so he could not consider the significance of ancient aesthetic theories approach Divine Beauty in
a similar way. The Christian neo-Platonists recognized two modes of awareness. Dominic O’Meara and Richard Sorabji have shown that neo-Platonists were in fact aware of and made theological use of the concept of intentionality and non-intentionality. For example, Sorabji explains that “there are two kinds of thought in Neo-Platonism”: there is a discursive form of reasoning (dianoia, logos) which refers to “the step by step reasoning which considers propositions.” And there is intellect (nous), which refers to “the steady and even timeless understanding in which discursive thought ideally terminates.” (106). In the discursive form of reasoning (dianoia or logos) according to O’Meara, “internal objects’ or concepts “represent transcendent objects in discursive thinking.” Sorabji adds that the nous does not. Sorabji argues that the form of thought identified as intellect (nous) was not intentional. Beauty as Pseudo-Denys understands this transcendental name of God is such an intelligible—it is prior to the intellect as is not an experience “about” something.

Augustine made use of this notion of divine Beauty. In a controversial argument, Jean Luc Marion, commenting on Augustine’s de trinitate has suggest the existence of a theological givenness, which would be an immediate apprehension of a reality that exceeds intellectual grasp, and yet it is that experience which transforms all else and orients the person to moral awareness. As with Romeo’s Juliet, the speaker or author who evokes the Beauty of God is eliciting fellowship with others who have had the experience. The words are not constitutive of meaning, they are evocative of remembered experiences. The significance of this awareness of the divine as mysterious beauty carries moral force primarily in the claim that the human person bears the image of God (imagio

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5 For a discussion of why the discursive reasoning of Neo-Platonism is intentional, see Dominic J. O’Meara, “Intentional Objects in Later Neo-Platonism” in Ancient and Medieval Theories of Intentionality (Leiden, Germany: Brill Press, (2001) 115-125 at 119.
It is the unfathomable mystery of the divine that Augustine, for example, identified with the image of God born by all human persons, which is the source of human dignity.

**Aesthetics in Contemporary Legal Thought**

The significance of extra-textual, and extra conceptual meaning, associated with aesthetic experience, has been noted by a few legal theorists. Most notably, James Boyd White’s work in law and literature makes note of this connection. For White, law points beyond its formal expression to greater themes, as literature points beyond the formal elements of narrative to artistic meanings that can have great significance for the reader. Adam Geary recently argues, following White, for the need to integrate rhetorical theory, critical race theory, queer theory, and various versions of reader response theory into legal analysis. His work seeks to overcome the Continental divide that shaped philosophy in the twentieth century. His work also sees the significance of the experience of the Other and attaches moral meaning to the unfathomable mystery that one encounters in another person.

**What Does Aesthetic Experience Suggest?**

Works like this suggest that religions, whatever else they might be, involve aesthetic life projects. Their significance is as ways of living, which seek meaningful human existence in ways that are not well understood in contemporary analytic philosophy. What might it mean to seek to live artfully in the presence of a mystery that exceeds conceptual understanding and yet is the source of moral meaning? How can conflicts among these life projects be assessed when the meaning of a
practice or belief is fully apprehended only in light of its contribution to an ineffable
apprehension of aesthetic quality? While my paper does not attempt to answer
these questions, it does seek to argue for the vitality and significance of the
questions for thinking about the nature of religious toleration by suggesting
critiques of the paradox of toleration as it is described by recent philosophy.

Foundationalist approaches like Locke’s fail in part because they do not
account for the powerful experiences of meaning that is not a result of distinct ideas,
but instead is the apprehension that is made possible in and through religious
communities, with distinct life patterns that evolve within patterns of belief and
ritual practices. It would seem that a theory that accounts for aesthetic experience
would view religions as distinct ways of responding to the aesthetic experience of
that the Christian neo-platonists called the Beauty of God. There would be no
capacious response to the “crisis” that did not acknowledge that religious
experience results from particular traditions and cultures. But, the structure of the
experience, and the awareness of the mystery that dwells within each person might
be a place to begin a description of religious toleration, rooted in human dignity.