

## **Aesthetic Experience and Divine Knowledge**

What constitutes knowledge? What means do we have of attaining knowledge? Let us firstly say that a mode or methodology for attaining knowledge, and the *kind* of knowledge attained is an 'epistemic framework.' Let us secondly say that the scientific method is one type of epistemic framework, and the mystic experience is another.

Now, the purpose of this meditation is to consider the kind of epistemic framework that allows the kind of knowledge that is sometimes referred to as 'divine,' 'godly' or 'transcendental.' It is my belief that as the notion of a deity goes beyond anything that might be revealed by the scientific method, we may turn our gaze inward and reflect on the passions that spur us to have faith. So long, that is, as those intuitions about the world are not confidently ruled out by science, and are not demonstrably false.

It is also my belief that such passions have a strong grounding in aesthetic experience and that such experiences allow us to develop an understanding of much stronger mystic or revelatory experiences. But what is an aesthetic experience exactly? What are its components? Perhaps I can make a modest attempt at outlining some defining features. Firstly, there is raw sensory experience that imparts, for example, an impression of colour and form, or rhyme and meter. In addition to this, there are the emotions and sentiments that are evoked. Furthermore, the cultural context the art work was made in and the context in which it is being digested will affect the values we bring to the art work with us. Finally, there is the cognitive content that the work of art imparts.

This is all very well, but what of the significance of an aesthetic experience? This is, I think, the most important question. But it does not seem that a mere categorization of its features can offer any meaningful insight into such a complex characteristic of human experience. In any case, when I refer to emotions and sentiments, what exactly am I referring to? For that matter, what exactly constitutes value? Suppose that a cognitive scientist were to tell you that such an experience can be accounted for in purely scientific terms, with every mental state and emotional state mapped out perfectly. Would the significance question be answered? It is not altogether obvious that it would. It seems fallacious to think that understanding the genesis of something is the same as understanding its significance. A moral action, for instance, is not significant simply because it can be traced back to some evolutionary process.

Consider the emotional aspect of an aesthetic experience. When we use terms like awe, love or revulsion, we are using imprecise terms to describe imprecise internal markers. And yet, were I discussing art with someone from a foreign culture, despite the differences in our subjective set, despite translations problems and despite different cultural values, it is possible to discern common attitudes, interests and values in the arts. Our language is intelligible. No culture is so foreign it is beyond comprehension.

This kind of universal psychological appeal might suggest we can find an objective standard against which we can measure art. But where can we find these standards? We might as well ask where King Arthur should have searched for the Holy Grail. Both questions are equally meaningless. I can enjoy pleasant melodies in both Indian Classical composition and in pop. I can find jarring discord in the music of Bela Bartok and This Heat. But when I do not find jarring discord in Pop I do not condemn it for not

meeting the standards of Bartok; nor would I condemn it for not producing the same kind of melodies Mozart produced. When throwing these terms about, we find ourselves in a Wittgensteinian language game. The value of music, art, poetry and so on is found in a web of contingent standards. These webs resist all attempts at comprehension through grand, overarching theories about what art should be. Any attempt to develop one would be futile.

Nonetheless, the value we place on art and the emotions and states of mind art works evoke adheres to its own kind of grammar that we see recurring through our species' creative life. It is not through a dispassionate accounting of the content of art - the lines and colours on the canvas or the words on the page dispassionately cognized - that helps us understand the significance of the aesthetic experience. Rather, we should look to mental and emotional states they produce in the subject. These values and sentiments elicited by art constitute the aesthetic experience. In fact, this kind of experience can be found outside of the practice of art; for instance, when we look up at the stars or out over the sea. The religious mind is reinforced by such experience; for such a mind, the aesthetic experience is a fire that is lit within the soul, and bestows a kind of subjective knowledge - all the more valuable by virtue of its subjectivity.

The course of philosophy and religion, I think, is often propelled by such experiences. Reason, faith and knowledge are intimately intertwined, despite the heroic efforts of some to untangle them from one another and dispose of them. Richard Dawkins, for instance, believes that *his* sense of awe on contemplating evolution is superior to the awe of the mystic. William Kingdom Clifford argued that it was always morally wrong to hold and act on a belief without sufficient, *empirical*, evidence.

These efforts prompted the great American pragmatist philosopher and psychologist William James to argue for a kind of modest Fideism in his essay *The Will to Believe*. James believed that one is morally and epistemically entitled to hold a religious belief "in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced." So long as the evidence does not come down conclusively *against* the belief, James believed that under certain conditions "Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions."

Is a passional cause merely something that is non-evidential? To the extent that unreflective believers within some religious practice might find justification for their belief and lifestyle, we might call the passional nature non-evidential, insofar as this kind of belief is merely their default cultural setting.

But from where did this setting arise? What justification can we give for the religious epistemic framework? And why should we adhere to a Christian framework and not, say, a Hindu framework?

It is not my intention to argue against religious pluralism. I think that the mystic and revelatory experiences that define the world's major religions all stem from the same root. It is this intuition that prompted William Blake to write his aphoristic, vaguely philosophical set of poems entitled *There is No Natural Religion* and *All Religions Are One*. All religions are one, according to Blake, because they stem from the same source: the Poetic Genius - which more or less means the imagination. It is this point, I think, that forms the apex of this essay: the religious epistemic framework counts as evidence deep, subjective religious intuitions. From these intuitions stem the religions of the world, each with their own

set of methods to arrive at and justify belief. Though, by the very nature of the being they are trying to comprehend (if it exists), it seems as if none may offer the final word.

But there is a far more general question we can ask to frame this discussion. What prompts us to act on a belief? What prompts us to adopt reason as an intellectual ideal? What is it that forces us to act in ways we perceive to be morally significant? Without the sentiment that something is right, we would not act. Our purely logical intellect might lead us to the conclusion that something is morally justified, but if that is not accompanied by the moral sense that that thing is right, we are loath to act on it. Likewise, were a scientist or philosopher able to provide a rational proof for God's existence, would the mere *knowledge* of this proof count as faith? Without the inner light of faith's reality (to borrow a Jamesian term), the belief would be impotent were there no *internal* reason to act on it.

So, on one branch of human inquiry, we have the thirst for scientific verification. The immense success of this method has produced a feeling that it could, in principle, settle religious questions. But where in the definition of 'Deity' – a concept given to us by our intuitions – does it allow for comprehension through scientific means? An entity that is omnipresent or transcendent is in excess of any reasoned understanding. The kind of understanding that *does* lead to knowledge of the deity can be understood through an inquiry into the aesthetic experience.

Plato's *Phaedrus* offers an interesting illustration of the point I am trying to make. In his famous allegory of the chariot, he identifies the intellect as a chariot driver trying to control two horses as they wheel around the heavens so that the soul may glimpse the forms – those divine *things* that Plato believes constitutes the truly real. There is a temptation to view Plato as advocating a strict, enlightenment sense of reason; one that is dispassionate and analytic. But in Plato we see the distinction between reason and the aesthetic sense collapsed. According to the allegory, when we perceive something beautiful, our soul is reminded of the form of beauty that he saw in his divine procession around the heavens. And so the image of a beautiful boy causes the soul's wings to sprout, and to yearn for the divine things it once took such delight in surveying when it was free from the prison of the body. For Plato, knowledge of truly divine things is only meaningful when it is spurred on by divine madness – like eros, for instance. We seek philosophical knowledge because we *love* beauty. When we perceive beautiful things, we are overcome by the feeling we are also perceiving the divine.

So it is also in Indian aesthetics. The whole concept of *Rasa* revolves around the idea that an artwork is imbued with an essence that evokes a complimentary mental state in the viewer, reader or listener. *Rasa* is the overall emotive tone of a work, and it is important because the state it produces in the subject is an essentially joyful state of mind – the pleasure is transcendental, and provokes inward contemplation. This state of mind is not conative (that is, it does not spur us on to some other action) but it is meant to be enjoyed for its own sake. Such is the aim of art, and the knowledge art conveys is esoteric and eternal. On experiencing this art, we know the divine. Consider this verse describing the origin of divine speech in the *Rig Veda*:

Brhaspati! When they [the first poets and seers] set in motion the first beginning of speech, giving names, their most pure and perfectly guarded secret was revealed through love. (10.71)

Here, love is the origin of knowledge. We often ask what force it was that generated the universe, what unmoved mover gave us motion. Here, we are asking what force it is that propels us to knowledge. For Plato and for the early Indian aestheticians, it was an experience of the divine.

Such attitudes are not just buried in antiquity. The poet Robert Graves sincerely believed that all true poetic inspiration came from a European deity he referred to as the White Goddess. Any poetry that was formed outside of this divine inspiration was not worth calling poetry. For Bach, all music – even secular music – was deeply religious. As there was no meaningful distinction between religious and non religious, any music that failed to echo the very reformation God he believed in was not worth its name. Albert Schweitzer records him as writing that:

Like all music, the figured bass should have no other end and aim than the glory of God and the recreation of the soul; where this is not kept in mind there is no true music, but only an infernal clamour and ranting

What makes these comments interesting is that the standards by which we can judge the artwork does not come from some objective standard of taste, but by the ability of that work to anticipate, to mimic or to invoke the divine. This is something above and beyond mere pleasure; it is a contemplative pleasure. It is evidence of the divine.

So, what does the emotion of love, the feeling of tranquility or the experience of joyful excitement tell us by themselves? Not much, if we fail to contemplate and reflect on them. But the question is, why should that contemplation be sceptical? Should it be so, simply because that is what Richard Dawkins would want? While we certainly have no right to claim our own subjective set is the final word on the divine, I believe that we are justified in acting on those experiences in such a way as that it establishes a relationship with the divine order of things; be it theist, Brahmanic or even pagan. In short, we are justified – with fear and trembling – to throw ourselves into this mode of knowing. That is, if we so choose.