

# ART, EMPATHY AND THE DIVINE

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Religious art can reconfigure our conception of God's omniscience. This should be seen in terms of divine understanding, with empathy and love required for understanding of human beings. §I surveys reasons to think that God can empathize with us. §II and §III consider different ways that religious art has attempted to represent such empathetic relations. There are images of Christ's suffering that elicit empathy in the viewer, and there are depictions of God's empathetic understanding of humanity. §IV and §V consider the epistemic roles of art and how religious art can reconfigure how we think of God's omniscience.

## I. EMPATHY: HUMAN AND DIVINE

Empathy involves our coming to share in the emotions and thoughts of others. There is low-level empathy where the emotions of another are contagious. One can, for example, be deflated by the sadness of those around you, or, as Hume puts it in a letter to Adam Smith, a depressed person can throw a 'Damp on Company'.<sup>1</sup> There is also high-level empathy. This is where the perspective of another is adopted, where I might be said to get into their shoes. I may, for example, come to understand why you find a certain social situation awkward. This is not because I have merely caught your

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<sup>1</sup> Hume, D. 1932. *The Letters of David Hume*. Vol. 1. Ed. J.Y.T. Greig. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 313.

unease, via low-level empathy, but because I come to appreciate how it is for you to be here with these people, given what you know about them and your previous encounters with them. Empathy involves, as put by Blackburn: ‘the sense of being emotionally and cognitively “in tune with” another person, particularly by feeling what their situation is like from the inside or what it is like for them’.<sup>23</sup>

There are various reasons to think that God must be able to empathize with us. To be in a caring relationship with your children you must know when they require help; you must know what problems they face and what it is that is troubling them. Part of such knowledge involves knowing what another is thinking and philosophers of mind talk of this in terms of ‘mindreading’. Our knowledge of each other is limited, but, being omniscient, God’s knowledge is not. Such perfect knowledge involves knowing *everything*: God knows all truths about lawnmowers, cats and quarks, and he also knows all truths about minded individuals: ‘before him no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do’ (Hebrews 4: 13). He is a God ‘unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid’ (‘Collect for Purity’).

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<sup>2</sup> Blackburn, S. 2016. *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, p. 152.

<sup>3</sup> Coplan, A. and Goldie, P. (eds.) 2011. *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. is a useful anthology on empathy and its relevance to debates in contemporary psychology, cognitive science and philosophy of mind.

Elsewhere I argue that such divine mindreading must involve empathy.<sup>4</sup> In interpreting thinkers, we must empathize with them: understanding someone's words, thoughts and actions involves being able to think the thoughts that they entertained when they said, thought or performed them. An omniscient God understands all our thoughts and in order to do so he must be capable of empathizing with us. I focus on the conceptual content of thought, whereas Zagzebski is concerned with conscious experience. She argues that since 'God is cognitively perfect, he must grasp what it is like to be his creatures and to have each and every one of their experiences'.<sup>5</sup> Such knowledge requires 'total empathy': the ability to 'empathiz[e] with every one of a person's conscious states throughout that person's entire life—every thought, belief, sensation, mood, desire, and choice, as well as every emotion'.<sup>6</sup> God can only be seen as omniscient if he has omnisubjectivity, that is, 'the property of consciously grasping with perfect accuracy and completeness every conscious state of every creature from that creature's own perspective'.<sup>7</sup>

Stump relates empathy to the notion of personal presence—when, that is, one is present *with* another person or present *to* them.<sup>8</sup> Empathy with another can cause us to feel, in some sense, another's pain, and when this occurs another's presence is vivid.

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<sup>4</sup> O'Brien, D. 2013. 'God's Knowledge of Other Minds.' *European Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 5(1): 17–34.

<sup>5</sup> Zagzebski, L. 2016. 'Omnisubjectivity: Why It Is a Divine Attribute.' *Nova et Vetera* 14(2): 435–450, p. 438.

<sup>6</sup> Zagzebski, 'Omnisubjectivity', p. 442.

<sup>7</sup> Zagzebski, 'Omnisubjectivity', p. 435.

<sup>8</sup> Stump, E. 2010. *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 108–28.

Presence is also a feature of our cognitive interaction with one another: as we communicate with each other, either verbally or perhaps by catching someone's eye, we are present to each other. If you are reading this essay in the presence of another person, that person is *here, now, with you*. At the beginning of a lecture I may look out at a sea of faces, but when I catch someone's eye, or listen to their question, I come to see one of those faces as a person. I am not merely aware of my own first-person experiences, nor am I merely aware of that person's objective, physical properties, those that can be apprehended from the third person perspective; I am aware, rather, of their consciousness in the world—they become present to me as another person. In coming to see them in this way I adopt the second person perspective.

Such presence is magnified where there is love: 'there is a much greater degree of personal presence when two people, who are mutually close to one another in a loving relationship, are mutually mind-reading each other in intense shared attention'.<sup>9</sup> God too, Stump argues, can be present to us and we to him, both in divine mindreading and through divine love. Zagzebski proposes that 'God's love for each of us is generated from a preceding act of total, unmediated intellectual comprehension of us'; 'If omnisubjectivity is total perfect empathy, it is the most intimate acquaintance possible compatible with a separation of selves'.<sup>10</sup> There is, then, unilateral apprehension of another, when, for example, one empathizes with another's pain and in so doing their presence is manifest; mutual awareness manifest in communication and in love; and, Stump argues, there is a deeper form of presence

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<sup>9</sup> Stump, E. 2013. 'Omnipresence, Indwelling, and the Second-Personal.' *European Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 5(4), 29–53, p. 41.

<sup>10</sup> Zagzebski, 'Omnisubjectivity', pp. 449, 443.

involving God, that characterised by the theological notion of indwelling, where the Holy Spirit dwells in the believer's mind. This is a maximal form of empathy and second person presence: 'In the Holy Spirit's indwelling, God himself is somehow within each person of faith'.<sup>1112</sup>

A distinct form of empathetic engagement with another involves joint attention.<sup>13</sup> A badminton player is aware of the flight of the shuttlecock and she is also aware that her opponent is tracking this object in the same way as her. They jointly attend to the shuttlecock, and in sports arenas many people are jointly aware of the action—watching the game *together*. Such joint attention plays an important role in child development, from early parent-child relations involving pointing and gaze-following, through more sophisticated awareness of attention in social relations, ultimately to the ability to mindread.<sup>14</sup> Pinsent argues that the phenomenon of joint

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<sup>11</sup> Stump, 'Omnipresence', p. 47.

<sup>12</sup> Also see Stump, E. 2014. 'Faith, Wisdom, and the Transmission of Knowledge through Testimony.' In *Religious Faith and Intellectual Virtue*. Ed. L. Callahan and T. O'Connor. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 204–30, p. 214, for the claim that such a second-person relation with God enables the development of intellectual virtues such as wisdom.

<sup>13</sup> Eilan, N., Hoerl, C., McCormack, T. and Roesler, J. (eds.). 2005. *Joint Attention: Communication and Other Minds: Issues in Philosophy and Psychology*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

<sup>14</sup> Reddy, V. 2011. 'A Gaze at Grips with Me.' In *Joint Attention: New Developments in Psychology, Philosophy of Mind, and Social Neuroscience*. Ed. A. Seeman. Cambridge, MA: MIT press, 137–157; Moll, H. and Meltzoff, A. 2011. 'Joint Attention as the Fundamental Basis of Understanding Perspectives.' In *Joint*

attention illuminates Aquinas' understanding of virtue. Piety involves not just worship of God, but also other people—the 'children' of God—and in acting piously one 'participates in God's stance' towards them; one joins God in attending to them. Courage involves confidence in overcoming problems in life, a confidence in one's actions that God also shares.<sup>15</sup>

There are, however, various problems associated with divine empathy. There is tension with the traditional view that God is impassible, that is, that he cannot experience suffering or feel emotions. It has been argued that the transient character of our emotional life is incompatible with the immutability of God; that emotions cloud rationality and are thus incompatible with divine wisdom; and that emotional feelings require a physical body which God does not possess.<sup>16</sup> Divine empathy can also be seen as incompatible with other divine attributes. We have indexical knowledge—I believe it is *now* rather cold and that it looks rather pleasant *over there*—yet God, not being located at a particular point in space and time, cannot have such knowledge.<sup>17</sup> There are also several related arguments to the conclusion that God's divine attributes limit his possession or understanding of certain concepts. God cannot understand the concepts of surprise, tiredness, lust, fear or despair because he

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*Attention: New Developments in Psychology, Philosophy of Mind, and Social Neuroscience*. Ed. A. Seeman. Cambridge, MA: MIT press, 393–413.

<sup>15</sup> Pinsent, A. 2012. *The Second-Person Perspective in Aquinas's Ethics: Virtues and Gifts*. Abingdon: Routledge, p. 54.

<sup>16</sup> Scrutton, A. 2013. 'Divine Passibility: God and Emotion.' *Philosophy Compass* 8/9: 866–74.

<sup>17</sup> Grim, P. 1985. 'Against Omniscience: The Case from Essential Indexicals.' *Nous* 19(2), 151–180.

cannot be surprised (since he is omniscient), tired, fearful or despairing (because he is omnipotent) or lustful (because he is without sin).<sup>18</sup>

Stump suggests a solution may be found to such problems in the Chalcedonian conception of the Incarnation.<sup>19</sup> Christ is one person, yet he possesses two minds: one human, one divine. God can empathize with humans and thus be able to come to understand them in virtue of Christ possessing a human mind, one that can feel emotion, have indexical knowledge and knowledge that depends on the possession of a physical body. The two natures of Christ should be seen as working together in divine mindreading.

Christ can mind-read in ways not possible for mere human persons. When he does, it is the human nature doing the mind-reading; but the person doing the mind-reading is divine and has access to divine power. So Christ has the ability to mind-read human beings deeply, or even miraculously, in a way that human persons otherwise could not do.<sup>20</sup>

When we attempt to interpret each other, we can mishear utterances or misread text messages, forget things that have been said, and not catch revealing behavioural clues. These are limitations to which God is not prey. There may also be physiological changes inside the brain and body that are correlated with certain thoughts, those that

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<sup>18</sup> See Nagasawa, Y. 2008. *God and Phenomenal Consciousness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 17–73, for details of these incompatibility arguments.

<sup>19</sup> Stump, 'Omnipresence'.

<sup>20</sup> Stump, 'Omnipresence', p. 9.

we could never detect in our everyday interactions, but, again, those which would be evident to God.

It is not clear, though, how such an account can satisfy those who feel the pull of the problems above. Can God really be said to understand human thought when his only access to it is via the human nature of Christ? Any such strategy would merely seem to transpose the difficulties in understanding from between God and man—how can He understand us?—to between the two minds of God. Imagine Jane in turmoil since she has sinned. She calls to God for forgiveness. Her call, though, cannot be heard by God the divine, only by Christ through his human nature. Christ can understand her sin and her suffering and her need for forgiveness. Christ, though, as human, cannot give her the kind of forgiveness for which she yearns—this must come from His divine side. But it is not clear how this can be communicated across the human-divine divide. My focus in this paper is on artistic representations of God and Christ and on whether these can illuminate the empathy we have for him—and he for us.

## **II. SYMPATHY FOR CHRIST**

There is an emphasis on empathy and sympathy in religious art. There are countless images of the dead or dying Christ: ‘*pietas*’ in which he is held by Mary, God, and by angels. It’s hard not to be moved by some of these images. Look at the entwined



hands and the dirty feet of Veronese's pieta,<sup>21</sup> and at the way Michelangelo sculpts Mary's slumped body and Christ's fingers resting on her dress.<sup>22,23</sup>

There are various other types of images of Christ and art historians have developed a typology to distinguish them: *Christ on the cold stone slab* on the way to Golgotha; the *Man of Sorrows* (Christ desolate on the cross); *the lamentation* (Mary and others grieving over his body); *Ecce Homo* (before the crucifixion, with crown of thorns, cloak and reed sceptre); and *the Deposition* of Christ's body in the tomb. Many of the paintings of these types elicit sympathy on the part of the viewer. Via low-level empathy one comes to appreciate the suffering portrayed, which in turn leads to sympathy and compassion for Christ, Mary and others we see portrayed in anguish. In their masterly portrayals of the broken body of Christ counter-reformation artists had a wide repertoire of techniques to promote sympathy. The Late Gothic revels in gore: spurting blood, bulging veins and wracked muscles crowd the walls of churches: Carlo Crivelli's *Dead Christ Supported by Two Angels* has thorns in his forehead and battered hands, with cherubs showing intense grief.<sup>24</sup> Christ's eyes implore devotees to feel compassion for his injuries. Physical aspects of the setting also aid empathy. The sharp corners of masonry in Antonello da Messina's *Pieta with*

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<sup>21</sup> Veronese, P. (1581) *Pieta*.

<sup>22</sup> Michelangelo (1499) *Pieta*. Rome: St. Peters.

<sup>23</sup> Reproductions of the artworks I discuss are now just a click away, and so I recommend viewing the images to which I refer as you read through the paper. Title and date should suffice to locate an open access version. Where there may be difficulties I shall provide footnotes with more information concerning the particular work in question.

<sup>24</sup> Crivelli, C. (1470) *Dead Christ Supported by Two Angels*.

*Three Angels* and Caravaggio's *The Deposition* seem to dig into our own flesh.<sup>25</sup> In others clouds are rent and trees writhe (e.g. in Durer's woodcut, *The Entombment*).<sup>26</sup> Caravaggio's chiaroscuro and spotlighting were highly influential, with Italian, Spanish and Dutch artists adopting this way of focusing on the facial expressions and contorted bodies that elicit sympathy in the viewer. The placing of paintings within a Church was also considered with regards to their effect. Zurbaran's *Crucifixion*<sup>27</sup> was located in darkness at the rear of a chapel, thus it 'seemed to emerge as a real vision before the eyes of the viewer because of its extraordinary three-dimensional quality' (Bray 2009, p. 49).<sup>28</sup> In Jose de Ribera's *The Trinity*,<sup>29</sup> one's skin stretches with that of Christ. Ribera's forte is stretched, wrinkled and wounded skin—Portus claiming that 'it would be difficult to find a seventeenth century painter in whose work there is such an abundance of martyred flesh'.<sup>30</sup>

Artists also play with rhythm and constrained movement. In a 14<sup>th</sup> Century painting of the crucifixion by Ugolino da Siena, *Crucifixion with the Madonna, Saint John and Angels*, one feels one's own torso twisting in rhythm to the opposed stances

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<sup>25</sup> Messina, A. (1475) *Pieta with Three Angels* and Caravaggio, M. (1600–4). *The Deposition*.

<sup>26</sup> Durer, A. (1497) *The Entombment*. [woodcut].

<sup>27</sup> Zurbaran X (1627). *Crucifixion*.

<sup>28</sup> Bray, X. 2009. *The Sacred Made Real: Spanish Painting and Sculpture 1600–1700*. London: National Gallery, p. 28.

<sup>29</sup> Ribera, J. (c. 1635) *The Trinity*.

<sup>30</sup> Portus, J. 2011. *Ribera*, Barcelona: Poligrafa, p. 84.

of Christ, Mary and John.<sup>31</sup> The art critic Berenson notes of Renaissance nudes that ‘taughtnesses of muscle and those stretchings and relaxings and rippings of skin which, translated into similar strains on our own persons, make us fully realise movement’.<sup>32</sup> As one approaches Caravaggio’s *Flagellation* (1607)<sup>33</sup> down a long gallery in the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples, one starts to tense with the tussling bodies, the knots in their muscles emphasized by the twisted loincloth, clothes, rope binding a switch, and crown of thorns. Christ teeters, his body twisted in opposite directions, his knees buckle as the torturers pull his hair and kick his calf.<sup>34</sup>

In viewing such paintings we can experience both low-level empathy towards the depicted torments of Christ and, to some degree, high-level empathetic appreciation of his thoughts and experiences. Through depiction of the redemptive role of Christ’s suffering we are also invited to share God’s empathy for us. However, to explore such divine empathy I shall turn in the next section to more explicit representations of Christ’s empathy with man.

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<sup>31</sup> Ugolino da Siena. (14C) *Crucifixion with the Madonna, Saint John and Angels*.

<sup>32</sup> Berenson, B. 1896. *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance*. New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, pp. 86–7.

<sup>33</sup> Caravaggio X (1607). *Flagellation*. Naples, Italy: Capidomonte Museo.

<sup>34</sup> Cognitive scientists point to the role of mirror neurons in low-level empathy, when, for example, one tenses as those around you tense. Currie, G. 2011. ‘Empathy for Objects.’ In *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*. Ed. A. Coplan and P. Goldie. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 86–7) suggests the same mechanisms may be involved when viewing art. Scholl, G. 2015. ‘Pictures of Pain: Their Contribution to the Neuroscience of Empathy.’ *Brain* 138(3), 812–20, reviews the scientific evidence for this claim.

### III. DEPICTIONS OF DIVINE MINDREADING

Artists have also attempted to represent the kinds of empathy God and Christ show towards man. In Francisco Ribalta's *The Vision of St. Bernard*, Christ appears to Bernard while praying in Church, detaching himself from the cross in order to embrace him.<sup>35</sup> We see Bernard's sympathy for the suffering of Christ, and his love, but we also see Christ's reciprocal empathy and love for Bernard. Christ is not just aware of Bernard's love towards him, but also his pious beliefs, hopes and intentions concerning his life. Their joint-presence together, in Stump's sense, is beautifully expressed. In Tintoretto's *Christ Mocked*, we see Christ looking out at the viewer, looking at us, attempting to understand our humanity—attempting to empathize with us.<sup>36</sup> Similarly in Caravaggio's *The Taking of Christ*,<sup>37</sup> his humanity emphasized in contrast to the metallic, inhuman arms of the soldiers who come to take him.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ribalta, F. (1625). *The Vision of St. Bernard*.

<sup>36</sup> Tintoretto X (c. 1548–9) *Christ Mocked*.

<sup>37</sup> Caravaggio X (1602) *The Taking of Christ*.

<sup>38</sup> See also the searching eyes of Christ in Domenichino X (1602) *The Way to Calvary*. Such eyes become almost the sole focus of devotional paintings such as icons and Veronica images. The latter are paintings of the veil of Veronica that was imprinted with Christ's face as he stopped to have his face wiped on the road to Calvary; these 'record' the anguished appearance of Christ as he looked at the holy women on his way to Calvary, so—as we look at these images—he gazes at us in the very same way' (Finaldi, G. 2000. *The Image of Christ*. London: National Gallery

There are, then, various ways art can elicit and represent empathy and understanding. There are images that promote sympathy and low-level empathy for Christ, and there are those in which we see Christ attempting to understand us.

There is a similar range of examples with respect to Christ as an infant. In an early 16<sup>th</sup> Century painting by Mantegna, *The Holy Family with Saint John*, Christ in the guise of a Roman emperor carries an orb, representing his rule of earth.<sup>39</sup> Little empathy is expressed here. There are also, though, images that induce us to feel sympathy for him. In *The infant Christ with the Instruments of the Passion* (Anonymous, c. 1610) the child plays with the tools and instruments that will eventually be used to torture and kill him—the sense of horror accentuated by the cross proportionate to the child’s frame.<sup>40</sup> Variations on this theme were popular in Spain in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. The child was often shown sleeping or in prayer, with, in other versions, the crown of thorns or a spear presaging the events to come, angels on occasion providing further signposting. Lastly, there are pictures where high-level empathy is implied. In Mantegna’s infant we saw the cold eyes of a ruler; compare, though, Murillo’s *Heavenly and Earthly Trinities* (1682) in which the child binds his earthly family together with empathetic understanding, but also his divine family.<sup>41</sup> Again, there is more than just shared feelings here; we have Christ’s understanding of the lives and thoughts of Mary and Joseph.

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Press, p. 107). See Puglisi, C. and Barcham, W. (eds.). 2011. *Passion in Venice. Crivelli to Tintoretto and Veronese: The Man of Sorrows in Venetian Art*. New York: Museum of Biblical Art Press, p. 104) for a striking example of one such painting.

<sup>39</sup> 16<sup>th</sup> Century painting by Mantegna, *The Holy Family with Saint John*

<sup>40</sup> Oxford: Ashmolean.

<sup>41</sup> Murillo’s *Heavenly and Earthly Trinities* (1682)

Artists have thus attempted to depict features of God's omniscience, including divine empathy upon which this paper focuses. I claimed above that such empathy is theologically problematic and that it would appear to be incompatible in certain ways with other divine attributes. The suggestion that I'm working towards, is that perhaps art can help ease such worries. In the final two sections of the paper I consider how it may do so.

#### IV. THEOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMIC ROLES OF ART

I shall consider three ways that art can be seen to provide theological illumination. It can aid meditation and contemplation, it can communicate religious truths through iconography, and it can say things that words cannot. I shall go on to develop a distinct reading of this last suggestion.

First, then, solutions to theological problems may not be *in* the paintings themselves, but meditation on religious art can lead thinkers to knowledge of God or enlightenment. Hamburger explains:

The basic tenet could not be simpler. Trapped in a world of sensual experience, humans need (or at least benefit from) material props; but, to avoid confusing what they see with God's invisible divinity, they must transform the sensual impression derived from looking at artistic representations into mental contemplations.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Hamburger, J. and Bouche, A-M. (eds.) 2006. *The Mind's Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 413.

St. Francis's meditations on the suffering of Christ were so intense that he experienced miraculous empathetic wounds or stigmata during a vision. His empathy with Christ involved physical realization of the Passion. Franciscans thus emphasize the role of suffering. Certain sects encouraged flagellation and mortification of flesh, and books of meditation on the suffering of Christ were widely translated and copied from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Religious art also played an important role: 'medieval pictures not only represented religious figures and themes but also instigated dynamic progressions that, themselves, generated theological content'.<sup>43</sup> The Franciscan focus on suffering and empathy resulted in a move from *Christus Triumphus* images, with Christ alive on the cross, triumphing over death, to images of the *Man of Sorrows*, and from child rulers to those who needed care and protection.

Second, medieval artists worked with a wide range of symbols. The evangelists, for example, were represented by images of a man, an eagle, a lion, and an ox, and these symbols further represented associated virtues: man is rational, lions courageous. A pelican is not just decorative: these birds were thought to kill their young, reviving them by sprinkling blood from their chest, as Jesus was raised by God. Viewers were to read meanings from these symbols, with 'the art of the Middle Ages...first of all a sacred writing whose elements every artist had to learn'.<sup>44</sup> There was little room for creativity: 'In such matters a mistake would have ranked almost as heresy' (Male 2006, p. 2).<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Hamburger, *The Mind's Eye*, p. 414.

<sup>44</sup> Male, E. 1913. *The Gothic Image: Religious Art in France in the Thirteenth Century*. London: Collins (1961), p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> Male, p. 2

It is not clear, though, how these iconographic codes could provide pictorial solutions to theological problems. If the theological claims themselves are problematic, then such symbols will not provide the illumination for which we are looking, since, according to this approach, visual art does not add its own theological content—it merely illustrates the arguments. Such iconography can be translated into spoken word or text. The Pelican represents the resurrection of Christ; it does not explain it.

The Supper at Emmaus is an episode in Luke's gospel in which two disciples meet a traveller who has not heard of Christ's resurrection. They inform the traveller of the alleged events, expressing some scepticism. The traveller then blesses their bread and reveals himself as Christ. Rembrandt etched and painted five versions of this event.<sup>46</sup> Their depiction of human empathy is sincere and beautiful, and relies on careful observation of the human body and human behaviour. The group's presence together shines out. Some also claim that these paintings capture the divine: Rembrandt depicts the 'sublime stillness and serenity of Christ' and, according to Dewitt, 'somehow captures a sense of wisdom borne of all the ages since time began'.<sup>47</sup> This, however, is surely going too far. The depiction of the divine elements of these relationships remains formulaic and unsatisfying, with radiating light and the symbolic dove being asked to carry too much theological weight. The tilt of Christ's head and the demeanour and concentration of the group suggest human empathy, but the divine element is indicated only by a halo of light. It could be claimed that medieval artists' recourse to iconography was due to a lack of sophistication in their

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<sup>46</sup> See Dewitt (2011, pp. 75–83).

<sup>47</sup> Dewitt, L. 2011. *Rembrandt and the Face of Jesus*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 11.



artistic abilities since ‘[i]t was obviously easier to draw a cruciform nimbus round the head of the Christ than to show in His face the stamp of divinity’—’All the human, tender or simply picturesque side of the Gospels does not seem to have touched the medieval artist. He evidently did not see in the New Testament the things which appealed to a Veronese or a Rembrandt’.<sup>48</sup> This may be so, but, I suggest, even after the Renaissance pictorial representations of the divine are grounded in human physiology, physiognomy and emotion, and more needs to be said concerning how such representations can illuminate the divine itself.

The last suggestion I will consider is that art can say things that words cannot. The art historian Otto Pacht argues that ‘[v]isual art, like music, can say things, in its own medium that cannot be said in any other’—’There is more to it [the history of art] than a mere illustration of the humanities.’<sup>49</sup>

[M]edieval art [for example] is something more than a post room in which intellectual and religious values are wrapped and unwrapped on their way from consignor to consignee....[M]edieval art, in very many of its manifestations, is a statement in its own terms, *sui generis*, concerning the universe, existence, everyday life and the Last Things: a statement that neither is a substitute nor can be substituted.<sup>50</sup>

There are various ways that the *sui generis* character of religious art can be

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<sup>48</sup> Male, *The Gothic Image*, pp. 3, 177.

<sup>49</sup> Pacht, O. 1999. *Practice of Art History: Reflections on Method*. London: Harvey Miller, pp. 84, 137.

<sup>50</sup> Pacht, *Practice*, pp. 84–5.

understood. In one sense it is a familiar and persuasive claim that pictures can say more than words. Look at Rembrandt's 1656 drawing of a child being taught to walk.<sup>51</sup> It's breathtaking—actually, that's not quite the physiological reaction I have; rather, I feel weak-kneed (perhaps in sympathy with the child's faltering steps). The picture draws you in—you step, in turn, into the shoes of the proud child, the mother, and perhaps end with the milkmaid, surveying the scene, her stance reflecting her satisfaction at the child's progress. This is one of David Hockney's favourite drawings and he describes it eloquently.<sup>52</sup> It is a drawing of a secular subject, but some of the examples of religious art discussed above are similarly rich.

But in what sense can visual images say more than theological arguments and what is the specific relevance of this to consideration of divine empathy. In the final section I shall turn to a distinct reading of the claim that religious images are *sui generis* and of the role that art may play with respect to theology and the philosophy of religion.

## V. ART, RECONFIGURATION AND OMNISCIENCE

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<sup>51</sup> Rembrandt (1656) child being taught to walk. [drawing]. London: British Museum.

<sup>52</sup> For Hockney's praise see Raine, C. 2016. 'Phantasmal Nudges of Pigment.' *Times Literary Supplement*, No. 5924, October 14, p. 21). This drawing is in the British Museum (see Roylton-Kisch, M. 1992. *Drawings by Rembrandt and His Circle in the British Museum*. London: British Museum Press, cat. no. 53). For buckling knees also see Caravaggio's *Flagellation* above (p. 9).

Artists do not only depict familiar appearances; they can also make us see things anew. They can *reconfigure* our experience. Gertrude Stein was not at first pleased with Picasso's 1906 portrait of her,<sup>53</sup> primarily because she claimed it did not look like her. Picasso famously replied that 'no matter; it will'.<sup>54</sup> But what did he mean? The claim, I think, is that Picasso enables us to see an aspect or aspects of Gertrude's visual appearance that were not seen before—certainly not by Gertrude herself. There is something of a Roman emperor in the way that she sits, her jacket toga-like, majestically ruling her salon of artists and writers. Elgin goes as far as to say that, '[a]rguably, this is the first portrait in history to portray a woman as magisterial.'<sup>55</sup> Goodman thus claims that '[a] visit to an exhibition may transform our vision'; 'successful works transform perception and transfigure its objects by bringing us to recognize aspects, objects, and orders which we had previously underrated or overlooked'.<sup>56</sup> Having seen the portrait, and perhaps after further immersion in Picasso's work, her contemporaries—and us, via photographs—may notice features of Gertrude that may not have been noticed before.

Rodin's 1897 sculpture of Balzac can also be seen as reconfiguring our conception of the writer.<sup>57</sup> Rodin's hulking figure is not the sedate man of letters portrayed by, for example, de Vasselot in his rendering, now in the Comédie

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<sup>53</sup> Picasso, P. (1906) *Portrait of Gertrude Stein*.

<sup>54</sup> Goodman, N. 1976. *Languages of Art*. Indianapolis: Hackett, p. 33.

<sup>55</sup> Elgin, C. 2002. 'Art in the Advancement of Understanding.' *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 39(1): 1–12, p. 4.

<sup>56</sup> Goodman, N. and Elgin, C. 1988. *Reconceptions in Philosophy & other Arts & Sciences*. Routledge: London, pp. 48, 22.

<sup>57</sup> Rodin, A. (1897) *Balzac*.

Française.<sup>58</sup> The folded arms and protruding stomach are resolute in the face of his torments; psychological turmoil suggested by (almost demonic) deformations of his skull; Lampert suggesting that these capture:

The troubled personal life of an artist who has no choice but to sacrifice domestic happiness, who works unrelentingly, needs solitude but craves approval, is somehow manifest in the raking angle and the huge, enveloping (and concealing) Dominican monk's robe[.]<sup>59</sup>

In Picasso and Rodin, then, we see artists who have reconfigured our conception and perception of certain individuals. Perhaps art can play an analogous role in reconfiguring our conception of God and of certain theological notions.

Analytic philosophers of religion conceive of omniscience in the following kinds of terms. Kenny defines it as the 'doctrine that, for all  $p$ , if  $p$ , then God knows that  $p$ '.<sup>60</sup> Variations on this theme include 'for every proposition an omniscient being either knows it or knows it to be false';<sup>61</sup> God 'knows of every true proposition that it

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<sup>58</sup> de Vasselot *Balzac*. Paris: Comédie Française.

<sup>59</sup> Lampert, C. 2006. 'The Burghers of Calais, and the Monument to Balzac: "My Novel".' In *Rodin*. Ed. Lampert, C., et al. London: Royal Academy of Arts, 95–118, p. 102.

<sup>60</sup> Kenny, A. 1979. *The God of the Philosophers*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 10.

<sup>61</sup> Zagzebski, L. 2007. 'Omniscience.' In *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion*. Ed. C. Meister and P. Copans. London: Routledge, 261–269, p. 262.

is true’;<sup>62</sup> and, an omniscient being ‘knows every true proposition and believes no false ones’.<sup>63</sup> In Ribalta’s *St. Bernard*, however, we see an all-knowing Christ, but his is not an omniscience happily characterized by the claim that ‘if  $p$ , Christ knows that  $p$ ’. The kind of knowledge depicted is not seen in such quantitative terms; it is, rather, to be understood in terms of empathy and love, as will be spelt out below. My claim, then, is that a painting such as this may reconfigure our conception of omniscience (or, perhaps, undo the distorting effect of analytic philosophy). Certain works can therefore be seen as saying something *sui generis* in that they allow the viewer to see a person (Stein, Balzac, and Christ) in a way that one cannot if one remains wedded to traditional or pervasive ways of understanding them.

In order to explain the kind of reconfiguration I have in mind, I shall first draw a distinction between knowledge and understanding, suggesting that understanding should be seen as the greater cognitive achievement and therefore as constituting God’s omniscience. Second, I shall claim that understanding others involves empathy, and that total empathy requires love. A reconfigured picture of God’s omniscience thus emerges.

‘Knowledge’ and ‘understanding’ are sometimes synonyms, but there is an important sense of understanding where it is seen as a greater epistemic achievement than knowledge.<sup>64</sup> In understanding why one of my hostas is struggling in its current

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<sup>62</sup> Swinburne, R. 1977. *The Coherence of Theism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 162.

<sup>63</sup> Plantinga, A. and Grim, P. 1993. ‘Truth, Omniscience and Cantorian Arguments: An Exchange.’ *Philosophical Studies* 71: 267–303, p. 267.

<sup>64</sup> ‘[K]nowledge, as contemporary theories conceive it, is not and ought not be our overriding cognitive objective. For to treat it as such is to devalue cognitive

position in the garden I do not merely know that the hosta is not doing well. I also know that its struggling because it's too dry and that it's native to marshy conditions. I also grasp certain modal relations: I know that it will continue to struggle if it remains where it is, and that it would improve if moved over by the pond. Understanding involves grasping the relations between individual items of knowledge—seeing how they fit together.<sup>65</sup> One is therefore often said to have understanding of systems or bodies of knowledge. I can understand microeconomics and the cuisine of Spain.

The distinction between knowledge and understanding also applies to our grasp of other minds. I can know that you are frightened of air travel without *understanding* this aspect of your character. To understand another, one needs more than merely to know the propositional content of their thoughts. I need, for example, to know the reasons for this fear, if there are any, and perhaps quite a bit about your personal history and how this fear has impacted on relationships and family life. Understanding a person involves appreciating what motivates them, not just which beliefs they hold, but which are important to them, which they might drop if push

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excellences such as conceptual and perceptual sensitivity, logical acumen, breadth and depth and understanding, and the capacity to distinguish important from trivial truths. Even when Watson knows more than Holmes, he does not appear to be cognitively better off.' (Elgin 1998, p. 152)

<sup>65</sup> See Janvid, M. 2014. 'Understanding Understanding: An Epistemological Investigation.' *Philosophia* 42(4): 971–85 and Elgin, C. 2006. 'From Knowledge to Understanding.' In *Epistemology Futures*. Ed. S. Hetherington, Oxford: Clarendon, 199–215.

came to shove. Understanding is holistic. It does not in itself consist of knowledge of propositions; it is, as Zagzebski puts it, knowledge of structure:

understanding is not directed toward a discrete object, but involves seeing the relation of parts to other parts and perhaps even the relation of part to a whole. It follows that the object of understanding is not a discrete proposition. One's mental representation of what one understands is likely to include such things as maps, graphs, diagrams, and three-dimensional models in addition to, or even in place of, the acceptance of a series of propositions.<sup>66</sup>

Understanding of another also involves empathy. Given how much time Mary spends in her garden it's easy to say that you believe that gardening is the most important thing for her, but you don't really understand her unless you can step into her shoes and appreciate what life would be like if that's the case, how other activities would not satisfy her in the same way, and how, for example, she might react if she discovered she were unable to garden any more.

Further, emotions can play an epistemic role in our coming to understand ourselves and others. They can reveal salient features of a situation, those that were not seen or could not be discerned in the absence of emotion. Fear, for example, can reveal danger, or, before an exam, it can provide one with self-knowledge that one has not worked hard enough. For Proust, Nussbaum says, 'suffering itself is a piece of

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<sup>66</sup> Zagzebski, L. 2001. 'Recovering Understanding.' In *Knowledge, Truth, and Duty: Essays on Epistemic Justification, Responsibility and Virtue*. Ed. M. Steup. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 235–52, p. 241.

self-knowing. In responding to a loss with anguish, we are grasping our love'.<sup>67</sup> Or, on a less tortured view of love, laughter and fun are themselves pieces of self-knowledge—in finding oneself responding to the world *with another* in such a way, one grasps one love for that person.<sup>68</sup> Emotions can also provide insight into the minds of others. Love for a partner enables one to come to know the fine grain of their mental life—love in part constituted by such sensitivity. McPherson calls love that reveals in this way, 'transfiguring love'—love that, in my terminology, reconfigures what one sees and how one understands what one sees: '[t]here is a kind of

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<sup>67</sup> Nussbaum, M. 1992. *Love's Knowledge*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 267.

For Nussbaum (1992, pp. 269–72), however, such episodic feelings cannot provide this kind of knowledge. Such knowledge must be attained slowly, over time, only then can the evolving and dynamic nature of love be revealed, and this can only be communicated through narrative. That is not to say, though—as pointed out by Wynn, M. 2005. *Emotional Experience and Religious Understanding: Integrating Perception, Conception and Feeling*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 76n34)—that emotions do not have the epistemic role I suggest; to do so, according to Nussbaum, they must feature in such narrative understanding.

<sup>68</sup> A stronger claim, one that I will not discuss here, is that 'there may be some views of the world and how one should live in it...that cannot be fully and adequately stated in the language of conventional philosophical prose, a style remarkably flat and lacking in wonder—but only in a language and in forms themselves more complex, more allusive, more attentive to particulars' (Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p. 3). Her claim is that 'certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms characteristic of the narrative artist' (*Love's Knowledge*, p. 5). And perhaps also the visual artist?



intelligibility in the world that only comes into view when we are properly disposed and attuned to the world through an engaged standpoint of love'.<sup>69</sup> As Elgin puts it: emotion is 'an avenue of epistemic access, hence a contributor to the advancement of understanding.'<sup>71</sup> Perhaps revealingly, these claims are consonant with Cezanne's reflections on his art:

Between you and me, Henri [Henri Gasquet, a friend], I mean between what makes up your personality and mine, there is the world, the sun, what's going on, what we see in common. Our clothes, our bodies, the play of light, I have to dig through all that. That's where the slightest misplaced brushstroke spoils everything. If I'm purely emotional about it, I slap your eye on sideways. If I weave around your expression the entire network of little bits of blue and brown that are there, that combine there, I'll get you to look as you look, on my canvas. One stroke after the other, one after the other. And if I'm

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<sup>69</sup> McPherson, D. 2018. 'Transfiguring Love.' Forthcoming in *New Models of Religious Understanding*. Ed. F. Ellis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 85.

<sup>70</sup> 'Dante's *intelligenza d'amore* is not available to the non-lover, and the loving itself is part of it' (Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p. 41); also cf. Cottingham, J. on the 'epistemology of involvement' in his 2018 'Transcending Science: Humane Models of Religious Understanding.' Forthcoming in *New Models of Religious Understanding*. Ed. F. Ellis. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>71</sup> Elgin, C. 2008. 'Emotion and Understanding.' In *Epistemology and Emotion*. Ed. G. Brun, U. Doguoglu and D. Kuenzle. Aldershot: Ashgate, 33–49, p. 33.

unemotional, if I draw and paint as they do in the schools, I'll no longer see anything.<sup>72</sup>

My claim, then, is that divine omniscience should also be seen in this way. Since understanding is intellectually more demanding than mere knowledge, God's perfect mind should be seen in such terms. Such understanding is holistic: it does not merely involve knowledge of all true propositions; it also involves knowing how these fit together. In order for such understanding to encompass other thinkers, it must involve empathetic engagement. And, lastly, love is required for such empathy to be total. We saw above that St. Bernard and Christ were jointly present with each other, and we saw their love—such empathy and love, I now suggest, are constitutive of what it is to understand each other.

I have suggested that art can reconfigure our experience and our understanding of individuals and their relations with others. My focus has been on religious art and how it may illuminate the notion of omniscience, the claim being that this should be seen in terms of understanding and not propositional knowledge. Empathy is built into this notion of understanding. To understand another one must empathize with them. In §I, though, empathetic relations between God and man were seen as problematic, in that empathetic knowledge may be inconsistent with God's moral perfection or the way he inhabits space and time. Have I, then, found a solution to such problems in art? It may appear not. There is surely a question remaining concerning how God

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<sup>72</sup> Danchev, A. 2013. *Cezanne: A Life*. London: Profile Books, 178–9. Nussbaum (1992, p. 81) argues for such a claim with respect to Henry James' *The Secret Fount*. The narrator, Gilbert Long, is so detached from emotion that he cannot come to have any knowledge of others.

could understand us, given his other divine attributes. This may be so, but I have nevertheless attempted to change the nature of the debate concerning omniscience—and this may be fruitful. We should resist struggling to account for God’s knowledge of all true propositions given his other divine attributes—a project that is usually pursued in piecemeal fashion: particular contradictions identified and resolutions sought. Instead, we should attempt a more constructive project, one in which we develop conceptions of God that allow for such a reconfigured notion of omniscience, asking what God must be like if he can have such holistic, empathetic understanding of us.

This paper is in part motivated by the sterility of much debate in the philosophy of religion. Omniscience is often considered with respect to problems concerning the incompatibility of the divine attributes. If God is omniscient then he must know that I am scared of flying, but God cannot have such knowledge given that an omnipotent being cannot have fear. A game then ensues, one in which definitions of the divine attributes are refined. Perhaps omniscience means not knowing *everything*, but knowing everything that it’s possible to know, or everything that it’s possible for a being such as God to know. It goes on... Wes Morriston nicely expresses his dissatisfaction with this approach in the context of a discussion of omnipotence:

In recent years, definitions of omnipotence have become more and more complicated. Indeed, they frequently employ so much technical apparatus and contain so many subordinate clauses and qualifications, that it is natural to wonder whether they have much to do with what an ordinary person might mean by saying that God is all powerful.<sup>73</sup>

My suggestion, then, is that religious art can reinvigorate the debate concerning omniscience and perhaps the other divine attributes. By opening oneself up to religious art one can come to see alternatives to traditional academic definitions of religious concepts.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Morrision, W. 2002. 'Omnipotence and the Power to Choose: A Reply to Wielenberg.' *Faith and Philosophy* 19(3): 358–67, p. 358.

<sup>74</sup> Thanks to audiences at the 55<sup>th</sup> Christian Philosophy conference, Guildford (2015), Open University *Thinking in the Open* (2015), Oxford Brookes *Understanding Others*, Ashmolean Museum (2014), *Special Divine Action* cluster research group, Oxford Brooke & Oxford (2016; funded by the Templeton Foundation) and to Bill Gibson, Charles Taliaferro, Linda Zagzebski and Andrew Pinsent.

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