

EMPATHY, CHRISTIAN ART AND THE BODY¹

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ABSTRACT: Christianity has a fraught relationship with the body: bodily pleasure is a sinful distraction from the spiritual life of the immortal soul, yet it is hard to escape images of the, often tortured, bodies of Christ, martyrs and Saints in Christian art. There are images of Christ's suffering that elicit low-level empathy in the viewer, and there are depictions of God's high-level empathetic understanding of humanity. I argue that the latter—via depiction of the body of Christ—can reconfigure our conception of God and specifically his omniscience. This should be seen in terms of divine understanding, with empathy and love required for God's understanding of human beings.

Keywords: empathy, omniscience, Christianity, art, understanding, somaesthetics

As one approaches Caravaggio's *The Flagellation of Christ* down a long gallery in the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples, one starts to tense in sympathy with the tussling bodies, the knots in their muscles emphasized by the twisted loincloth, clothes, rope binding a switch, and crown of thorns.² Christ teeters, his body twisted in opposite directions, his knees buckle as the torturers pull his hair and kick his calf. Here, one's own bodily reactions are involved in coming to know what it is like to be beaten—what it like *for Christ* to be beaten. Our response to this painting involves empathy, that is, we come to share in the emotions and thoughts of those depicted. There are two kinds of empathy. There is low-level empathy, where the emotions and feelings of another are contagious. One can, for example, be deflated by the sadness of those around you. There is also high-level empathy. This is where the perspective of another is adopted, where, for example, I come to understand the thoughts that led to one person betraying another. Empathy involves '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'.³

Analytic somaesthetics highlights the role of the body in the knowledge we have of ourselves, the world, and others. In contrast, religion—and Christianity in particular—downplays the role of the body in favour of the immaterial soul.⁴ Here, though, I explore how somaesthetic considerations can be brought to bear on the relation between religious art and how we conceive of God. Much religious art focuses on the body of Christ, and, the claim stressed here, is that our own bodies play a crucial role in our appreciation of such art and how this contributes to our understanding of religion. This dual role of the body is stressed by Richard Shusterman: somaesthetics 'treats the body not only as an *object* of aesthetic value and creation but also as a crucial sensory *medium* for enhancing our dealings with all other aesthetic objects'.⁵ Further, my project embraces the multi-disciplinary and unifying approach of somaesthetics, drawing together, amongst other disciplines, the philosophy of religion, aesthetics, neuroscience and art history. I shall first consider the empathy we feel for the depicted Christ in various religious images, before moving on to artistic representations of God's empathy for us, and their relevance to how we should understand God's omniscience.⁶

Sympathy for Christ

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

³ Simon Blackburn, *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3rd edition, 2016, p. 152.

⁴ See Richard Shusterman, 'Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57(3), 1999, p. 301.

⁵ Shusterman, 'Somaesthetics', p. 308.

⁶ I should say, perhaps, that this paper is part of a genuine attempt to understand religion. I am not myself a Christian nor, I think, religious in any recognized sense. I am tempted to describe myself as, what Mark Johnson in his recent book calls, religiously 'tone-deaf', although, given the arguments of this paper, this does not seem the best description of my lack of faith since I can discern the kind of tones others can hear—or, rather, see—in Christian art; it's just that for me they are not accompanied by belief (Mark Johnson, *Saving God: Religion after Idolatry*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011, p. 17).

¹ This is a shortened and revised version of an extended discussion of this topic in my paper, 'Art, Empathy and the Divine', forthcoming in *The Heythrop Journal*. (Early view: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/heyj.13054>.)

² Caravaggio (1607), *The Flagellation of Christ*, [oil on canvas], Museo di Capodimonte, Naples. Caravaggio plays with balance and twisted cloth to similar effect in *The Martyrdom of St. Matthew* (1600), [oil on canvas], San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome.

at the entwined hands and the dirty feet of Veronese's pieta, and at the way Michelangelo sculpts Mary's slumped body and Christ's fingers resting on her dress.⁷ 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 empathy. 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* (1470) has thorns in his forehead and battered hands, with cherubs showing intense grief.⁸ Physical aspects of the setting also aid empathy. The sharp corners of masonry in Antonello da Messina's *Pieta with Three Angels* and Caravaggio's *The Deposition* (1600–4) seem to dig into our own flesh.⁹ 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. In Jose de Ribera's *The Trinity* (c. 1635), one's skin stretches with that of Christ. Ribera's forte is stretched, wrinkled and wounded skin—exploring, it has recently been argued by Edward Payne, relations and parallels between fabrics torn in struggle, the bodily skin of Christian martyrs, Saints and Christ, and the pictorial surface of the paintings themselves. Javier Portus notes that 'it would be difficult to find a seventeenth century painter in whose work there is such an abundance of martyred flesh'.¹⁰

⁷ Paolo Veronese (1581), *Pieta*, [oil on canvas], Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. Michelangelo (1499), *Pieta*, [marble], St. Peters Basilica, Rome.

⁸ Carlo Crivelli (1470), *Dead Christ Supported by Two Angels*, [tempera on poplar], National Gallery, London.

⁹ Antonello da Messina (1475), *Pieta with Three Angels*, [tempera on wood], Museo Correr, Venice, and Caravaggio (1603–4), *The Entombment of Christ*, [oil on canvas], Pinacoteca Vaticana, Vatican City.

¹⁰ Jose Ribera (c. 1635), *The Trinity*, [oil on canvas], Museo del Prado, Madrid. Portus' claim is taken from *Ribera*, Barcelona: Poligrafa, 2011 (p. 84). For discussion of cloth, skin and canvas, see Edward Payne and Xavier Bray, *Ribera: Art of Violence*, London: Dulwich Picture Gallery, 2018.

As we saw in Caravaggio's *Flagellation*, artists also play with rhythm and constrained movement. In a 14th 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 of Christ, Mary and John.¹¹ The art critic Bernard 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'. The states of our own bodies mirror those of the bodies depicted in paintings. Neuroaesthetics is a recent development in which cognitive neuroscience investigates aesthetic experience. Relevant here are findings that indicate the mirror neuron system is involved in such empathetic engagement with art and our sensitivity to the posture and facial expressions of those in paintings, just as we are sensitive and receptive to the emotions and feelings of those around us.¹²

In viewing such paintings we experience both low-level empathy towards the depicted torments of Christ and, to some degree, high-level empathetic appreciation of his thoughts and experiences.¹³ Through depiction of the redemptive role of Christ's bodily suffering we are also invited to share God's empathy *for us*. However, to

¹¹ Ugolino da Siena (n.d.), *Crucifixion with the Madonna, Saint John and Angels*, [tempera and gold on wood], Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.

¹² Bernard Berenson, *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance*, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1896, pp. 86–7. Greg Curry investigates the kinds of mirroring and empathetic mechanisms that may be involved ('Empathy for Objects' in Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie, eds., *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 86–7). For the role of mirror neurons, see David Freedberg and Vittorio Gallese 'Motion, Emotion and Empathy in Esthetic Experience', *Trends in Cognitive Science*, 11(5), 2007, pp. 197–205.

¹³ Franciscans emphasize the role of suffering in worship and religious life, with flagellation and mortification of flesh aids to penance and meditation. Their 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. This emphasis on the role of the body is also stressed in 'practical somaesthetics; which 'involves actually engaging in programs of disciplined, reflective, corporeal practice aimed at somatic self-improvement' (Richard Shusterman, *Thinking through the Body*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 45). Further work on the somaesthetics of religious practice would be illuminating.

explore such divine empathy I shall turn in the next section to more explicit representations of Christ's empathy with man.

Divine Mindreading

There are various reasons to think that God must be able to empathize with us. First, understanding a person involves knowing what they are thinking, and philosophers of mind talk of this in terms of 'mindreading'. Elsewhere I have argued that divine mindreading must involve empathy.¹⁴ 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 therefore in order to do so he must be capable of empathizing with us. I focus on the conceptual content of thought, whereas Linda 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'. 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'.¹⁵

Eleonore Stump relates empathy to the notion of personal presence—when, that is, one is present *with* another person or present *to* them.¹⁶ Empathy with another can cause us to feel, in some sense, another's pain, and when this occurs another's presence is vivid. 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. I am now present to you: *here, now, with you*.¹⁷ At the beginning of a lecture, I look out at a sea of faces, but in catching your eye, or listening to your questions, I come to see you as a person. I am not merely aware of my own first-person experiences, nor am I merely aware of your objective, physical properties, those that can be apprehended from the third-person perspective; I am aware, rather, of your consciousness in the world—you become present to me as another person. In coming to see you 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'.¹⁸ God too, Stump argues, can be present to us and we to him, both in divine mindreading and through divine love. There is, then, unilateral apprehension of another, when, for example, one empathizes with another's pain and in so doing their presence is manifest, and mutual awareness manifest in communication and love.

Artists have 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.¹⁹ In Bernard's facial and bodily expression we see his 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

¹⁴ See Dan O'Brien, 'God's Knowledge of Other Minds', *European Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, 2013, 5(1), pp. 17–34.

¹⁵ Linda Zagzebski, 'Omnijectivity: Why It Is a Divine Attribute', *Nova et Vetera* 14(2), 2016, pp. 438, 442.

¹⁶ See Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 108–28.

¹⁷ This paper was presented at the *Somaesthetics: Between the Human Body and Beyond* conference in Szeged, Hungary, May 14, 2018. The co-presence of speaker and audience is vivid to both, but the presence of an author is also manifest in their writing.

¹⁸ Eleonore Stump, 'Omnipresence, Indwelling, and the Second-Personal', *European Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 5(4), 2013, p. 41.

¹⁹ Francisco Ribalta (1625), *Christ Embracing St. Bernard*, [oil on canvas], Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Christ looking out at the viewer, looking at us, attempting to understand our humanity—attempting to empathize with us.²⁰ Similarly in Caravaggio's *The Taking of Christ*, his humanity emphasized in contrast to the metallic, inhuman arms of the soldiers who come to take him.²¹ See also the searching eyes of Christ in Domenichino's *The Way to Calvary* and the eyes of St Bartholomew in Ribera's *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*,²² where, as put by Edward Payne, 'he peers out into space and we stare back at him, our roles are instantly reversed: the victim transforms into a spectator and we become the subject of his gaze'.²³ 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 his crucifixion; 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'.²⁴

Seeing Things Anew

I suggest that religious art can loosen the grip of certain problematic ways of conceiving of God and his divine properties, with the emphasis here on representations of the body in Christian art. 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 '.²⁵ 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. 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).

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'.²⁶ In one sense it is a familiar and persuasive claim that pictures can say more than words. Look at Rembrandt's drawing of a child being taught to walk.²⁷ 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. It is a drawing of a secular subject, but religious art can be similarly rich. A further way to think of the *sui generis* character of art is to note that artists not only depict familiar appearances; they can also make us see things anew. They can *reconfigure* our experience. Nelson Goodman 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'.²⁸ Rodin's sculpture of Balzac can be seen as reconfiguring our conception of the writer. Rodin's hulking figure is

²⁰ Jacopo Tintoretto (c. 1548–9), *Christ Mocked*, [oil on canvas], Private collection.

²¹ Caravaggio (1602), *The Taking of Christ*, [oil on canvas], National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin.

²² Domenichino (1610), *The Way to Calvary*, [oil on copper], Getty Museum, Los Angeles. Jose Ribera (1644), *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, [oil on canvas], MNAC, Barcelona.

²³ Payne and Bray, *Ribera*, p. 62.

²⁴ Gabriele Finaldi, *The Image of Christ*, London: National Gallery Press, 2000, p. 107. For a striking example of one such painting, see Catherine Puglisi and William Barcham, eds., *Passion in Venetian Art, Crivelli to Tintoretto and Veronese: The Man of Sorrows in Venetian Art*, New York: Museum of Biblical Art Press, 2011, p. 104.

²⁵ Anthony Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, p. 10.

²⁶ Otto Pacht, *Practice of Art History: Reflections on Method*, London: Harvey Miller, 1999, pp. 84, 137.

²⁷ This is one of David Hockney's favourite drawings and he describes it eloquently (see Craig Raine, 'Phantasmal Nudges of Pigment', *Times Literary Supplement*, No. 5924, October 14, 2016, p. 21). This drawing is in the British Museum (see Martin Royalton-Kisch, *Drawings by Rembrandt and His Circle in the British Museum*, London: British Museum Press, 1992, cat. no. 53). For buckling knees also see Caravaggio's *Flagellation* above.

²⁸ Nelson Goodman, and Catherine Elgin, *Reconceptions in Philosophy & other Arts & Sciences*, Routledge: London, 1988, pp. 48, 22.

not the sedate man of letters usually portrayed. The folded arms and protruding stomach are resolute in the face of his torments; psychological turmoil suggested by (almost demonic) deformations of his skull. Catherine Lampert suggests that '[t]he 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'.²⁹ In Rodin, then, we have an artist who has reconfigured our conception and perception of a particular person. Perhaps art can play an analogous role in reconfiguring our conception of God.

Knowledge and Understanding

'Knowledge' and 'understanding' are sometimes used to refer to the same thing, but there is an important sense of understanding where it is seen as a greater epistemic achievement than knowledge.³⁰ In understanding why one of my hostas is struggling in its current position in the garden I do not merely know that the hosta is not doing well. I also know that it's 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.³¹ One is

therefore often said to have understanding of systems or bodies of knowledge. I can understand microeconomics and meteorology.

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 came to shove.

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 do not 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, 'suffering itself is a piece of self-knowing. In responding to a loss with anguish, we are grasping our love'.³² Or, on a less tor-

²⁹ Catherine Lampert, 'The Burghers of Calais, and the Monument to Balzac: "My Novel"' in C. Lampert, et al., eds., *Rodin*, London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2006, p. 102. The sculptures referred to are Auguste Rodin (1898), *Monument to Balzac*, [bronze], Boulevard du Montparnasse, Paris, and Vasselot's marble bust (1875), now in the Comédie Française.

³⁰ '[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 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' (Catherine Elgin in Goodman and Elgin, *Reconceptions*, p. 152).

³¹ See Mikael Janvid, 'Understanding Understanding: An Epistemological Investigation', *Philosophia*, 42(4), 2014, pp. 971–85, and Catherine Elgin, 'From Knowledge to Understanding' in Stephen Hetherington, ed., *Epistemology Futures*, Ox-

ford: Clarendon, 2006, pp. 199–215.

³² Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992, p. 267. For Nussbaum, 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 (*ibid.*, pp. 269–72). That is not to say, though, that emotions do not have the epistemic role I suggest (as pointed out by Mark Wynn,

tured 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's love for that person. 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 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'.³³ As Elgin puts it: emotion is 'an avenue of epistemic access, hence a contributor to the advancement of understanding.'³⁴

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, those concerning the beliefs, desires, hopes and intentions of thinkers; it also involves

knowing how these fit together. It must also involve empathetic engagement. And, lastly, love is required for such empathy to be total. We saw above that Bernard and Christ were jointly present with each other, and we saw their love—such empathy and love, I now suggest, an essential component of omniscience with respect to another person. Consideration of religious art has not enabled us to engage in analysis of perennial debates concerning what are termed the omni-properties of God, debates that focus on certain problems associated with them. How, for example, can God have knowledge of all true propositions when, given his existence is not spatio-temporal, he cannot come to know (indexical) truths about what is happening *here* and *now*.³⁵ Christian art, rather, focuses on the body of Christ and thus we come to empathize with his suffering and also with the way he understands us as flesh and blood human beings. Here I have explored how artists facilitate such low and high-level empathy with Christ and how this may enable us to see the thinness of the analytic philosopher's notion of omniscience and perhaps therefore not to feel the pull of such traditional problems in the philosophy of religion.

Emotional Experience and Religious Understanding: Integrating Perception, Conception and Feeling, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); to do so, according to Nussbaum, they must feature in such narrative understanding.

³³ David McPherson, 'Transfiguring Love' in Fiona Ellis, ed., *New Models of Religious Understanding*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 85.

³⁴ Catherine Elgin, 'Emotion and Understanding' in George Brun, Ulvi Doguoglu and Dominique Kuenzle, eds., *Epistemology and Emotion*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008, p. 33.

³⁵ For details of such incompatibility arguments, see Yujin Nagasawa, *God and Phenomenal Consciousness*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 17–73.