

The Cosmos as a Work of Art

Alexander R. Pruss
November 22, 2004

e-mail: ap85@georgetown.edu
Department of Philosophy
Georgetown University
Washington, DC 20057

1. Introduction

The cosmos is filled with evil that seemingly has no redeeming value. Granted, *some* evils do lead to greater goods, sometimes goods that could not exist without the evils. Thus, the exercise of courage is a good that requires either an actual evil to stand firm in the face of or the illusion of an evil—and an illusion is a kind of evil, too. But many evils appear to serve no such purpose. Philosophers call an evil that a supremely good God would have insufficient reason to permit to exist a *gratuitous* evil. A particularly powerful form of the argument from evil against the existence of the God of Western monotheism is, thus, that there *seem* to be gratuitous evils, hence there probably *are* gratuitous evils, and so this God does not exist.

In his Sermon 125, St. Augustine says:

[A]ll people are under control in their own spheres; but to everyone it seems as if there is no control over them. As for you, you only have to bother about what you want to be, because whatever and however you want to be, the craftsman knows where to put you. Consider a painter. Various colors are set before him, and he knows where to put each color. The sinner, of course, wanted to be the color black [###image]; does that mean the craftsman is not in control, and doesn't know where to put him? How many things he can do, in full control, with the color black! How many detailed embellishments the painter can make! He paints hair with it, paints the eyebrows[###image]. To paint the forehead he only uses white. ^[1] [###image]

I will sketch an argument that if we follow St. Augustine in seeing the cosmos—i.e., the sum total of all created existence—as a work of art, then we have good reason to be sceptical of the judgment that there are gratuitous evils. I will do so by stating several features of works of art each of which, when transferred to the case of the cosmos, makes it difficult to conclude that any evil we see is gratuitous. However this account does not undercut the religious claims that from the *goodness* of things in the universe we can tell something about God's goodness. Paradoxically, evil does not give a strong argument against the existence of God, but

good might give a strong argument in favor of it.

2. Holism

As Leibniz noted in this connection, we are capable of observing only a small segment of the cosmos. Now, as Augustine clearly saw, a work of art needs to be judged as a whole. Consider, then, three senses in which we are capable of observing only a small segment of the cosmos.

2.1. Distance

The further away we look, the less clearly we see. By the time we get to what is happening around other stars, we are no longer capable of seeing much of moral significance: we cannot even tell if there are any persons there. Yet a work of art must be seen as a physical whole to be judged. A small portion may seem quite questionable while the whole works. A famous example is the hand of Monet's "Woman with a Parasol" (###image 1, 2, 3). The whole (###image) is no worse off for the deficient hand. In fact, one might speculate that a "better" hand would draw attention away from the parts of the image that matter, thereby making for a worse overall painting. If this is true, one is reminded of Aquinas's optimism:

The universe, the present creation being supposed, cannot be better, on account of the most beautiful order given to things by God.... For if any one thing were bettered, the proportion of order would be destroyed; as if one string were stretched more than it ought to be, the melody of the harp would be destroyed. (*Summa Theologiae* I, 25, 6, ad 3).

Examples abound. Is that splotch a... (###image) lily? But it harmonizes (###image) perfectly in the whole (###image).

Moreover, the meaning of the whole may be rather different from the meaning a physical part leads us to expect. Consider this pretty (###image) but somewhat subdued maritime scene. We might complain about the darkness of the color, for instance, or the lack of motion. But once we see the vivid and dynamic whole (###image) such complaints disappear (###image). We realize that the part must do its thing, and in this case its thing is to serve.

In fact, we might completely misunderstand the genre through a spatially limited perspective. We might think this diamond to be an abstract expressionist painting (###image). But it is but a patch on Cézanne's Harlequin (###image).

Thus, a spatially limited perspective does not allow us either to judge with much confidence what *kind* of work of visual art we are dealing with, nor what quality the work has. Apparent exceptions prove the rule. Thus, a Pollock has a fractal quality—it looks much the same at different scales (###images 1 2 3). But *this* fact about it is an aspect of its significance, an aspect that cannot be deduced from looking at it in just one scale. Interestingly, imitations apparently lack this aspect.

All of the above considerations show that we cannot judge the artist an untalented artist on the basis of a physical part. But interestingly there is an asymmetry between the good and the bad. For while we cannot judge on the basis of a physical part that an artist is untalented, we can judge an artist talented on that basis. We do not need to see the rest of the figure to know we are dealing with a great artist here (###image). If we see the whole we may see new meanings, and the old ones may be transformed (###image). Yet at the same time, having seen the small portion, we already knew that we had an artist of great talent. Even if the unlikely happened, and the whole was botched, the artist's ability to have produced the *part* would have been testimony to his or her skill.

Similarly, then, given the vastness of the universe, we cannot judge negatively the artistic significance of the small portions we do see if the universe is a work of art, though some (###photo) of these portions (###photo) on their own may be enough to make a partial positive judgment about the author.

2.2. Time

While some works of art, such as paintings and sculptures, do not have a rigid temporal dimension in themselves, musical performances, literary works, plays and films tend to. While still first viewing the work, the viewer has seen it from the beginning to a point before the end. Particularly in the case of literature, drama and film, such a temporally limited point of view can well preclude one from judging of the significance and at times artistic merits, since further developments may entirely transform one's judgment of what has gone on so far. Thus, for instance, while *Anna Karenina* was coming out in serialized form, critics thought it a mere society novel with ladies in pretty dresses.

Indeed, some of the best works of literature, drama and film turn on a misunderstanding of the meaning or artistic merits of what has gone on. Thus, a text may seem reflective of a poorly drawn character,

but further developments may reveal that it is the intention of the author to have a character of precisely this sort—none other would do the job. Consider for instance the annoyingly pretentious voice-over at the beginning of Kieślowski's *Decalogue 5* (##clip). Who would speak in a such a didactic and platitudinous way? Yet next we learn that this is a student rehearsing for a bar exam. And by the end of the film, this same student—now become a defense attorney—upon being faced with the impending execution of a client is transformed from someone who merely utters trite lines about the nature of punishment to someone who *emotionally* comprehends the horror of it. And seemingly little things in this short scene are significant. The ribbon around the cigarettes and the student's rubbing his neck foreshadow the strangling of the criminal's victim and the hanging of the criminal, while the mirror emphasizes that this is a film about parallelism—that between the death of the victim and the death of the killer. But none of this was apparent from this scene alone.

While there may be *some* things whose meaning cannot be transformed by time, the sheer surprisingness of transformations wrought by talented authors—think of *The Sixth Sense*—should caution us. Judgments as to genre may even change on us. And in the case of the cosmos, the argument from evil is typically directed against a member of one of the three great monotheistic religions, each of which insists that there is a momentous *eschaton* coming. The ways, some subtle and some not, that the meaning of something in a work of fiction may be transformed with time should make one think that if the cosmos is a work of art, then any judgment that something represents a weak point should be made very cautiously prior to the *eschaton*. In fact, someone who does not accept any eschatology will also realize that what we have observed is a very small temporal part of the whole: the universe is billions of years old and barring some supernatural *eschaton* has billions of years to go. Moreover, even having seen an *eschaton*, caution would be called for: I completely missed out on the significance of the lawyer's transformation in *Decalogue 5* the first time or perhaps even the first two times I saw the film.

Again, however, we can see that talent can often be recognized on the basis of a temporal part. For even if a part in the end may mean something completely different, even without seeing that meaning and even while misunderstanding its genre, we might see it as definitively indicative of authorial talent. In fact,

this is even true if in the end the work as a whole does not come off well (as one hopes will not be in the case of the universe)—it is still true that the author had the talent *to make that part*. But, at least when dealing with a relatively small part (measured in terms of length of time or in terms of whether any expected crucial events that are to come have yet come), we cannot judge the part as poorly done. For all we know, a judgment that there is poor acting on stage will be transformed when we find out that the actors are playing untalented actors in a play within a play. At the same time, a judgment that the actors *have significant talent* may be qualified but will not be entirely overthrown by finding out that what we saw was a play within a play, say.

2.3. Aspect

We have five senses. We know that a work of art can only be judged directly by someone who has the requisite sensory access (if only vicariously). Seeing only some aspects of a multisensory work again typically ensures that one is not epistemologically in a position to make a judgment that the work is a poor work of art. Think of seeing a film without the soundtrack or hearing the soundtrack without the video. While one might positively judge the author talented on the basis of only one of these, one typically cannot judge the author untalented without having observed both, because the interaction of the two may transform the significance of each. Or imagine listening to a piece of music through ears that only heard a very narrow frequency range.

Theists from the three great monotheistic religions typically believe that there are unobservable aspects of reality, spiritual realms, choirs of angels, the lives of souls (our own and those of others, with both being somewhat mysterious to us). If the argument from evil is directed at such a theist, the theist has good reason to say that we cannot negatively judge the cosmos as a whole. A good artist making a work that incorporates several aspects—such as sight and sound—typically interweaves these aspects in such a way that the work cannot be judged negatively on the basis of one of these alone. Likewise, if reality contains spirit and matter, observations of only the latter cannot give us a definitive negative artistic judgment.

Yet, as before, if we see something in the physical universe, like this scene (###photo), that has consummate beauty, then we can *positively* affirm talent in the creator, though on the basis of this alone we

perhaps cannot conclude that the cosmos as a whole shows talent.

2.4. Intellectual limitations and genre

And even when we are done with all the sensory limitations, we know that some works of art require an application of the intellect to appreciate. One needs to figure out, for instance, a work's genre to judge it bad. But to get at a work's genre is no easy task—especially as we see from contemporary art. (##image 1 2 3) It may take time and, as noted earlier, may be quite impossible from a viewing of a mere part.

And as long as we are *in media res*, we cannot be sure we sure that we got the universe's genre right. Indeed, if we think about it, we realize we really have no idea what genre of art the cosmos with its intricate human history on the one hand and its sweeping cosmic vistas would be (##image 1 2 3) if it were a work of art, and hence we cannot dismiss the possibility that it may be a work of very high value.

Again, we have an interesting asymmetry. Without knowing the genre of a work, we cannot judge the author untalented. But without knowing the genre, we can make at least some positive judgments. Even if we do not understand Magritte's pipe, we can tell it is well drawn—this misses most of it, but is still something.

3. Optimization

Leibniz thought that a perfectly good God would necessarily create the best possible cosmos. Such an idea creates a serious problem of evil. For, an atheist would likely contend, this world is not the *best possible*. A better cosmos might contain persons of a kind much smarter than we are, for instance. One response is to argue, perhaps along the lines given earlier, that for all we know the cosmos is the best possible work of divine art. But we do not need to defend *this* controversial claim.

For it is a part of Western monotheism that God created the cosmos *freely*, and hence he could not have been necessitated to create the best—he was free not to create at all. Hence, God might have created a cosmos that was not the best possible. Maybe the idea of a best possible cosmos is even an incoherent one: for any possible cosmos, there might be a better possible cosmos.

And, in fact, considerations of art make it quite plausible that an infinitely good artist might create something that would not be the best possible work of art. It would be a mistake to suppose that a great

human artist needs decide to produce the best work of art within the artist's powers. Rather, the artist has an artistic vision and sets out to execute that vision as best he or she can. In executing this picture (##image) of the artist's father, did Cézanne really survey on an abstract level all possible works of art he could produce, and decided that a painting of his father would be the best one possible? Surely not: rather, no doubt, he had an artistic vision of a painting of his father, or maybe even just a desire to paint his father, and then set out to execute that vision. Did Cézanne also abstractly consider whether he might not be better at producing works of some other kind of art, say music, or paintings in a different genre? Again, surely not.

If—and even this is not clear, since an artist may simply try to make something merely sufficient to communicate what the artist wishes to communicate—there is always an attempt by a great artist to produce the best possible, it is to produce the best possible actualization of the particular artistic vision that has seized the artist's imagination. And so if the cosmos is a work of great art, it does not follow that it is the best possible thing God could have made. At most, it would follow that God has done his best in embodying his artistic vision. Since we are not in a position to know very much about this artistic vision, we cannot conclude that he has failed at this task. But, as noted before, we *can* say that he has shown much talent.

4. Audience

Yet there is a hitch in the above arguments. On many theories of art, a work of art must have an audience. Who could be the audience of *the cosmos*? We? But we are in it: How can we be the audience?

One can, however, deny that a work of art needs to have an audience. An instance of beauty produced for its own sake and not for viewing might well be a work of art. But we do not need to go so far. For an audience can well be a part of a work. Any good artist draws the audience in some way into the work. Sometimes this may happen to such a degree that the audience may be a *part* of the work itself (##photo), say if the artist is capable of predicting the audience's reactions—that they will sit down by the chessboard.

But the objection goes on. If we are the audience of the cosmic work of art, then shouldn't we have access to the work as a whole? The audience to a painting gets to see the whole. One does not make a film for an audience that lacks the sense of sight. However, here, we see that the temporal limitations on our observations of the universe are paramount. For, yes, an audience gets to see the whole painting. But not

always all at once. If the work is large, one may have to turn one's neck, move back to see it better, look at it from several angles, and so on. And even if the work is not large, our eyes scan it along multiple paths. Of course, once we have taken it all in, it may seem like this all took but an instant. But it is quite possible that once one is able to see things from the point of view of the *eschaton*, all the craning of our necks that this life consisted in might be but a flash.

5. Conclusions

The idea that the cosmos is a work of art is deeply embedded in Western theism. And if we take this idea seriously, then we realize that there is a holistic value that the cosmos may have which, at least for the nonce, is beyond our ability to make a judgment about. And this holistic value may be one for which the various parts of the whole which are individually bad may be necessary—God might well have reason to allow them (though not to produce them himself). The magnitude of this value we cannot even guess at. Thus, for all we know, despite the evils, the whole is such that the evils are not gratuitous. And so the argument from evil is not conclusive.

Now, one may object that the primary categories for negative judgments of art are things like *poorly done*, *ugly* and *banal*. These kinds of categories seem different from the category of *evil*. Sure, art can be evil, but that is when it is not *only* art but something else as well, and then while it may or may not be *bad art*, it is not *evil* as art (###image). One might dispute this last point. But a different kind of response might be to bring in Augustine's famous idea from the *Confessions* that evil is a *privation*, a *lack* of something that should be there. Ontologically, then, evil is not unlike banality which is a lack of depth and significance. Note, too, that one of the worst evils that could happen to one is to have lived a banal life. Of course to compare evil and banality is not to say that the fact of evil is a banal fact, and anyway the idea of the cosmos as a work of art may be only an instructive analogy.

Yet there is something uncomfortable in all of the above ideas, even if they seem to be logically sound. Could any work of art justify the suffering of billions? Three things can be said.

First, it makes a difference that those suffering are themselves in the audience. The work of art is one they are a part of but *is also for them*. (It may be suffering for a child to go to a museum, but appreciation

may develop.)

Second, it may make a further difference if, as Christians claim, the artist enters the artwork and suffers along with us.

Third, we can take an abstractive step. We may take aesthetic value as simply an *example* of a value we cannot judge negatively of without a holistic view. There may be such kinds of value that we have no inkling of, just as there can be genres of art we have no inkling of. Beings who did not know about art would have no inkling that there was even a possibility of the kind of value that this Picasso (##image) has, and likewise the universe may have a value that to us is as unknown at present. [\[2\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) *Sermons III/4*, transl. Edmund Hill, OP, New City Press: Brooklyn, 1992.

[\[2\]](#) I would like to thank my audience at the Epiphanies of Beauty Conference, University of Notre Dame, November, 2004 for a number of helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. In particular, the increased emphasis on genre was suggested by Thomas Flint.