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Dietrich von Hildebrand's Reflection on Beauty and Aesthetics: A Theological Appraisal of AI-Generated Art

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Abstract

The recent emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) to generate digital images from descriptive text prompts has taken the creative world by storm, with AI art generators like *DALL-E 2*, *MidJourney*, *NightCafé*, and others. Notwithstanding ethical considerations, the complex relationship between AI art, humanity, aesthetics, and the Divine demands a theological response. Dietrich von Hildebrand (1889–1977) was a leading German Roman Catholic philosopher. His literary work focused on ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, philosophical anthropology, social philosophy, and aesthetics. It is his theological reflection on aesthetics that will provide us with wisdom and guidance as we navigate, evaluate, and critique AI-generated art. This paper begins by exploring the essence of AI-generated art and how it works. Von Hildebrand and his literary work are introduced, which brings us to an exposition of his philosophical theology on aesthetics, outlining his most significant and pertinent points. In turn, this provides us with a theological apparatus to evaluate AI-generated art.

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1. Introduction

Although artificial intelligence (AI) has more knowledge than any human being, and some people believe that it is more clever than humans, it lacks certain capabilities like common sense, context, emotional intelligence, innovation, and so on. Its ultimate deficiency is of course the spiritual. It lacks “eternal spiritual ponderings on the meaning of life that are so fundamental in defining who we really are” as humans, says Hageback and Hedblom (Hageback and Hedblom 2022, Introduction). When it comes to AI-generated art, the question is, what does this do to art when it can seemingly produce better art than humans, and yet on all levels lacks the spiritual dimension? (Hageback and Hedblom 2022, Introduction). Hageback and Hedblom (Hageback and Hedblom 2022, Chapter 1) explain that for art to qualify as genuine art it usually

requires dedicated skill and effort from artists, with years of training and creative experience. Only then is the artist accepted into the art guild. Such art has the power to communicate spiritual matters and is able to affect the human being, elevating them to higher ideals (Hageback and Hedblom 2022, Chapter 1). I will argue that this artistic quality is entirely absent from AI-generated art.

To explore this further we will need to understand what AI-generated art is and have some understanding of how it works. Secondly, we will need to consult the work of a Christian philosopher who has provided a deep, mature reflection on art, beauty, and aesthetics. Here I have chosen Dietrich von Hildebrand and his two volumes titled *Aesthetics*. Von Hildebrand's work provides us with insightful fundamentals for genuine art, namely, that beauty reveals God; the objective quality of beauty and human experience; the relationship between human creativity and God; how beauty reflects the true nature of reality; and the transforming power of true beauty. These offer a theological apparatus for which we can evaluate AI-generated art and decide whether it can be acknowledged as genuine art or as something lesser.

2. AI-Generated Art and How it Works

Open-source AI-generated art programs, like *DALL-E 2*,¹ *MidJourney*, and *NightCafé*, provide anyone with an opportunity to use simple text prompts to create exceptional complex and realistic images (Heikkilä 2022; Maerten and Soydaner 2023, 25). In overly simplified terms, these programs work by “scraping millions of images from the open web, then teaching algorithms to recognize patterns and relationships in those images and generate new ones in the same style.” (Roose 2022). This kind of “art”, if we can call it that, is therefore the result of computation rather than creativity. Granted, some level of human creativity and knowledge is required to write the text for the prompt to generate impressive AI art. Other than this, there is no artistic skill or technique required (Roose 2022).

However, there are copyright and plagiarism concerns when deep learning and their image processing programs use the images of artists and designers without their permission to generate artistic AI images (Heikkilä 2022; Kim 2020, 444; Maerten and Soydaner 2023, 25; Roose 2022). Zurth (Zurth 2021, 18) believes that copyright protection is the wrong approach, especially when it may hamper further development of AI technology and that artwork created by humans is still more valuable and authentic. Algorithms, he argues, “lack crucial skills, such as purpose, understanding, awareness, intuition, inspiration, and reflection. There might be artificial intelligence, but there is no artificial creativity.” (Zurth 2021, 18).

Just recently, Sparks (Sparkes 2022) highlighted that under the photo licensing service, Shutterstock will start (if they have not already) selling AI-generated art together with art and images created by human beings. Any artist who puts their work online is training AI in image creation using algorithms (Roose 2022).

On the other hand, these programs may act as a tool and assist artists in the future (Heikkilä 2022; Maerten and Soydaner 2023, 25). Even so, there is a genuine concern that AI will take over the careers of many artists (Heikkilä 2022). Some people believe that, “We’re watching the death of artistry unfold right before our eyes.” (Roose 2022). And others have wondered why anyone would pay for their art if they can generate it themselves using AI.

AI-generated images, music, and poetry have already begun to be recognized as legitimate art forms, says Chamberlain (Chamberlain et al. 2017, 2). Last year, in 2022, Jason M. Allen, won a prize at the Colorado State Fair's annual art competition for his piece, "*Théâtre D'opéra Spatial*" submitted in the digital art category. He created it with Midjourney, an open-source AI-generated art program. Before then, in 2018, the first AI-generated portrait, called "Edmond de Belamy" was auctioned off for \$432,500 (Maerten and Soydaner 2023, 2; Roose 2022). This prompts (pun intended) the question, what place does AI-generated art hold in our future?

According to Chamberlain et al., empirical studies have demonstrated that art students "consistently preferred and valued the professionally-made artworks," more so than those who are not art students. The researchers interpreted this to mean that art students perceived that there was intentionality behind those pieces of art that were made by professional artists, more than the computer or robot-generated artworks (Chamberlain et al. 2017, 4). Generally, however, there was a bias against artworks that were computer generated because they were perceived as inferior and less valuable to works created by human skill and intellect (Chamberlain et al. 2017, 5). Further, lines and brushstrokes provide visual information which contributes to the perceived sense of an artwork's authenticity and attractiveness as genuine art, giving expression to its uniqueness and the artist's artistic skill. It's indicative of the artists' interaction with their artwork. Computer-generated art, on the other hand, is often sterile and may seem more rigid and artificial. (Chamberlain et al. 2017, 6, 16, 35).

The production and assessment of artwork have been understood, according to Lima et al. (Lima et al. 2021, 4) as a social process. They explain that those who "create, evaluate, buy, sell, and interact with art are intertwined in understanding what art is in each art world." This begs the question what AI-generated art might mean for art and artists. For one, it might change how people understand art, who can be regarded as artists, and whether AI-generated art may be regarded art at all (Lima et al. 2021, 4). It may be argued that AI-generated art lacks meaningful artistic expression that can only be created through human creative and artistic endeavor, which may mean that those who know such a piece of art was created by AI may devalue it. (Lima et al. 2021, 11). Yet, as I have already mentioned, awards have been given to AI-generated art, which suggests inconsistency in society and among various artists and digital creators whether AI-generated art is authentic art.

Even if AI-generated art is not ultimately recognized as genuine artistic expression, one still needs to ask how it is assimilated into society, and to what extent would it hold aesthetic value despite not having humanlike intelligence and skill. (Chamberlain et al. 2017, 2–3).

3. Dietrich von Hildebrand

In light of the issues raised in the previous discussion, how might we develop a theological apparatus to evaluate AI-generated art? Here I turn to a leading German Roman Catholic philosopher, Dietrich von Hildebrand (1889–1977) who was born in Florence to parents who enjoyed the best of European values, was "fed on beauty," and whose father, Adolf von Hildebrand, was a respectable sculptor (Alice von Hildebrand 2013b, 37; Feingold 2019, 386; Szalay 2018, 24). I

argue that he is well suited to help us develop a theological appraisal of AI-generated art because (1) he argued that the purpose of art ought to reveal something of the divine, (2) he believed that beauty is an objective quality that could be comprehended by human beings, (3) he helps us understand the relationship between human creativity and God, (4) his emphasis on creating a true artistic expression, and (5) he believed that art has transformative power. This I argue will provide us with an apparatus for evaluating whether AI-generated art may be considered genuine art.

Von Hildebrand believed that art ought to reflect the true nature of reality without manipulating or distorting it. (Dietrich von Hildebrand 2016; 2019). There are other philosophers of aesthetics and art, still alive today, who might evaluate AI-generated art, for example, Kendall Walton, Noël Carroll, Arthur Danto, Nick Zangwill, Yuriko Saito, and others. However, even though von Hildebrand died long before the emergence of contemporary AI art, his philosophical-theological contribution remains most relevant for such a theological discourse.

Elsby (Elsby 2020) tells us that von Hildebrand was well-recognized for his philosophy on phenomenology and ethics but “less known for his late works on aesthetics.” However, the recent translation and publication of his large tome titled, *Aesthetics*, in two volumes,² allows English readers to explore “his mature thought on beauty.” He offers a “systematic account and defense of beauty as a meaningful, objective, value-laden reality that deeply structures and affects human personality.” (Elsby 2020). Von Hildebrand employs a phenomenological method, together with a classical and Christian focus for his development of philosophical aesthetics (Feingold 2019, 386).

Although von Hildebrand’s *Aesthetics* is certainly a significant contribution to aesthetic theory, Elsby (Elsby 2020) argues that it is “also a seminal phenomenological treatise. It beautifully captures the importance of value and disvalue and their meaning for our lives as human persons. The rich, detailed analysis manifests a realm of human experience that has intimate connections with our moral and social lives.”

Crosby (Crosby 2006, 7) tells us that von Hildebrand “studied philosophy in the phenomenological school of Edmund Husserl” and converted to Catholicism at the age of 25, influenced, at least in part, by Max Scheler, also a Catholic philosopher. He says that Von Hildebrand was a formidable voice in German Catholicism by 1930, according to Crosby, and became known for his philosophical contributions on marriage, and man and woman. “One can trace the chapter on marriage in the Second Vatican Council’s *Gaudium et Spes*, back to von Hildebrand’s writings in the 1920s.” (Crosby 2006, 7). Von Hildebrand was also an early opponent of Nazism and was shortlisted as an enemy. (Crosby 2006, 7).

Alice (Alice von Hildebrand 2013a, 39), Dietrich von Hildebrand’s wife, herself also a philosopher writes how all his philosophical output,

Sing the same tune: identical hierarchy of values, absolute priority given to the supernatural, personal over the impersonal, the key role of Truth, and the priority of moral values over other values (such as intellectual, aesthetic, or vital). In his metaphysics he shows that apart from the abyss between God and all His creatures, the deepest divide is between personal and impersonal.

Von Hildebrand had wanted to write his thoughts on aesthetics, but he had always put it on hold, until one day when he

and Alice were living in New Richelle, United States, he turned to her and finely said he would write his *Aesthetics*. He poured himself into the project, but it “was a simple task; like picking a ripe fruit,” Alice said (Alice von Hildebrand 2013b, 37).

In her article, Alice seeks to provide summative pointers to her husband’s work on *Aesthetics*. She explains how he sought to highlight the significance of beauty in the Christian life and show that there is a profound relationship between morality and beauty. He believed that a bond is created between humans when they share in the common love of beauty. She continues to explain that for Dietrich, “Beauty is a value, and like all values, it is fully objective and points to another world.” Yet, it is also inherent in all metaphysical values, whether they be objects in nature, animals, humans, or even angelic beings. This is one type of beauty, yet there is also another radically different type of beauty, God. He is said to be “Beauty Itself.” Beauty can also be found in qualitative values, like “moral goodness and intellectual values.” (Alice von Hildebrand 2013b, 37). Dietrich von Hildebrand set out in his *Aesthetics* to “analyze the very essence of beauty and the message that it communicates to man, not only from the point of view of beauty but also morally and religiously.” (Alice von Hildebrand 2013b, 38).

4. Dietrich von Hildebrand on Aesthetics

Von Hildebrand’s project on aesthetics was phenomenological, seeking to describe the essence of beauty and aesthetic values (Dietrich von Hildebrand 2016, 2; Szalay 2018, 29). In this work he desired to “overcome modern and post-rational relativism ... in aesthetics. He argued in favor of an objective experience of value in which we are able to know the beauty of things themselves (*Ding an sich*).” (Szalay 2018, 24; Cf. Spencer 2019, 311).

Szalay explains that von Hildebrand was concerned that after the second world war, functionality would replace beauty with superficial designs expressed in aerodynamics, giving shape to industrial utility. Economics, he believed would swallow up authentic beauty, and there would be no classical beauty left. Decades later we see that his concerns were realized. He also argued that the commonality between a Christian experience of beauty and classical art is their objectivity. And so von Hildebrand set out to develop a “sophisticated argumentation for beauty construed as an objective value and not a relative, subjective or emotional one.” (Szalay 2018, 24)

The first of von Hildebrand’s volumes on aesthetics explores the “being of beauty, especially in nature and in the life of the human person.” (Dietrich von Hildebrand 2019, 1). He offers a phenomenology of beauty as an objective value (Elsby 2020). In his second volume, he focused on artistic beauty in the disciplines of “architecture, sculpture, painting, literature, [and] music.” (Dietrich von Hildebrand 2019, 1; Elsby 2020).

Dietrich von Hildebrand developed the concept of the first and second powers of beauty. The first power refers to our natural senses, emotions, and experiences that give us the ability to respond to sensory stimuli. The first power in the aesthetic experience is what enables art to be pleasing. While the first power is very important, it is limited by our physical faculties. To fully appreciate all that beauty and art has to offer, one needs to apprehend the second power where beauty transcends the natural level of being, and where “a spiritual idea is expressed in artistic form. In this case our delight is

not merely sensory.” (Feingold 2019, 387; Dietrich von Hildebrand 2019, 1).

The second power is the human ability to apprehend beauty and respond to it in such a way that is beyond their natural ability (Dietrich von Hildebrand 2016, 213). Von Hildebrand explains that beauty is not about an individual’s subjective preference, instead, it is an objective reality in our world that may be appreciated by the person. This power to perceive beauty allows us to connect with something larger than us. This power, he calls, “the second power.” This transcending of our present experience initiates a sense of awe, wonder, and reverence within us as we apprehend beauty because we appreciate its intrinsic value as it points beyond itself to the transcendent. The experience of the second power of beauty in art, according to von Hildebrand, may have a transformative effect on us in various ways, he explains that it, “seizes us, enchants us, moves us, elevates us, and makes us happy.” It also broadens our spirit and enriches it.” (Dietrich von Hildebrand 2016, 390–91). The second power invites us to experience a sense of personal transcendence which in turn fosters moral and spiritual development. He explains that “There is a hierarchy in the beauty of the second power. The higher and more sublime this beauty is, the more it draws us through its quality alone into ever sublimer heights, until we enter before the face of God.” (Dietrich von Hildebrand 2016, 213; Feingold 2019, 387). Yet, the greatest expression of the second power of beauty is to be found in nature (Dietrich von Hildebrand 2019, 12–13). One ought to think of the beauty of the second power as moving us into what is true (Dietrich von Hildebrand 2016, 448) and towards spiritual realities, namely transcendence and God (Spencer 2019, 321). What follows are values from von Hildebrand’s second power of beauty that will help develop an apparatus to evaluate AI-generated art.

Beauty Reveals God

Von Hildebrand argues in his *Aesthetics* that, “Above all, beauty is a reflection of God, a reflection of His infinite beauty, a genuine value, something that is important-in-itself, something that praises God.” (Dietrich von Hildebrand 2016, 2). Recounting the words of a theologian once spoken to him, “When the beauty of a mountain range captivates us, what moves us is not what we see, but the idea of God’s creative power.” It is here, where we apprehend the ultimate, beauty “of God’s unlimited creative power, for which the mountain range is but a sign, a symbol.” (Dietrich von Hildebrand 2016, 154). Spencer explains that von Hildebrand’s concept of beauty demonstrates how God is reflected in the world and is at work in it. *Aesthetics* does not simply reflect a divine idea, but its values reveal something about God and who he is (Spencer 2019, 332). This is somewhat similar to Abraham Kuyper’s reflections, he says that when God had finished creating, he saw that everything was good. Even if every person was deaf and blind, unable to enjoy God’s creative works, the beautiful remains and God experiences it for his eternal power as well as his divinity (Kuyper 2008, 210). But we do hear and we do see, and so when we are confronted with the truly beautiful, we are not moved towards some practical objective, but instead become contemplative, von Hildebrand says. This is believed to be profoundly valuable. Our spirit enlarges and becomes more beautiful when we contemplate beauty (Dietrich von Hildebrand 2016, 5). Beauty reveals God to us, and so the experience of beauty develops our spiritual persons. In looking at beauty “lies a special form of the act of self-transcendence, a certain contemplative objectivity.” (Dietrich von Hildebrand 2016, 10). It is to this objectivity we now turn.

The Objective Quality of Beauty and Human Experience

Feingold (Feingold 2019, 386; Cf. Friel 2017, 27) explains that “Von Hildebrand’s analysis of beauty is situated in the context of his theory of values. He understands value not as a subjective aspect of being, as it might sound at first, but as an objective aspect of things according to which they are intuitively grasped as endowed with importance and not merely neutral.” And so von Hildebrand pushes against the claim that one is unable to grasp or know values because these values are a feeling one has in the presence of something that is perceived (Dietrich von Hildebrand 2016, 18). While acknowledging that von Hildebrand’s contribution to beauty here may be somewhat controversial according to his Christian worldview, Szalay (Szalay 2018, 25) articulates a view of beauty as something that,

*Can be grasped as an objective value, not by relying on tradition and the transmission of certain praxis in concrete communities but rather by relying simply on **universal reason**. The starting point for von Hildebrand’s argument is that there is an unchangeable, essential structure of beauty beyond any cultural or even religious contexts that comes to the fore in each authentic experience of beauty, independent of cultural or religious transmission.*

Although this authentic experience of beauty may penetrate one’s heart providing a spiritual experience of joy, this penetrating experience is distinct from the beauty of the artistic object itself, it is very different both qualitatively and ontologically. In other words, “qualitative content is not beauty, but happiness.” Beauty is an apersonal entity, whilst spiritual qualities like happiness are a personal entity (Dietrich von Hildebrand 2016, 48).

There is a difference between objective beauty that may be enjoyed, and those experiences like joy and happiness that beauty actualizes in one’s soul. Further, Beauty does not “derive its importance from the potential happiness it causes a human being.” One might think of it like this: “The beauty of the object” will always be the source or the origin, while the human experience is the fundamental notion that serves as the basis for contemplation and action (Dietrich von Hildebrand 2016, 53–54). Elsby (Elsby 2020) explains it like this, “The objectivity of beauty lies in the object itself and is not simply a projection of value onto an object by the subject.” Feingold (Feingold 2019, 386) commends von Hildebrand’s approach which he believes demonstrates “wonder and reverence before the mystery of the dimensions of beauty.” However, Szalay (Szalay 2018, 28) is not convinced. He argues that if we were to focus on *how* we experience, rather than *what* we experience, the implications of von Hildebrand’s approach might not be quite so positive. Yet, I fail to see how this might make any difference. Nevertheless, his other objection seems more plausible. He says that von Hildebrand sacrifices divine beauty as something that is “concretely present in the incarnated and temporal world” to rescue the objective value in beauty (Szalay 2018, 31). Szalay (Szalay 2018, 34) also argues that von Hildebrand’s concept of beauty experience was more about “a momentary act in which the ‘angelic’ (ahistorical) intellect grasps beauty as value,” which seems to ignore the temporal existence of a human being, rather than considering it as a process. Be that as it may, and despite some shortcomings, von Hildebrand still offers us a helpful framework for understanding the relationship between objective beauty and human experience.

Human Creativity and God

There is a fascinating problem in the beauty of human creativity. The character of a great artist, his moral standing, the depth of his experience, and the quality of his personality rarely, if ever, align with “the quality, sublimity, and greatness” of their artwork. There is a disconnection between the artist and their creativity explains von Hildebrand (Dietrich von Hildebrand 2019, 13–14). Here the artwork transcends the moral and spiritual status of the artist (Dietrich von Hildebrand 2019, 16).

Von Hildebrand argues that “The sublime greatness, the breath of God in the works of” an artist transcends the moral and spiritual status of the artist. They are granted the “mysterious ability to create something so great and glorious.” This is a unique gift of God, “that neither presupposes the analogous perfection in human beings nor bestows it on them.” An artist need not enjoy moral virtues in ultimate perfection. Yet, God permits them “to create works of a sublimity that far transcends what he as a human being accomplishes in a moral respect.” The theme of the artwork is not the artists themselves, “but its own value, the beauty of the work of art itself. A work of art does not primarily make a proclamation about its author, but about the glory of the cosmos and, ultimately, about God’s infinite beauty.” (Dietrich von Hildebrand 2019, 13–14). And this beauty takes a hold of us and fills us with light, it enralls us and draws us before the face of God (Dietrich von Hildebrand 2016, 48).

Beauty Reflects the True Nature of Reality

Von Hildebrand argues that Scripture enjoys the most sublime expression of beauty. Not that beauty is the theme of Scripture, but instead that the theme is “the divine, revealed truth.” The beauty of scripture is, as von Hildebrand says, “the splendor of the divine sacred truth” (*splendor divinae sanctae Veritatis*). This beauty, he continues, can only be apprehended if we approach Holy Scripture with a longing “for divine revelation, in utter reverence and religious devotion.” (Dietrich von Hildebrand 2016, 285). Genuine art is not art for art’s sake, instead “artistic beauty is the theme of the work of art.” The artist’s objective is to reveal and communicate the truth to others (Dietrich von Hildebrand 2016, 290–91). In this way, artistic beauty reflects the true nature of reality. Von Hildebrand says it beautifully when he writes that “truth too has a specific beauty which is the splendor, the fragrance of truth.” (Dietrich von Hildebrand 2016, 441). The truth he continues, “is a bearer of metaphysical beauty, of that beauty which is a *splendor veri (the brightness of truth)*.” The same applies to all values in relationship to metaphysical beauty, “the higher the value, the greater the beauty which is its splendor, its fragrance. Now the same applies to truth: the more significant, the more fundamental the truth, ... the greater the beauty.” (Dietrich von Hildebrand 2016, 442).

The Transforming Power of True Beauty

The enjoyment of beauty is a profound source of Joy, von Hildebrand says. However, it also has great power to develop one’s personality, and more remarkably “in a moral sense.” He quotes Plato to illustrate his point, “At the sight of beauty the soul grows wings.” (Dietrich von Hildebrand 2016, 5). True beauty has a transformative power on our lives, for those who are captivated by it, “beauty kindles love,” it delights and enchants us (Dietrich von Hildebrand 2016, 1, 379).

5. An Appraisal of AI-Generated Art

Despite the power and significance of von Hildebrand's philosophical-theological project on aesthetics, Szalay rightly criticizes von Hildebrand's shortcomings, namely, that his *a priori* “does not consider the event of the Incarnation as indispensable for understanding beauty,” and therefore, may be considered inconsistent with his Christian worldview, especially when in Christianity, Jesus Christ is said, “to be the embodiment of the divine *Logos* and thus the personal source of all beauty.” (Szalay 2018, 31, 37). Szalay (Szalay 2018, 31) is also concerned that,

Hildebrand reduces the encounter with beauty to a reflective “experience” in the narrow sense (Erfahrung) and does not sufficiently take into account the wider context in which it occurs can be detected in a neglect of the importance of hermeneutics in understanding beauty. One can certainly agree with Hildebrand’s aspiration to show that the value-experience is irreducible to some pleasant sensory impression (Augenweide), but he fails to see that the appreciation of the beauty of, e.g., a painting—the process by which we become aware of its value—is not only a question of intuition; it is also a cultural achievement implying a hermeneutical labor.

Although we ought to take cognizance of Szalay's criticism, von Hildebrand's contributions to aesthetics, beauty, and art are still very relevant. Other contemporary contributors to this discourse seem to pick up on similar notions promoted by von Hildebrand. Craft explains that art gives us an opportunity to “linger in a space that is profoundly different from our normal modes of experience, and in doing so, cultivates an imagination which sees the depth of meaning in experiences outside of our own.” (Craft 2022, 186). Many of us, he argues are predisposed by disenchantment, and so while we perceive beauty we fail to appreciate “the mystery and presence of God around us.” If we are open to it, beauty may encourage us to “reframe” and “understand the deeper truths of the world to which beauty speaks.” (Craft 2022, 188). Art, according to Craft, may also have a transforming power, “calling us to re-evaluate our perception and relationship to the world and thus make it anew.” (Craft 2022, 189). Glaspey also argues that art can do so much more than simply beautifying our environment, as important as that is. While it certainly may be used for devotion and worship, he believes that, like von Hildebrand, it has transformative power, and may contribute to personal growth (Glaspey 2021, 18).

The arts provide a portal for “higher theological reflection,” says Craft, and signals that we live “in a state of in-betweenness,” that is, our current world and the coming renewed creation. This is because she believes that art helps us to embody the Lord's prayer, “Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.” (Mat 6:10; Craft 2022, 195). Unlike von Hildebrand, Craft (Craft 2022, 190) in her way emphasizes Jesus Christ as the embodiment of beauty especially in his crucifixion when she writes,

Theologically, beauty and brokenness find their most complete expression in the cross, and it is there that we can understand the relation between beauty and suffering, which also sheds light on our placemaking practice. In the cross, we find a beauty that does not reject suffering and brokenness or move too quickly beyond it, but rather lingers and makes its home in the brokenness, even if that home is impermanent. Christ on the cross fully takes on suffering for the sake of redeeming beauty and thus transfigures brokenness by dwelling fully within it.

Considering AI-generated art, one needs to bare in mind that it is “computational creativity” which includes both art and science, and yet, the methods are purely scientific, they are neither artistic nor creative. Rather than a canvas, artificial intelligence seeks to “understand human creativity by engineering creative processes on the computer.” Science and computer programmers lead the AI-generated art industry, not artists. (Audry 2021, 27–28).

As I have already said, for von Hildebrand, the beauty in genuine art includes both the first and second powers, and it's in the second power where “spiritual values are communicated through the physical and sensible representation.” (Feingold 2019, 388). For this reason, von Hildebrand had little appreciation for the contemporary artists and artistic movements of his time (Feingold 2019, 388). One can only imagine what he would have thought of AI-generated art, perhaps that it lacks the personal dimension, the possibility to promote personal growth, and most importantly to reveal God.

While we can't hear the opinions of von Hildebrand, we do have the thoughts of the American-Japanese artist, Makoto Fujimura. His style fuses fine art with abstract expressionism, in the traditional Japanese art styles of Nihonga and Kachoga. Fujimura is also a devoted Christian, and though he is not Roman Catholic like von Hildebrand, his wife is.

Fujimura (2023) discusses the advancement of AI in a video on his YouTube channel where he says that AI is a misnomer because it is artificial intelligence, created by using algorithms processing millions of data points very rapidly. Reflecting on whether he would go out of business, he is confident that he will be just fine, and AI may even offer him greater opportunity because: (1) He employs physical materials like pulverized minerals, malachite, and azurite gold hand-woven silk, and seeks to keep his Japanese artistic tradition alive. In so doing his art has deeply human qualities. This makes his art unique, so AI-generated art is no threat to his creative work. (2) People keep returning to human experience and human knowledge, which makes his artwork far superior to any AI-generated art. An original painting will always be more valuable than computerized art produced by algorithms because it offers an “immersive experience.” And (3) Fujimura also has Christian faith, something that machines and artificial intelligence will never have. One begins to hear an echo of von Hildebrand's second power when Fujimura says, “I always listen to my paintings, which tell me where the painting wants to go. So, in that sense, artists have a language to deal with the power and mystery of what is happening. Also, if you are a person of faith, then you know you are bringing in this invisible reality of faith. Faith is a substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things that are not seen (Hebrews 11:1–3).”

As Glaspey says, great art takes time. Lesser art (like AI-generated art) can be created quickly (and AI art almost immediately!), and one can “grasp everything it has to offer very quickly” which means its impact is at best minimal and brief—it does not stay with us for long in our thoughts and reflection, as one might expect from complex works of art created by a human person (Glaspey 2021, 34).

It becomes clear then, that AI-generated art has the potential to be aesthetically pleasing and illicit responses from our natural senses, including sensory stimuli. Further, it may evoke certain superficial emotions and experiences. These are embodied in the first power. If we are going to take von Hildebrand's study on aesthetics and beauty seriously and use it as a rubric for evaluating AI-generated art, then it seems that it is devoid of all the values of the second power, and

therefore, it is questionable whether it is genuine art at all.

6. Concluding Thoughts

This paper explored AI-generated art and provided a simple non-technical description of how it works. From there I discussed the German Catholic philosopher, Dietrich von Hildebrand and gave background to his theological-philosophical contributions. This led us to his work on beauty and aesthetics where I explored his concept of the second power which features ideas on how beauty reveals God, the objective quality of beauty and human experience, the relationship between human creativity and God, how beauty reflects the true nature of reality, and the transforming power of true beauty. In turn, this provided us with a theological apparatus to evaluate AI-generated art. Although von Hildebrand lived some 46 years ago, Crosby (Crosby 2006, 8) explains that,

Hildebrand acknowledged another aspiration that was felt by many people of the time. Many were oppressed by the mechanical and artificial rationality that dominates modern life; they were longing to get beyond this sterile rationality and to participate in forms of life that were more abundant and organic. But while he welcomed the emergence of this aspiration, he was quick to detect an opening for the anti-personalism of the age.

This is almost a prophetic voice for current AI-generated art. I argue, along with von Hildebrand that genuine and meaningful art ought to consist of beauty that is a manifestation of both the first and second powers. Other than well-written prompts from a human mind, AI-generated art has little to no human interaction or experience which means it is devoid of the second power and, therefore, lacks a real sense of transcendence, and any ability to reveal God or any transforming power.

How are we to respond to AI-generated art then? I don't mean to suggest that it is of no value. Ethical issues aside, it can create exceptional images, but that is all it is, AI-generated *images* or AI *imagery*. One can hardly call it genuine art. So, my recommendation is to treat it as such, make use of AI 'image' generators like Midjourney, Dall-E 2, NightCafé, and others, and experiment. But let us keep our artists in business and encourage them to create art that is even more deeply spiritual, beautiful, and transcendent so that we may never lose sight of the beauty of God for the sake of humanity and our world.

Footnotes

¹ DALL-E is "named after Pixar's Wall-e and Surrealist painter Salvador Dali," explains (Maerten and Soydaner 2023, 17).

² Translated by Fr. Brian McNeil and edited by John F. and John H. Crosby.

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