

The Aesthetic Theory of Frances Power Cobbe

1. Introduction

In this article I introduce readers to the aesthetic theory of Frances Power Cobbe (1822-1904), a very well-known writer on philosophical and religious subjects in the Victorian era. Highly patriarchal as British society then was, Cobbe nonetheless had a successful and prolific publishing career that spanned the 1850s to the 1890s. She authored numerous books and dozens of essays in the leading heavyweight periodicals. A champion of women's rights and animal welfare, and 'one of the best-known leaders of the Theistic and intuitional school' in ethics (Besant, 1882, p. 10), Cobbe was seen as one of the great intellectual women of the age, along with Harriet Martineau and George Eliot. Cobbe's interests encompassed moral theory; philosophy of mind, history, religion, and science; social and political issues; and aesthetics.¹

Cobbe's main writings on aesthetics are from the 1860s. She argued that there are female artistic geniuses in the ironically titled 1862 essay 'What Shall We Do With Our Old Maids?' (hereafter 'Old Maids') in *Fraser's Magazine*. She considered art and morality in 'The Morals of Literature' (hereafter 'Morals'), also in *Fraser's* in 1864. And she set out a systematic hierarchical classification of the arts, and an account of the principles for evaluating art-works, in the two-part 1865 essay 'The Hierarchy of Art' (hereafter 'Hierarchy'), once again in *Fraser's*. *Fraser's*, we should note, serialized Mill's *Utilitarianism* in 1861: the journal was the key site for philosophical discussion in 1860s

¹ On Cobbe's thought overall, see Hamilton (2006), Mitchell (2004), Peacock (2002), and Williamson (2005).

Britain (along with *Macmillan's Magazine*). Incorporated into Cobbe's 1865 book *Studies New and Old of Ethical and Social Subjects*, 'Morals' and 'Hierarchy' together totalled 100 pages – as one reviewer commented, the book should have been titled *Ethical, Social and Aesthetic Subjects* (Anonymous, 1865, p. 701). Cobbe later authored miscellaneous further aesthetics-related pieces (e.g., Cobbe, 1874a, 1874b, 1876, 1881), but 'Old Maids', 'Morals', and 'Hierarchy' are her central aesthetic writings and are my focus here.

This article provides the first modern-day account of Cobbe's aesthetic theory, which deserves recovery and discussion for several reasons. Nineteenth-century women philosophers are neglected, as are both nineteenth-century British philosophy and the history of women's contributions to philosophical aesthetics. Lying at the intersection of these three areas of neglect, nineteenth-century women's aesthetic theorizing in the British context is almost entirely unknown to philosophers today.² By examining Cobbe's work we can fill in one piece of the blank in our knowledge about women in nineteenth-century aesthetics. Diversifying aesthetics is not only a matter of making contemporary conversations more inclusive; it is also important to acknowledge women's presence (and that of other underrepresented groups) in the history of the field. As a woman with a comprehensive account of the arts who addressed aesthetics alongside ethics and gender, Cobbe is a strong candidate for membership in a more inclusive history of aesthetics.

I will take Cobbe's three main aesthetics essays in turn, reconstructing her main claims, which is necessary because these essays are not widely known today. I will quote Cobbe extensively, to give a flavour of her work and demonstrate its philosophical character. In Sec. 2 I look at 'Old Maids' and her account of female genius. In Sec. 3 I look at 'Morals',

² Born in Ireland, Cobbe moved to England in the late 1850s. Ireland was then incorporated into the United Kingdom, making Cobbe both British and Irish.

in which Cobbe espoused a version of aesthetic moralism. In Sec. 4 I explain Cobbe's system for ranking the arts in 'Hierarchy', where she distinguished between primary creative, secondary reproductive, and tertiary receptive art³ and then theorized the five arts of poetry, music, architecture, sculpture, and painting. In Sec. 5 I focus more critically on three issues. First, I point out some ambiguities in Cobbe's ranking of the arts and points at which her hierarchy breaks down. Second, I argue that in 'Hierarchy' Cobbe had moved away from aesthetic moralism and was forging a middle ground between the views of Anna Jameson – a key Victorian representative of aesthetic moralism⁴ – and the idea of *l'art pour l'art*, which Cobbe knew from such French exponents as Victor Cousin. Third, however, Cobbe's middle ground depended on a conception of nature which Darwin's work made unsustainable, as she later acknowledged. Nonetheless, as I hope to show, her aesthetic theory has many interesting and original features, and Cobbe deserves to be recognized as a significant historical woman aesthetician.

³ Cobbe did not distinguish the artistic from the aesthetic – rather, as I will explain, she conceived aesthetic experience as a form of art, tertiary art.

⁴ Aesthetic moralism is often associated with John Ruskin, but actually Ruskin (like Cobbe) navigated between moralism and aestheticism (Landow 1971; Hewison, 1986, ch. 3). Indeed, Ruskin's view that beauty is 'in all cases something Divine' is quite close to Cobbe's (Ruskin, [1843-60] 1902, vol. IV, p. 210). However, I have found no evidence that Cobbe was influenced by him; while, sadly, Ruskin said that he objected not to what Cobbe said but to the fact that she (as a woman) was saying it. He complained that she sounded like a tinkling saucepan (see Mitchell, 2004, pp. 239-40). On Jameson's work, which also stands in need of philosophical recovery, see Thomas (1967) and Johnston (1997); and, on Jameson's popularity in mid-nineteenth-century Britain, Thomas (1980, p. 20).

2. From Old Maids to Female Geniuses

In 'Old Maids' Cobbe rejected the Victorian ideology of 'separate spheres', on which a woman's place is in the home. Cobbe argued that women should be allowed to participate in all human activities – for women's own sake, the benefits to the community, and so ultimately the benefits to family life itself. Every human activity, she continued, is guided by one of three ultimate values: the true, the good, and the beautiful.⁵ Science and philosophy, for instance, aim at truth; philanthropy at the good; art-making at the beautiful.

Cobbe was confronting opponents who thought that women could never make genuinely great art. The period had inherited the Romantic view that making great art requires creative originality, of which only men are capable – men can produce but women can only reproduce.⁶ Or, as Cobbe put it, many people doubted 'the possibility of women possessing any creative artistic power' (1862, p. 602).

She admitted that until recently women had been fooled into underrating their own abilities, confining themselves to making weak, ethereal 'sweet verses and soft pictures'. But this was changing, above all with the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the painting of Rosa Bonheur, and the sculpture of Harriet Hosmer. These three were creating works as powerful as any made by men.

Now, women who possess any real genius, apply it to the creation of what they (and not society for them) really admire. A woman naturally admires power, force,

⁵ This tripartite division shows Kant's influence. Cobbe presented her first book, *An Essay on Intuitive Morals* (1855), as a popularization of Kant, though it was much more than that.

⁶ On this gendered dichotomy in Romantic aesthetics, see Battersby (1989).

grandeur. It is these qualities, then, which we shall see more and more appearing as the spontaneous genius of woman asserts itself. (p. 605)

Cobbe focused on strength and power because they were a sticking point for those for whom 'all the training in the world will never make the female part of the human family *equal* in bodily or intellectual power – by power, I mean downright and absolute strength – to the male part' (Neal, 1824, p. 389). Cobbe replied that women could poetize with complete command of the written word, and could paint boldly, vividly, and directly. But sculpture remained a hard case because it seemed to require the literal physical strength to shape large masses of material. 'Then for sculpture. Will women's genius ever triumph here? ... We look to this point as the touchstone of the whole question' (Cobbe, 1862, p. 603).

As proof of women's sculptural genius Cobbe forwarded Hosmer's 1859 statue *Zenobia*. 'Zenobia is a definite proof that a woman can make a statue of the very highest order. ... Here is what we wanted. A woman ... can be a sculptor, and a great one' (pp. 604-5).⁷ But how? Because, Cobbe explains, the core part of sculpting is creating an initial small-scale model (she was generalizing from Hosmer's creative practice – she and Hosmer were friends).⁸ Making a small-scale model does not require physical strength. The sculptor may then convert their model into large-scale form or delegate this conversion to assistants; it does not matter, for this aspect of the work is mere implementation.

⁷ Cobbe was incensed when critics claimed that Hosmer could not possibly have created the statue; Cobbe was determined to refute them (Cobbe, 1894, vol. 2, pp. 28-9). On Cobbe and Hosmer, see also Cherry (2000, ch. 4), Culkin (2019), and Fraser (2017).

⁸ For Hosmer's account of her practice, see Hosmer (1864). No doubt Cobbe was also informed by the practice of the sculptor Mary Lloyd, with whom Cobbe lived for thirty years.

So Cobbe was adamant: women can be *bona fide* artistic geniuses. But would women who embraced artistic power and strength be losing their femininity? No, replied Cobbe; this mistakenly equates femininity with the artificial, cramped, clipped, doll-like traits of women who are confined to domestic life. In fact, if women could realize and develop all their powers, they would necessarily express their femaleness within them – as we see from Hosmer, Bonheur, and Barrett Browning. ‘Our affair is to give nature its fullest, healthiest play and richest culture, and then the result will be ... a true woman: a being, not artificially different from a man, but radically and essentially, because *naturally* different’ (Cobbe, 1863, pp. 226-7).

Another notable move that Cobbe made in ‘Old Maids’ was to identify sculpture as the supreme art. Often in nineteenth-century taxonomies of the arts, sculpture was ranked fairly low. For instance, Hegel placed it beneath music, painting, and poetry on the grounds that sculpture is more material.⁹ Cobbe, though, argues that because the true work of sculpting consists in conceiving a design and realizing it in nucleus, sculpture is the art that most closely recapitulates God’s creation of the world. The sculptor, like God, conceives a plan then uses material to realize that plan, transfiguring the material and infusing it with spirit. For this reason, ‘Sculpture is the noblest of the arts’ (Cobbe, 1862, p. 604).

Cobbe’s exaltation of sculpture was partly strategic. If sculpture is the noblest art, and if women like Hosmer are excelling here, then women can reach the summits of artistic achievement. But Cobbe also believed that sculpture was ‘the *Ars Divinior*. A deep and

⁹ To be fair, Hegel regarded classical Greek sculpture as the most perfect realisation of beauty as the Idea-made-sensible, but this was only because the Greeks had a deficient conception of the Idea *as* something material, such that it could be perfectly embodied in material shape (Hegel, 1970, vol. 2, 701-3).

strange analogy exists between it and the highest we know of the Supreme Artist's works' (p. 604). In a move typical of Romantic aesthetics, for Cobbe the great artist recapitulates God's creation of nature. Atypically, though, Cobbe maintains that women can recapitulate God's creative work just as much as men.

The idea that God's creation of nature is re-enacted in the artist's creativity would return, with differences, in Cobbe's 1865 art hierarchy. But before that, in 1864, she addressed art and morality.

3. 'The Morals of Literature'

Cobbe wrote this essay in the wake of the 1857 Obscene Publications Act, which was a response to the exponential growth of print culture in Victorian Britain (see Eliot, n.d.; Taunton, 2014). Levels of literacy were rising too, fuelling anxieties about literature and other printed materials undermining public morals. Accordingly Cobbe set out some criteria for deciding which kinds of writing were morally objectionable and which were not.

Cobbe begins with biography. The biographer's dilemma is how to be 'at once true, kind, and reverent of inner sanctities' (1865, p. 265). Cobbe proposes the guiding principle that the biographer should give 'the just expression of their impression': telling us as much as we need to apprehend the overall meaning of the individual's life as the biographer sees it, but not specifying all the intimate personal details from which their impression is derived.

This leads Cobbe to formulate a broader principle: 'All literature should be guided by truth – a certain kind of artistic and moral truth even in fiction' (p. 267). The guiding truth for the biographer is their impression; likewise, the fiction author gives us not a mere *récit* of one event after another but a narrative conveying an *overall* impression of human life. Having thereby moved on to fiction, Cobbe states that the fiction author should neither depict

identifiable real-life individuals nor give a malign portrayal of human beings generally. The artist should not paint 'pictures of life which would make us all a set of crawling worms unfit ... to be made subjects of a work of art'.

Some subjects, then, are unfit for art, however skilfully executed. With this Cobbe has moved to talk more generally about art and not only fiction. She invokes Shelley's distinction between secondary utility (physical needs) and primary utility (spiritual welfare) (Shelley, [1821] 1840). 'In like manner in art ... there are two utilities, the lower utility of giving expression to the thought, and the higher utility which lies in the thought itself' (Cobbe, 1865, p. 276). Thus art-works consist of (a) thought and (b) expression; both can be good, bad, or indifferent (p. 277). (1) The best art contains good thought well expressed; (2) the next best art contains good thought indifferently or poorly expressed; (3) the worst art contains bad thought well expressed. The popular view mistakenly inverts (2) and (3): 'In Literature we find enormous value attached to the sharp delineation of meanness, or the bold portraiture of vice' (perhaps Cobbe had Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* in mind). This is a misuse of the artist's power: 'Great art, applied to degrade and libel humanity, is not Divine, but devilish' (p. 278).

'Is it not then competent to art to seize on every subject, every phase of existence, and bring it out into the light under its magic glasses?' 'No', we answer fearlessly, it is *not* competent to art to choose subjects base or gross. The office of art is to express thought; but it must be good and noble thought, or the art is prostituted. (p. 279)

For Cobbe, then, art should: (1) only depict morally worthy subjects and show human beings in a positive and virtuous light; (2) only express morally edifying thoughts that further the moral welfare (higher utility) of the artist and recipient; (3) always aim to express moral truth. Further, (4) an art-work that expresses a morally good thought imperfectly is superior to one that expresses a morally bad thought well.

Cobbe appears to be an aesthetic moralist, for whom art should serve moral purposes and be assessed primarily by moral criteria, where these take priority over aesthetic ones, i.e., those concerning the quality of the expression. At the time aesthetic moralism was particularly associated with another Anglo-Irish author, Anna Jameson. Cobbe had read Jameson's 1854 *Commonplace Book*, a collection of loosely interlinked fragments in early German Romantic style (Jameson had spent time in Germany in the 1830s). Within the half of Jameson's book that concerns aesthetics, she explores: 'The morals of art, which ... we must never lose sight of. Art is not only for pleasure and profit, but for good and for evil' (Jameson, [1854] 1855, p. 282). Jameson praises Goethe for recognizing that art can awaken our moral sentiments, in particular when he protests about the morally damaging effects on the young Marie Antoinette of having tapestries of Jason and Medea draped in her rooms (p. 283). But Goethe mistakenly pulls back and he 'by some strange inconsistency places art and artists out of the sphere of morals. He is wrong. ... The idea that what we call *taste* in art has something quite distinctive from conscience' is a pervasive and pernicious error, for Jameson (p. 284). So although Jameson was heavily influenced by Goethe and the German Romantics, she rejected their aestheticism. She did not reduce art's value to moral value; but she saw moral value as a sufficiently big component of art's value that if the moral content was deficient then the art was bound to be bad.

Did Cobbe agree? 'Morals' might suggest so, but there are contra-indications. First, in 'Old Maids' Cobbe demarcated the true, good, and beautiful as three *distinct* values and fields of activity. Second, in 'Morals', having just said that art should only express good and noble thoughts, she qualifies:

Of course, so long as nature is in question – inanimate nature, or human nature which is really nature at all, – there can be nothing unfit or beneath art. It is the distortion of

the natural into the artificial which makes a thing or person an unfit subject for art.

(1865, p. 279)

This claim that all of nature and human nature is fit subject-matter for art seems to contradict Cobbe's previous statements. For *prima facie* human nature includes many negative feelings, and selfish, cruel, and evil dispositions, as one of Cobbe's critical reviewers observed (Anonymous, 1865, p. 725). According to this reviewer, the artist is only expressing one side of their human nature in giving vent to negative feelings in their work; and in portraying characters who treat one another cruelly, selfishly, etc., the artist is merely showing human nature under some of its (less endearing) aspects. Yet Cobbe takes it that cruel, mean, and selfish feelings and dispositions, whether of artist or fictional characters, are *not* natural. If the artist portrays characters in this negative light they are distorting human nature; if they vent scorn, despair, or cynicism they are letting their own nature become artificially distorted and disfigured.

This seems an optimistic view of nature, but Cobbe went on to justify it in 'Hierarchy' by treating nature as God's embodiment and manifestation. This simultaneously enabled her to attempt to reconcile her moralist and anti-moralist inclinations. Let's proceed, then, to 'Hierarchy', her most developed statement on aesthetics.

4. 'The Hierarchy of Art'

Cobbe identifies three orders of art: primary creative art, secondary reproductive art, and tertiary receptive art. She deals with the general features of each order in turn, before moving on to the art-forms of poetry, music, architecture, sculpture and painting.¹⁰

i. *Primary art*. 'Primary art is creative, and is directly derived from God's revelation of the Beautiful through his works. We call the works of God, ... Nature. We call man's copy of them at first hand, Art. The man has created Art out of what before was Nature' (Cobbe, 1865, p. 289). At first the artist apprehends God's creativity in beautiful nature, then the artist re-expresses in artistic form the beauty so apprehended. But what makes nature beautiful? Cobbe does *not* say that nature is beautiful when it has a harmonious or pleasing or unified form; indeed she is frustratingly brief on what beauty consists in, only stressing that God reveals it to us in nature. 'God – the source of all goodness, truth, and beauty – reveals Goodness to the conscience, Truth to the intellect, and Beauty to the aesthetic nature of his creatures' (p. 295). However, she appears to identify God's revelation of beauty in nature with his creation of nature, as when she says that human artistic creation both recapitulates God's creation *and* derives from his prior revelation of beauty in nature (p. 289). This

¹⁰ We may wonder whether Cobbe was influenced by the taxonomies of the arts of Hegel, Schelling, or Schopenhauer. Ascertaining Cobbe's influences is difficult because it was not then standard to spell out all one's sources and references. She had read some Hegel and Schelling but preferred Kant's 'true transcendentalism' to their 'mere dialectic subtilities' (1855, p. 48). She later discussed Schopenhauer (Cobbe, 1877) but apropos of the 'pessimism controversy' (Beiser, 2016), not aesthetics. However, a bigger influence on Cobbe than any of these was Coleridge (esp. [1817] 1907), whose influence on nineteenth-century British philosophy was immense (see Cheyne 2020). Thus Cobbe's Germanic influence was probably more indirect than direct.

suggests that nature reveals beauty to us (or is beautiful) just because it embodies and expresses God's creativity. Thus Cobbe speaks of the 'spirit of God revealed in the beauty of Nature' (p. 295) – his creative spirit in particular, for nature is his work and creation. In sum, for Cobbe, nature is beautiful insofar as it is manifestly created by God and we see his hand at work in it.

Cobbe's account of art is therefore religious through and through.¹¹ 'All true Art is *religious* art; it is religious in proportion as it ... more perfectly reproduces the beauty revealed by God through Nature' (p. 350). Art is not religious only when it depicts 'subjects suggested by the historical forms of religion', for instance when paintings illustrate scenes from the New Testament. Rather, art is religious whenever it successfully re-creates the divine beauty of nature. Art's aim is to embody 'that Beauty which is alone divine. If it succeed in this aim it is religious in a higher sense than if it presented to us the loftiest subjects in the range of theology'.

Here Cobbe was opposing Jameson, who in *Sacred and Legendary Art* examined the religious narratives and doctrines depicted in many historical art-works and maintained that when art-works successfully illustrate religious content the art-works become religious and sacred themselves (as with, say, Michelangelo's *Pietà*) (Jameson, [1848-64] 1892, vol. 1, pp. 1-10). In contrast, Cobbe thinks that artists should not aim to impart religious content didactically, for then they are not pursuing art's own intrinsic purpose, the expression of beauty. By being beautiful, art *is* religious anyway, but in the 'higher sense' – intrinsically rather than extrinsically religious. Thus, art is most genuinely religious when it is made to be beautiful, free from any externally imposed religious content.

¹¹ This should not deter readers: as Peter Adamson says, we cannot engage deeply with past philosophy unless we 'take the religion seriously' (2016).

From her conception of the relations among God, nature, beauty, and art, Cobbe derives her standards for evaluating art-works, beginning with the primary art-works: 'their value, if good, is determined, first, by the beauty of the thing they express, second, by the perfection of the expression' (Cobbe, 1865, p. 293). The most perfect art expresses beautiful content well; the next best art has beautiful content but fails to translate it into expression; the next best art again has unbeautiful content expressed well; and an art-work that is deficient in both content and expression loses its 'pretensions to the title' of art altogether. An art-work also falls short if it takes another art-work as its subject or inspiration, rather than natural beauty; in that case the art-work falls into the lower order of secondary reproductive art.

The idea of giving artistic expression to beautiful nature is quite open-ended, admitting of several interpretations. For one thing, as in 'Morals', Cobbe takes nature to include human nature, so that her definitions leave a large swathe of human subjects available to artists: all those that flow out of human nature, which is part of nature, and so part of God's creation. So a novel can deal entirely with inter-human relations yet still in Cobbe's terms express beautiful nature. Another question-mark surrounds artistic creativity. Is her view that in making primary art we re-enact God's creation of nature, so that art-works are beautiful just when we exercise genuine creative originality? Sometimes Cobbe sounds like this (as she did in 'Old Maids'), for instance when she defines art-making as *poesis*, creative making. But on the whole her view is different. We take the impression of natural beauty that we have received from God and give it artistic expression in a new form (recalling her earlier phrase the 'just expression of our impression'). We create the form of art-works, the ways that they express their content, but we do not create that content *ex nihilo*; rather, we apprehend the content which God has created and then reproduce it in art. Cobbe approvingly quotes Barrett Browning: 'God Himself is the best Poet, and the Real is His song' (Barrett Browning, [1844] 1901, vol. 3, p. 157, lines 248-9). As Cobbe glosses this idea, in any true

poetry (in the wide sense of *poiesis*), the ultimate artist is always God, whose creation of beautiful nature inspires the artist: 'In so far as the artist has done that which makes him a creator, i.e. ... *received* God's revelation of the beautiful through Nature, and has *faithfully* transferred it to Art, in so far he is a poet' (Cobbe, 1865, p. 295; my emphases).

A comparison with Hegel can help to clarify Cobbe's position. For Hegel, art-works are beautiful when their form expresses their content so completely that the content 'shines' through the form (Hegel, 1970, vol. 1, pp. 70-1). The content must be appropriate (it must concern the Idea); but when an art-work achieves beauty, this is because its form fits this content. The fit is what yields beauty. For Cobbe, conversely, art-works are beautiful when they successfully express a content that is *already* beautiful because it conveys the artist's already-received impression of beautiful (i.e., divine) nature. Art's content should be beautiful, then the form will be beautiful when it successfully embodies that content, so that the latter's beauty flows down into the form. Beauty comes not from form-content fit as such but from form expressing content that is antecedently beautiful.

ii. *Secondary art*. Reproductive art-works are inspired not directly by God in nature but by primary art-works, which the secondary artist sets out to recreate or translate in some form. Such art, however good, 'must remain in a different order from primary Art' (Cobbe, 1865, p. 291). A secondary work is judged (1) by the excellence of the primary art-work that it reproduces and (2) by how successfully it re-creates its source anew to yield an art-work that is (3) complete in its own right, 'judged independently of the original' (p. 292). For example, a translation is a reproduction not a production; yet the translator must reproduce the spirit of the original, not its letter, and the result must be a complete art-work that stands on its two feet. A 'true artistic translation' casts the thought of the original 'afresh in a new mould' (p. 304). If the original is beautiful, and the secondary art-work genuinely recreates it, then the beauty of the original will transfer to the reproduction.

iii. *Tertiary art*. This peculiar category of Cobbe's does not encompass art-works in the usual sense at all; rather, tertiary art is the *reception* of either beautiful nature or primary or secondary art-works. Cobbe does not use the phrase 'aesthetic experience' but evidently this is what she is referring to under the heading of 'tertiary art'. Thus she effectively treats aesthetic experience as an integral part of the order of art, although she ranks it (as tertiary art) beneath primary and secondary art, because it is even less creative than secondary art. Within the tertiary order, art-works (i.e., aesthetic experiences) are ranked by (1) the beauty of the art-work or part of nature that the subject is receiving, and (2) the level of the subject's comprehension and appreciation of that beauty. Cobbe insists that she does not mean mere technical comprehension, e.g. the ability to identify a column as Doric or Corinthian. What is crucial is the sensitivity with which the subject feels the sentiments animating the art-work or registers the qualities of some region of beautiful nature.

Having distinguished the three orders of art Cobbe turns to the main art-forms. She starts out with the highest-ranked form, poetry, intending to proceed through the forms in descending order of merit. But ultimately, we will see, the relative merits of architecture, sculpture, and painting are unclear. We should also note that Cobbe does not rank the forms on the grounds that some are more creative and others more reproductive. Instead she distinguishes more creative and more reproductive variants within each art-form. For example, within music, composition is creative whereas performance is reproductive. (There are also tertiary variants for each art-form, i.e., their modes of reception, which I shall omit here.)

a. *Poetry*. Cobbe's first art is poetry 'expressed through the medium of language' (p. 299). This is distinct from poetry in the broader sense of *poesis*, which coincides with primary art, whereas poetry in language is the first particular art-form. Poetry in language includes prose, for what defines poetry (the particular art) is use of the linguistic medium,

whether or not it is used to make verse. Awkward as these definitions might sound now, in Cobbe's time they were standard.

Poetry is Cobbe's highest-ranked art because its material – language – is delicate, capable of infinitely varied use, covering indefinitely many subjects ('coterminous only with the necessary bounds of all human things'; p. 298), and half immaterial (p. 296). She continues, 'if poetry be the greatest of the original arts, ... its various reproductions ... hold similar rank among the secondary arts' (p. 298). These secondary poetic arts are drama, dancing and operatic singing, recitation, and translation. The dramatic actor, Cobbe says, makes the written word more fully real; the actor does not merely copy the poet's words but gives them new embodied and enacted significance, creating a new whole. Similarly with dancing and, at their best, with singing, recitation, and translation.

b. *Music*. Here the medium – musical tones and their combinations – is again semi-immaterial: 'tenuous and ethereal ... transitory and evanescent, dying away with the undulations of air which are its media' (p. 314). Music is thus intrinsically transient, while unlike words its meaning is always uncertain and inconclusive; on both counts, tones are an inferior medium to words. Yet their characteristics also perfectly suit them to express human feelings in their indefinite and volatile flow – 'joy, pain, love or fury' (p. 313). So whereas poetry can take any subject-matter, music's subject-matter is limited to the play of human emotions.

But if music expresses *human* emotions, how does this fit with Cobbe's claim that art expresses the beauty, i.e. divinity, of *nature*? Cobbe explains that human emotions are part of human nature and human nature is part of nature, all of which God has created, so that our emotions, too, are beautiful because they embody God's creativity. Thus:

How does the fact that music is only the expression of a human ... feeling ...

correspond with the assertion with which we began, namely, that all true primary art is

derived directly from 'God's revelation of the Beautiful through His works?' It corresponds perfectly, inasmuch as the thoughts and feelings of man, which form the proper themes of music, are all beautiful, divine revelations. (p. 314)

Primary musical art is composition; secondary musical art is performance. But here another deficiency of music compared to poetry emerges: the musical art-work cannot fully exist at all without being performed. While it remains only a score, the work is really only half-complete. But by the same token performance is not merely reproductive but partially constitutes the work. Thus, music does not properly observe the hierarchy of primary and secondary art.

c. *Architecture*. Architecture differs from the other four arts, which follow the rule of *l'art pour l'art*, that is, they pursue the beautiful 'as an end in itself, the real and only end of art' (p. 318). Architecture, though, usually has a utilitarian purpose. When the useful purposes of architectural works predominate over their aesthetic aspects, as with ordinary dwellings and buildings, such works are not pure art. Conversely if the works have a purpose that leaves room for beauty to come first and for utility to be made secondary, then these works can be pure art. Generally this applies to religious buildings and monuments, for their purpose is to enable worship and reverence, and in pursuit of this purpose practical utility (e.g., having pews appropriately shaped for humans to sit and stand comfortably) can properly be made secondary to the purely artistic purpose of expressing feelings of reverence, awe, worshipfulness, solemnity, etc. Interestingly, then, for Cobbe architecture is like music in that architecture's proper subject-matter (if it is pure art) is human feelings. However, compared with music, architecture can express only a limited range of feelings:

Architecture is similarly [to music] derived from the Beautiful in *human nature only* ...

It represents a certain number of the sentiments natural to man, which are beautiful in

themselves, ... Religious Awe, Solemnity, Praise, ... Joy, Triumph, Mourning ...
nearly exhaust the list of the sentiments reproducible by architecture. (p. 333)

Like musical works, architectural works are beautiful insofar as they express human feelings that are beautiful because they are part of human nature, which in turn is beautiful because – like the rest of nature – it is God's creation. Architectural works should be ranked by (1) the beauty of the feelings they express, (2) how well they have embodied these feelings, and (3) how well they employ proportion, balance, and gravity to accomplish this embodiment. As for secondary architectural works, Cobbe admits that the primary/secondary line is hard to draw with architecture, because all architectural works are modelled on one another 'in unbroken series' (p. 335). However, secondary architectural works are inspired *primarily* by other architectural works rather than directly by the feelings to be expressed, as with French buildings that emulate ancient Roman ones.

d. *Sculpture*. Whereas music and architecture express interior human feelings, sculpture expresses the beautiful outward human form (p. 338). The sculpted body conveys human passions to a degree, as manifested in bodily features – e.g., a flared nostril conveying anger. But compared to architecture the expression of direct feeling is far more limited, because to be beautiful the sculpted body must be harmonious and serene. This leaves room only for 'the very calmest and most chastened indication' of emotion (p. 340).

Cobbe reiterates that the true sculptural work is the small-scale model. Yet the sculptures we view in galleries are the full-scale versions that, strictly, are reproductions of the original models. With sculpture, then, the primary work is the model, the secondary work its scaled-up version. What we normally regard as the sculptural art-work is actually the secondary work. The sculptor may produce the latter him- or herself or delegate its production to assistants. But even in the former case the artist remains in the odd position of being 'the reproducer and copyist of his own work' (p. 341).

e. *Painting*. Painting embodies natural beauty in shape and color. Its scope is far wider than architecture, music or sculpture, because its subject-matter encompasses everything in nature, not only human inner or outer nature but 'every conceivable thing which man may either see or imagine he sees, and of which Beauty may be predicated' (p. 347). Beauty is revealed in the 'lovely shapes, and rich and varied hues of nature' (p. 349); the artist apprehends this then recreates it in artistic form. With painting's secondary forms – engraving, lithography, and copying – the primary/secondary divide is much clearer than with music, architecture, or sculpture. For engravings, copies, etc., are both derivative of and separate from primary works of painting, which can exist perfectly well without ever being reproduced at all.

5. Critical Issues

I. *Ambiguities in Cobbe's hierarchy*. There are several such ambiguities. First, the order in which she treats the various art-forms presumably reflects their relative ranking. Yet after identifying poetry as the best and music as the second-best art, she does not comment on the comparative merits of architecture, sculpture, and painting. This leaves their respective rankings uncertain.

Second, Cobbe states that primary and secondary art-works are of different orders, and that no secondary work can ever surpass a primary work (p. 291). Yet the detail of her account does not wholly agree. She extols the secondary poetic arts because they share many of the same features that elevate the primary poetic arts: a universal range of subject-matters; diversity and delicacy of expressive medium (i.e., the acting, reading, singing or dancing body) (p. 298). By Cobbe's criteria these secondary arts must, it seems, be superior not only to the non-poetic secondary arts but also to the non-poetic primary ones.

Third, in any case, the primary/secondary division often breaks down. In different ways, Cobbe admits, works of poetry, music, and sculpture cannot come to full realization and existence without being reproduced, and architectural works feed off one another in unbroken series. The divide only straightforwardly applies to painting – but this seems to be Cobbe's lowest-ranked art.

Fourth, not only do most primary arts depend on the secondary ones, primary art overall depends on tertiary art. For 'receptive Art is not limited to the appreciation of human works but extends much further, ... to the appreciation of the beauty from which they are one and all derived, found in Nature itself' (p. 354). This appreciation of nature's beauty is the beginning of all art, Cobbe says, for all primary art reproduces the artist's impression of natural beauty. Indeed this follows from Cobbe's religious conception of art. Because for her God is always the true artist in the end, we must receive beauty from God before we can recreate it in art. Tertiary art (reception of beauty in aesthetic experience) is thus the precondition of primary art. Primary, secondary, and tertiary art are not so much a linear hierarchy but a cycle of interdependent forms.

II. *Aesthetic moralism revisited*. In 'Hierarchy' Cobbe endorses the idea of *l'art pour l'art*, which at first sight seems a pronounced change from 'Morals'. She knew of *l'art pour l'art* from the French scene where this slogan was by then widespread (Murphy, 2008; Wilcox, 1953). In particular Cobbe knew it from Cousin (1853), whose work influenced her division of values into the true, good, and beautiful.

In Cobbe's rendition, pure art is made for its own sake, specifically to express beauty, not to serve utilitarian purposes or impart moral precepts (or religious doctrines) didactically.

The Good, indeed, and the True are so inseparably linked with the Beautiful that every work really attaining the Beautiful must partake of Truth and Goodness. But it is not for the sake of instilling Truth or preaching Goodness that the Beautiful should be

produced. When any artist attempts to do so, and makes a poem or picture whose main purpose is to ... enforce moral lessons, the result is an inferior and imperfect work of art. (Cobbe, 1865, p. 321)

Thus the artist should not enforce morality; anyway they do not need to, for beauty already contains goodness, because God is the original source of beauty. Nature, we've seen, is beautiful insofar as it reveals God's creativity. But God creates nature in accordance with his goodness and wisdom – this is why truth, goodness, and beauty converge. To the extent that nature is genuinely beautiful, then, it is imbued with and conveys God's goodness. In turn, art-works that are genuinely beautiful re-present or re-embody some part of beautiful nature which the artist has apprehended, meaning that goodness is built into the content of these arts and their forms in turn. Therefore, Cobbe says, to 'the Greeks ... who of all men best knew what beauty was, the "beautiful" in form and the "noble" in action and feeling were one and the same' (p. 349).

However, we might object, surely not everything in nature or human nature is good. For example, regarding music, Cobbe admits that we have base, spiteful, and mean feelings, but she denies that these are appropriate musical subject-matter:

Music cannot deal with ignoble, mean, or ugly thoughts and sentiments, with petty cares, or base, rancorous or envious feelings. ... Music paints the flowers in these gardens ... But the weeds ... she will not paint. They are no subject for her art. (pp. 314-5)

But why shouldn't ignoble and mean feelings be given musical expression, if these feelings are natural? And if they are natural and yet ignoble, how does that square with God's beneficent creation of nature? Cobbe does not directly address these questions in 'Hierarchy' but her other writings supply her twofold answer. First, human evil is not directly of God but arises from our misuse of the freedom God has given us. This fault lies with us, not God

(Cobbe, 1855, pp. vi-vii). Human evil is therefore not part of nature, the realm that God has directly created. Consequently, human evil is neither beautiful nor fit subject-matter for art. Second, natural evils like earthquakes and diseases are not directly of God either – Cobbe quotes the Old Testament: ‘After the wind there was an earthquake, but the lord was not in the earthquake’ (1 Kings 19: 11-13). Natural evils are instead by-products of the operation of natural laws and forces that are generally benign and life-sustaining (Cobbe, 1888, p. 74). So such evils are again not directly created by God, therefore not beautiful, therefore not appropriate for art.

In essence, Cobbe explains how art can be made for its own sake without this threatening morality by making goodness an intrinsic part of beauty in the first place. We can have what the moralist wants – edifying, noble art-works – without having to subordinate artistic goals to moral ones and produce didactic art. Just as art need not illustrate overtly religious subjects to be religious (*pace* Jameson), it need not illustrate overtly moral doctrines to embody goodness.

III. *Nature*. Cobbe's middle ground between moralism and aestheticism relied on a conception of nature which Darwin's theory of evolution was exploding even as she wrote. She subsequently engaged with Darwinism in depth (Cobbe, 1871). As she later said, if life evolves through struggle and conflict in which many individuals and species are eliminated, then nature cannot readily be seen as God's beneficent creation after all. If one views life as evolving through natural selection *and* being created by God, then:

The Supreme Power who had seemed to stand on high directing each shaft of light with the godlike ease and certainty of ... Apollo ..., appears now rather as an Engineer discharging a huge catapult or *mitrailleuse*, whereof one bullet in fifty strikes the mark and the rest fall to the ground. (Cobbe, 1888, p. 75)

On the evolutionary view nature is a battleground, not a garden. If God is expressed in nature so understood, then he is at worst demonic, at best a warrior-god like Odin (p. 72). We can only conclude, Cobbe now says, that God is not in nature at all. His domain is spirit and interiority. Conversely, nature is pervaded by cruelty and evil. To relate to God we must transcend nature, mentally and practically; nature is not to be followed (1889, p. 66).

But if nature is not divine, then by Cobbe's standards it is not beautiful and is not something for artists to recreate. In essence, the ways of religion and nature parted, taking away the space in which Cobbe's aesthetic theory had existed. This is presumably why she abandoned the theory, passing over it dismissively in her autobiography (Cobbe, 1896, vol. 2, pp. 59-60). She remained interested in aesthetics,¹² but attempted no further comprehensive theorizations.

Although Cobbe's middle ground between moralism and autonomism could not hold, her aesthetic theory remains interesting in several ways. It shows us a nineteenth-century woman systematically ranking the arts in the manner that we usually (mis)attribute exclusively to the period's big male figures like Hegel and Schopenhauer. Cobbe puts forward a distinctive set of claims: there are female geniuses, whose art is more female the greater their genius; nature is beautiful because it reveals God's creativity, and art is beautiful when it re-expresses the divine beauty of nature, which includes human nature and human emotions; insofar as it is beautiful all art is intrinsically religious, and intrinsically good; there is a division between primary creative, secondary reproductive, and tertiary receptive art; in the end this hierarchy is a cycle, because the aesthetic experience of God in nature, conceived as 'tertiary art', is the starting-point for all primary art. Cobbe's theory has problems: it relies

¹² For instance she opposed the aestheticist movement of the 1880s; see her exchanges with her younger friend Vernon Lee, who briefly supported aestheticism (Lee, 2017).

on a pre-Darwinian view of nature, and her ranking of the art-forms breaks down on several counts. Cobbe wove these claims into an overarching theory which had problems, but that hardly sets it apart from many other historical aesthetic theories that are discussed much more than Cobbe's. Her theory deserves a place on our map of the history of aesthetics.¹³

¹³ I thank the referees for their thoughtful and constructive comments.

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