

To Push is to Pull

Lining the walls of the Sistine Chapel are frescoes painted by Michelangelo. One of the central scenes, *The Creation of Adam*, depicts the mythological moment when God “created” Adam. The picture demonstrates an eager exchange of ideas and information. A reciprocity only as *alive* as the viewers beholding the image. The picture’s circular dynamic exemplifies an idea proposed by John Berger in *Ways of Seeing*. Likewise, his idea exemplifies the cyclical nature of the image. Berger proclaimed, “The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe.” His statement addresses the implications of seeing— what it means to interact with the world via sensory input. The fresco under investigation magnifies this statement on seeing through the specific details of the image, symbolic parallels, and the Judeo-Christian context in which the painting resides.

The depiction’s details confront the metaphysical nature of the divine and its relationship to believers. The work is titled *The Creation of Adam*, yet Adam is already present. His languid body lays out on the edge of a cliff, his lifeless arm passively rests on his knee leaving his hand to dangle. Antithetically, God is employing a coordinated effort to reach out to Adam. Stripped of its context, the image portrays the highest ideal conceptualized actively attempting to *create* man. God is imbuing Adam with the potential to actualize His idealized image. That fundamental concept is the synopsis of Christian belief: follow God to be *Christlike*. The clear tension between the two figures’ postures speaks to the actual function of divinity. The image intimates at the utility of God by depicting a conceptualized ideal (God) conscientiously sparking life into Adam— a conceptualized ideal driving people towards the highest good. Berger elaborates, “The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe.” To see is to understand, to make sense of. It is the “understanding” of divinity that pushes individuals towards idealism which in turn fortifies their understanding of divinity. To contextualize this idea, think of the setting: the painting is situated in a church, a repository for individuals who are God fearing. If one subscribed to the Catholic creed, this image would reinforce their existing understanding and valuation of God. However, this exchange is

cyclical; the prior knowledge strengthens the effect of the picture and the picture strengthens the understanding or “knowledge” of God.

Further explored, the image contains more subtle symbolism, specifically the vehicle God and his cherubs float on. Michelangelo, a literal renaissance man, was disciplined in all fields of natural philosophy including anatomy. The parallel between the red curtain surrounding God and the human brain is uncanny. My superficial analysis concluded this was a statement on religion’s obvious roots in human imagination. Further evaluated, the inclusion of this detail speaks to the function of God (the drive to strive for the highest good) and its intrinsic relationship to the human psyche. His portrayal within a brain legitimizes the effects of religious belief. Berger’s quote, “The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe,” addresses the psychological phenomenon of confirmation bias. We evolved to experience the world through a lens of intuitions, facets of experience that can be characterized as instinctive understanding. On one level, we intuitively know that when we see a wall we can not go through it. But on another, we intuitively know that when we see a wall, we are looking at a wall. By *intuition* I mean the phenomenological experience of understanding what our sense data is telling us; confirmation bias is an inevitable byproduct of our relationship with intuitions. Optical illusions demonstrate this perfectly, images can deceive our senses and portray familiar macro patterns (like a face) unrelated to the actual image. And once we see these patternistic images we can’t unsee them, our brain forces us to see it in this new way; our brain forces us to understand based off of what we know. Confirmation bias is just that— we become fine tuned to making sense out of the unknown from the information we already “know.” Moreover, if one psychologically believes in the divinity of God, then they will have no problem seeing evidence of His existence in regal scenery or low-probability events. Michelangelo’s decision to depict divinity within a brain was a testament to the genuine effect religion has on man *and* to the cognitive process responsible. These ideas are in direct accordance with Berger’s comment on seeing. To interpret sensory input, to see, can not be divorced from confirmation bias. Even babies are born with a priori instincts governing their reactions to new stimuli.

The notion of divinity is an advent of culture. The relevance of this fact is contingent on the social utility of God. Humans collectively anthropomorphize ideals and place them in a symbolic

hierarchy of competence. This, therefore, results in some gods being superior to others. In the Christian case, all ideals are funneled through one point creating the idealized, platonic God Michelangelo addresses (omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, etc.). Berger's comment on seeing was not limited to visual input, to see is to intuitively make sense of the world around you. The idea of "God" is an understanding, a way of seeing; one that perpetually reinforces his existence (in belief) which continues to reinforce the ideals He stands for. Again, when one goes to church, their religion-rooted values are reinforced, and the values themselves go on to reinforce the believers' relationship with the religion in which they are nested in. The artwork within the Sistine Chapel is the piece de resistance of the Vatican, which itself is the focal point of Catholicism. *The Creation of Adam* is one in a series of religious images all acting as proponents of the faith. Berger said, "The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe." The way we understand things is dependent on what we already know. A believer would contextually *intake* a decadent building, regarded with the utmost respect, all being a manifestation of the aged belief system— but what they would *see* would be "anecdotal" proof of God's existence and divinity. Their idealized, religious beliefs would be instantaneously confirmed just as easily as it is to fall for an optical illusion. The Judeo-Christian context surrounding *The Creation of Adam* is not separate from the painting itself. That fact is exemplified in Berger's quote because what we "know" (or believe) is context but what we "see" is our interpretation thus our understanding.

Amid the renaissance, Michelangelo was commissioned to paint the walls and ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Among the scenes depicted was the central fresco *The Creation of Adam*. The depth of the image, like most art, runs deep. Different layers of excavation evince different points of meaning. However, each point is underscored by John Berger's quotation from *Ways of Seeing*. On the first level, the opposing posture of Adam and God invites the comparison to ideals essentially forming people. However, those people are fueled by the same ideals that formed them relating directly to Berger's quote. The next level speaks to the scientific legitimacy of this process given the fact a conceptualized ideal (God) can genuinely reinforce the motivation to strive to be like Him. From a psychological perspective, observers will, by default, confirm the validity of their thoughts based on their prior understanding of said thoughts. Like being forcefully compelled to see a face within an

optical illusion. A process which is localized in the brain that Michelangelo depicts God to reside in. Diving deeper into the previous point, God *creating* Adam is an effect of Adam creating God. People abstract and push their ideals onto divine figures, yet it is those same divine figures that pull people to strive towards those same ideals. *This* is the essence of Berger's quote, "The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe."

Works Cited

The Creation of Adam, Michelangelo 1508-1512

Ways of Seeing, John Berger 1972