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A MIND FOR THE BEAUTIFUL

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SYNOPSIS

Those of us who are engaged in the project of defending our Christian convictions spend a lot of time talking about the objective nature of truth and morality based on the biblical understanding that these are not the kinds of things we can construct for ourselves. They are transcendent properties of reality that we discover and with which wisdom compels us to align. A lot of ink has gone to paper in defense of the objective nature of truth and goodness and their grounding in the character of God. But the ancient philosophers who identified them as components of metaphysical reality always spoke of them within a triumvirate of Truth, Goodness and Beauty. Modernity has perverted our understanding of the latter with the corrosive acid of relativism in the same ways it has corrupted truth and goodness, and for the same reasons. We indulge that corruption any time we repeat the notion that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder." It most certainly is not. Beauty is an objective feature of the universe that is linked to truth and goodness by its origin in the nature of God. It is reflected in the order, balance, and symmetry of nature and revealed by our scientific and experiential discoveries. It is described by the mathematical relationships we find in the world, which have their foundation in the divine logos. It is reproduced in the arts, and in the human propensity to be creators in the image of Him who created us.

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” That is what we are told, and it seems to make sense. All of us are attracted to different kinds of art, different-looking people, different colors or sounds. But when we say this, we have to recognize that, in the modern sense with which we use the word “beauty,” our claims are not really claims about the things in question. They are claims about our *reaction* to the things in question. In other words, they are really saying something about us as subjects and how we are attracted to things. Beauty, in other words, has come to be all about what we personally find appealing.

It has not always been that way.

When the premodern philosophers talked about beauty, they had a far different idea in mind. To the Greeks, beauty was a property held by objects that displayed a sense of symmetry, order, balance, unity, and proportion. Plato saw beauty as the highest level of perfection of these in his forms. The Greek root for the word that came to be translated as “beauty” was *hora*, from which we have derived the word *hour*, because there was also a sense of timing in the concept and thus an accompanying inference to its *telos*—the purpose for which the object existed.

Think of a flower. The ancients not only saw beauty in the symmetry of the flower’s petals or the vivid colors it displayed but also recognized that these properties became most prominent when the flower reached its prime—when it bloomed. In the same way, fruit was beautiful when it ripened. A mature woman was beautiful, and a young girl was beautiful, each in a way that fulfilled their purpose for that respective stage of their existence.

The ancients identified the presence of absolute *truth*, *goodness*, and *beauty* as foundational to the structure of reality and co-related in the concept of the *logos*, where *logos* was rich in meaning and included reason, choice, reflection, calculation, inquiry, and a relational harmony between belief and actuality. In short, it was a “notion encompassing the entire life of the mind” and the outward form by which an inward thought is expressed.¹ But the Greeks understood the *logos* as an impersonal force. It wasn’t until the apostle John linked it to the second person of the Trinity that Christianity enriched the concept of the *logos* by connecting it—and the truth, goodness, and beauty that had long been associated with it—to the mind of God. On the Christian view of the world, beauty is a reflection of Him.

In the *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas expounded on this idea by defining beauty as “that which gives pleasure when seen,” where “seeing” was not the simple passive beholding of an object we equate it with today, but active contemplation.² In other words, the premodern view of beauty was not reached through a subjective

feeling about something, but in obtaining knowledge about its objective reality. Beauty was a feature of objects in the world that humans observed, recognized, and could also mimic through various forms of expression. Art that captured the essence of a natural scene, or of the human form, was beautiful when it succeeded in doing so. The harmonies of a musical composition were beautiful. The beauty of a story resided in its lessons about truth and reality and was demonstrated through the *pathos* and *ethos* of its deliverer. The architecture of a Gothic cathedral was beautiful because it directed our eyes and thoughts toward God.

Today we have completely corrupted this understanding of beauty. Just as with truth and goodness, relativistic modernity has turned the classical understanding of beauty exactly on its head. In order to grasp its objective nature, we have to recognize that our being attracted to something is not what makes it beautiful. We are wired to resonate with beautiful things. Beauty is a resident feature of objects that we find built into the fabric of the universe itself.

BUILT-IN BEAUTY

Scientists of all stripes recognize the intricate, *anthropic* connections that exist between characteristics of the universe that have to be just right to allow for life, and to sustain life, anywhere within it. While theists attribute these elements of physical reality to the work of an intelligent mind, materialists go to great lengths to explain them away. But no one denies that these intricate interrelationships exist in the natural world. These, and the metaphysical realities that complement them, allow us to describe, trust, and predict nature's workings through our methods of scientific discovery. Since mathematics is the language of science, it is telling that mathematicians share a history of uncovering eerie proportional "coincidences" that keep recurring in the natural world.

One of the most prevalent of these is the "Golden Number," *Phi* (1.618). This ratio, and the aesthetically pleasing *Golden Triangle* derived from it, shows up not only in the features of human faces but also in human-designed objects that are pleasing to look at, such as the commonly accepted shapes of rectangles used to frame pictures, or the triangular sides of the Great Pyramids. Humans incorporate this ratio into their designs in the deliberate attempt to imitate its appearance in the natural world. It shows up in such disparate locations as math's infamous *Fibonacci Sequence*, in the spirally expanding geometry of the chambered nautilus shell, in the similarly appealing geometry of flower petals, in progressive patterns of bee reproduction, or in the famously "perfect" proportions of DaVinci's *Vitruvian Man*. In other words, this mathematical concept is not just a feature of our natural world; it is also a trigger that

invokes a sense of pleasure in us when we see it. It is built into the creation and we are wired to recognize it as beauty—even if we can't say why.

Galileo Galilei is reported to have said, "Mathematics is the language with which God wrote the universe." On a theistic understanding, Galileo's connecting mathematics to beauty makes perfect sense. Leonhard Euler quantified the idea that mathematics has divine origins when he, upon discovering his infamous "Identity Equation" [$e^{i\pi} + 1 = 0$], labeled it as proof that God exists.

One does have to wonder why three seemingly unrelated numbers (π , the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter; i , the imaginary number and the square root of -1; and e , the natural logarithm so prevalent in calculus, probability, and limit theory) would have such an elegant relationship to one another. These are irrational numbers, not invented by mathematicians, but *discovered* by them as constantly popping up in every mathematical and scientific nook and cranny they explore. Indeed, physicist Richard Feynman called Euler's identity equation "the most remarkable formula in mathematics."³ Even the renowned atheist Bertrand Russell expressed a sense of awe toward mathematics, which

*rightly viewed, possesses not only truth, but supreme beauty—a beauty cold and austere, like that of sculpture, without appeal to any part of our weaker nature, without the gorgeous trappings of painting or music, yet sublimely pure, and capable of a stern perfection such as only the greatest art can show. The true spirit of delight, the exaltation, the sense of being more than Man, which is the touchstone of the highest excellence, is to be found in mathematics as surely as poetry (emphasis added).*⁴

The beauty with which mathematics describes the world is astounding in itself, but it doesn't stop there. There is also a relationship between the language God uses in nature and the ways in which it connects with our hearts.

RESONANT BEAUTY

The philosopher Leibniz understood mathematics and music to be interrelated when he described music as "the pleasure the human mind experiences from counting without being aware that it is counting."⁵ But music has a way of moving more than just our feet to the beat of a song. It can stir our souls. Tradition has it that when Handel was composing his epic *Messiah*, one of his servants walked in on him while he was writing the famous "Hallelujah Chorus." The composer was weeping. Handel is said to have

remarked, "I do believe I've seen the gates of Heaven." He was not the only musician to have connected music with divinity. Music analyst Lauren Green has even written "a theoretical essay about the connection of music, physics, and faith." How in the world could one connect those three topics in any way? Green explains that in music "you have a fundamental note that has overtones [that] are created when a string vibrates...according to a mathematical equation related to the fundamental note. These overtones help form the harmonic series, or the major scales... [Handel] tempered the scale so that every note is the same distance apart...[and therefore] glorifies the tonal center."

Glorifying the tonal center is not confined to just music. Green continues, "If you go to psychologists they will tell you that in man's innate nature he needs to glorify, he needs to worship and pour out his soul into something outside of him. Music creates this opportunity, not just because it creates these tonal centers, because it's vibratory. It resonates within us. Even if you're deaf, it still resonates."⁶

Green's description of our being "tuned in" to musical harmony confirms its objective nature and lays waste to the modern notion of subjective beauty. Ken Myers decries the same notion elsewhere:

To an earlier age, our contemporary idea of complete relativism in musical judgment would have seemed nonsensical. One could no more make valid individual judgments about musical values than about science. Music was no more "a matter of taste" than was the orbit of the planets or the physiology of the human body. [Since] Plato...music was understood to be based on natural laws, and its value was derived from its capacity to frame and elaborate these laws in musical form. Its success was no more a matter of subjective judgment than the laws themselves (emphasis added).⁷

The God-glorifying nature of music is just one of the many forms in which beauty is manifested in our world. We are enchanted by the symmetry, form, and vivid colors of a butterfly, by the color and immensity of a rainbow, by the power and majesty of a grand landscape. These kinds of things can elicit involuntary reactions in us when we experience them. They can take our breath away. They can make our feet start tapping. They can bring us to tears. They are the kinds of things that add fulfillment to our lives by inspiring us to think *outside* ourselves.

BEAUTY REFLECTORS

This aspect of our nature is one thing that makes human beings the most unique creatures on the planet. While more advanced animals may seem gripped by beautiful displays of nature, no other creature shows any inclination for demonstrating a pure appreciation for beauty in and of itself. But our awe for the beautiful extends beyond passive appreciation and into an active proclivity to reproduce replicas of what we observe in the creation. It is one characteristic of being made in the *image of God* that we want to be creators ourselves. If the world we inhabit is thick with a beauty that quite literally resonates within us, it makes sense that we should expect to be beauty seekers and reproducers.

The Bible itself refers to humankind as God's "workmanship" (Greek: *poiema*) in the same way one would refer to the beauty in a work of art.⁸ As the Grand Artisan's creative masterpiece, it is incumbent on us to take our apprenticeship seriously. Even the most devoted Darwinian anthropologists agree that one of the signs of the rise of modern humanity is our propensity for creativity and artistic expression. This, G. K. Chesterton once noted, exposes the fact that the difference between man and beast is not only in degree, but in kind: "[Monkeys] do not arrange the sticks into intricate patterns simply so they can sit back and lose themselves in contemplation of their symmetry....Man is the only one of the physical creatures with enough of a self to want to sign his name; art is his signature, and he gets it from the greatest Artist of all."⁹

Human artistry comes in many forms, from the expression of the beauty in the written word to the awe-inspiring sculpture of Michelangelo's *Pieta* or the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel; from the flying buttresses of a medieval cathedral to the layout of your computer's motherboard. But the beauty in our creativity is not limited to paintings and musical scores, and it is not simply for the sake of our enjoyment. It is an expression of worship. Anthony Esolen describes the high school in his hometown as having "had a tower and a belfry....There was an embrace of beauty. The tower could not be justified on grounds of sheer utility, unless we remember that without beauty the human being starves and shrivels....But the beauty wasn't merely decorative, like a patch of flowers planted here or there. It was, visually and formally, the building's orientation and pinnacle. *It was a building for people who have souls. It pointed towards the heavens*" (emphasis added).¹⁰

Seen in this light, it is instructive that "technology" is a combination of two Greek words: *techne* (craftsmanship, craft, or art) and *logos*. Technology is the term we use to describe the processed product of human creativity. Though we tend to think of technology in sterile, mechanical terms surrounding the manufacture of things that simply help make tasks easier to accomplish, the origin of the word has an *artistic* connotation. Aristotle said that "art is about making, and that the question of what one should make is always superior...to the question of how to make it."¹¹ He was also quick

to recognize that, by its very nature, *techne* is an admission that human artistry is imperfect in its ability to imitate nature itself.

Consider the Wright brothers, whose life mission is a testament to this fact. When the Wrights decided that they were going to design a flying machine, it didn't take them long to decide where to begin the process. They spent untold hours observing birds. It was during those observations that Wilbur noticed something in the flight of a pigeon: "There is no question in my mind that men can build wings having as little or less relative resistance than that of the soaring birds. The bird's wings are undoubtedly very well designed indeed, but it is not any extraordinary efficiency that strikes with astonishment but rather the marvelous skill with which they are used."¹²

As a result of their observations, the Wrights were not the first to build a flying machine; they were the first to discover a way to *control* a flying machine, even if they did so with less grace than that which we see in the flight of a common pigeon. Their insight connected an appreciation for the beauty found in nature with the human aspiration to design and craft imitations of the Designer's work.

THE END OF BEAUTY

Beauty reveals purpose that oozes from the objects of the Designer's innovations. It is a flashing beacon that ignites our passions. We see it in the world around us, no matter where we look. Unfortunately, modernity's subject-centered view of beauty has deadened our awareness of it and therefore undermined our capacity for appealing to beauty apologetically.

While we have good reason to address the lack of respect for truth and goodness in our culture, it seems that we are less adept at understanding the nature of that same culture's lack of respect for beauty. But all the most profound realities in this life have their basis in one of these three or their combination. Even our technological gadgetry owes its design to the mathematical order, trustworthiness, and beauty of the Grand Designer's mind. This should drive us to honor the beauty in this creation with all the respect and reverence it deserves. It should also affect our apologetic by allowing a broader method of appeal for those who have been distracted by the culture into embracing a relativistic view of truth and morality.

It used to be that many of the greatest innovators in human history were driven by their Christian convictions. Today it seems that the descent of many within the arts into meaningless or depraved forms, and the sterile scientism in much of our cultural approach to technology, can only be repaired by rejecting this vacuous, subjective view

of beauty. In its place we need an active attentiveness toward the Creator's hand in the world that we honor with the work of our hands.

Beauty's power resonates involuntarily within each human heart and therefore offers a complementary apologetic strategy that can help to overcome the culture's volitional resistance to truth and goodness. The thoughtful use of story, imagery, rhythm and lyrics, art, and architecture is a way to rekindle an awareness of beauty's objective nature by overpowering the emptiness of postmodernity. It is a way to challenge and feed the human imagination and thereby reach the skeptic's heart.

Our call is greater than just to appreciate the beauty in this world. If we really believe we are made in the image of our God, that fact lays a great responsibility on Christians to be the best musicians, artists, authors, scientists, and inventors—the best representatives and recreators of beauty that human beings can be. In our effort to do that, we are best able to reflect the beauty and majesty of the Maker in whom we live, and move, and have our being. If we are to be consistent in painting a biblical picture of reality about the world we inhabit, we have an obligation to paint that picture with a brush that is dipped in the objective paint of a godly view of beauty.

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NOTES

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- 3 Robert C. Crease, "Equations as Icons," *Physics World*, March 1, 2007; available at <http://physicsworld.com/cws/article/print/2007/mar/01/equations-as-icons>.
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