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### Beauty: A Defeater of Naturalism

*“A thing of beauty is a joy forever;  
Its loveliness increases; it will never  
Pass into nothingness.”*

John Keats. 1795-1821 Endymion. Book i

Beauty may be a many splendor thing, but any attempt to define it results in a larger conversation regarding the nature of reality. Although defining beauty may be something like trying to catch an elf, contrary to questions about the existence of elves, there is little debate that beauty is a universal concept among human beings. The question this raises is whether naturalism can, in fact, provide an adequate worldview within which to define beauty. In this paper, I will argue that *beauty*, as a universal phenomenon within the human experience, strongly suggests that reality is more than matter. *Beauty* involves more than a scientific analysis of a particular object, for it is the observer, not the object who declares something beautiful. For example, it is possible to explain the properties of a flower scientifically, but science is powerless to explain why the flower presents itself to us as beautiful. In fact, *beauty* itself is without substance since it is not something we name as if it were a particular object or entity; *beauty* is what we predicate of things that present themselves to our senses in a particular way. If *beauty* is not a substance, then it cannot be analyzed scientifically as a substance. For example, we say the sunset is beautiful. No one does a scientific analysis of the sunset and then claims that it has the property of *beauty*. This is why there is no objective, scientific definition of *beauty*. It is not as if one can place a flower under the microscope and tell if something is beautiful simply by its component parts. Of course, it might be possible to explain scientifically how certain biological properties of a flower produce certain aspects of the flower that result in someone admiring the flower, but that is something totally different. The fact is that *beauty* itself has no material properties although something called beautiful may have physical properties.

Although a full definition of *beauty* may elude us, we can still know that certain properties or conditions must be present for a human response named *beauty*. However, that does not assure that every object or condition with those qualities will elicit the response of *beauty* by all who observe it. Furthermore, it seems beyond question that there is an objective and subjective aspect to *beauty*. The objective is related to that which gives rise to beauty, that is, certain properties must be present in the object or condition, as not all objects or conditions give rise to the human response we call *beauty*. The subjective aspect is the observer, as *beauty* is a mental/emotional response to

something and cannot exist apart from the observer. Where nothing exists there is neither the beautiful nor the ugly. In terms of definition, then it seems the best we can do is point out what properties must be present, but we must realize that that is not defining beauty itself.

There have been, however, many attempts at defining beauty and it seems there is something to be learned about *beauty* through these attempts. Lyof Tolstoi reviewed the definitions of beauty of various European writers from Baumgarten (1714-1762), who he claims is the founder of aesthetics, to Charles Darwin (1809-1882). He concludes that no one definition of *beauty* tells the entire the story. He even admits that when all the contributions are added to each other, the sum would not equal an adequate definition of beauty.<sup>1</sup>

Dutch art critic Hans Rookmaarker echoes a common thought regarding *beauty*, namely that “Truth, love, beauty, and reality are all closely linked to one another. Truth and love are intimately connected, just as beauty and reality are. . . . The beauty of something is always related to its meaning. A tree, for instance, is beautiful, because it is so wonderfully made to fulfill various functions”<sup>2</sup> The first part is undoubtedly correct, however, the latter part seems only partially true as it cannot be true in all cases as it is possible that one can see beauty in a thing before he knows the function of the thing. So while function may indeed help us recognize beauty (that is, in its order), it is not what necessarily defines *beauty*.

Plato suggested that *beauty* is related to order and harmony which has often been suggested by others. Plato says: “And when a beautiful soul harmonizes with a beautiful form, and the two are cast in one mould, that will be the fairest of sights to him who has an eye to see.”<sup>3</sup> In another place he says: “For he who has been instructed thus far in the things of love, and who has learned to see the beautiful in due order and succession, when he comes toward the end will suddenly perceive a nature of wondrous beauty.”<sup>4</sup> St. Augustine agrees that beauty is in some way connected to order and wholeness. He writes: “And what is beauty? What is it that allures and unites us to the things we love; for unless there were a grace and beauty in them, they could not possibly attract us to them? And I reflected on this and saw that in the objects themselves there is a kind of beauty which comes from their forming a whole and another kind of beauty that comes from mutual fitness--as the harmony of one part of the body with its whole, or a shoe with a foot, and so on.”<sup>5</sup> But of course while such comments are helpful, they do not define beauty, they only speak of conditions from which the mental/emotional response of *beauty* arises or what we would call necessary condition.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Lyof N. Tolstoi, “What is Art” in *The Complete Works of Lyof Tolstoi* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1899), 16-32.

<sup>2</sup> Hans Rookmaarker. “The L’Abri Lectures” in *The Complete Works of Hans Rookmaarker*, edited by Marleen Hengellae-Rookmaarker (CD ROM, Piquant Edition), 226.

<sup>3</sup> Plato, “The Republic” in *The Best Known Works of Plato*, Translated by B. Jowett (Garden City, NY: Blue Ribbon Books, 1942), 68.

<sup>4</sup> Plato, “The Symposium” in *The Best Known Works of Plato*, Translated by B. Jowett (Garden City, NY: Blue Ribbon Books, 1942), 287.

<sup>5</sup> Saint Augustine. *Confessions*, Book IV, Chapter 13.

<sup>6</sup> A necessary condition is that condition by itself can bring certain things into being. A sufficient condition that condition which by itself will bring certain things into being.

Veronica Sekules points out that “Medieval thinkers added [to Classical ideas of beauty] notions of harmony between form and context. Harmony and concord as essential positive qualities were extended a wider context in which beauty was appreciated. Thus a beautiful thing might be rendered ugly when combined with other things in an inappropriate context.”<sup>7</sup> Again we see that order and harmony seem to be essential ideas related to the concept of *beauty*. Marc Hauser agrees with Sekules point about context when he writes: “Returning again to visual perception and our aesthetic judgments, an object is not in and of itself beautiful. We make judgments about an object’s appearances, judging some as beautiful under certain conditions. Many of us are automatically awed by the beauty of the pyramids in Egypt but disgusted by their re-creation in the world’s gambling capital, Las Vegas.”<sup>8</sup> Here we learn that it is more than just the object itself that may give rise to beauty, it is the context in which it is observed.

I believe also that Tolstoi’s comments about beauty are instructive. He writes: “In Russian, by the word *krasota* (beauty) we mean only that which pleases the sight.”<sup>9</sup> He suggests that beauty should be restricted to that which involves one’s sight. I think there is something important here in that he makes the point that there is a difference between beautiful and good. He writes: “Beautiful may relate to a man, a horse, a house, a view, or a movement. Of actions, thoughts, character, or music, if they please us, we may say that they are good, or, if they do not please us, that they are not good. But beautiful can be used only concerning that which pleases the sight.”<sup>10</sup> This restricts what can be called beautiful, which I think is a helpful distinction.

Richard Viladesau writes: “With regard to beauty, we must note that the term is analogous, that is, there are different kinds and levels of beauty.”<sup>11</sup> He even suggests that “beautiful art is also a sacred word in its own right, a direct mediation of encounter with God.”<sup>12</sup> It is interesting that Tolstoi seems to signal something of the same idea when he writes: “we call ‘beauty’ that which pleases us without evoking in us desire.”<sup>13</sup> I think this suggests something very important about *beauty*, namely that it is something that calls forth the best in the human heart by being pleasing to the sight. If this is so, it must also be pointed out that beauty is not the object of worship or obsession, for if it should be so, then beauty is destroyed, as C. S. Lewis wrote: “All beauty of nature withers when we try to make it absolute. Put first things first and we get second things thrown in; put second things first and we lose both first and second things. We never get, say, even the sensual pleasure of food when we are being greedy”<sup>14</sup>

Three conditions must be met when speaking of an object that elicits the response of beautiful. First, there is the physical ordering of the object itself, which is not beauty,

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<sup>7</sup> Veronica Sekules. *Medieval Art* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 2001), 127.

<sup>8</sup> Marc Hauser. *Moral Minds* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 26.

<sup>9</sup> Lyof N. Tolstoi, “What is Art” in *The Complete Works of Lyof Tolstoi* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1899), 13.

<sup>10</sup> Lyof N. Tolstoi, “What is Art” in *The Complete Works of Lyof Tolstoi* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1899), 13.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Viladesau. *Theology and the Arts* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 146.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Viladesau. *Theology and the Arts* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 145

<sup>13</sup> Lyof N. Tolstoi, “What is Art” in *The Complete Works of Lyof Tolstoi* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1899), 34.

<sup>14</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, Vol 3, edited by Walter Hooper (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), 111.

but order, harmony, balance, texture, and color. Second, the context must be appropriate to the object. These are what we might call necessary conditions for beauty to arise. Third, there must be an observer who possesses the appropriate senses and judgment to receive the image of the object. All three are necessary for the mental/emotional experience of *beauty*. These three conditions must converge within the mental/emotional framework of the individual person, but *beauty* is neither in any of these, nor is it a fourth substance. So beauty is not a substance.

Furthermore, it appears that the emotional response that something is beautiful does not depend on someone being taught to recognize beauty.<sup>15</sup> That is to say, there is no independent substance one can inspect that is called *beauty*, only objects we call beautiful. Consider the fact that no one has to teach a child some objective standard before he can recognize beauty. In fact, the child intuitively recognizes *beauty* before he has the vocabulary to speak of something being beautiful or the mental capabilities to intentionally discriminate between this and that. Studies show that children are emotionally stimulated by objects of bright colors and fine textures. But none of these features have the property of *beauty*; they can only elicit a response of *beauty* and then only if the one observing has the proper sense function to receive the image. That is, one must be able to see, touch, hear, or smell depending upon the nature of the object presenting itself.

In addition, it is instructive to point out that we seem to know what beauty is because we have two words to speak of opposite response—beautiful and ugly. Even though we are not quite sure how to define beauty, we seem to recognize it intuitively when we see it.<sup>16</sup> Equally instructive is the fact that we are more comfort when surrounded by beauty than when surrounded by the ugly. We even purposely decorate our homes, our neighborhoods, and even our person because we have a greater sense of well-being when surrounded by beauty than the ugly. To the best of our knowledge, we know of no other animal that has this response, nor one that purposefully seeks to beautify its environment. In addition, when a person paints, he does not paint *beauty*, he paints an object that may be beautiful. We enjoy sunsets and mountains, we boast of the beauty of our native land such as the beauty of Crimea. We are embarrassed and disconcerted when our landscape is marred or our neighborhoods are disfigured. And when the flower dies or the sunset disappears from view, beauty does not die or disappear. Elizabeth Prettijohn makes this point when she quotes Agnes Martin: “The artist Agnes Martin (1912-2004) puts this well, in an essay of 1989 entitled 'Beauty Is the Mystery of Life': 'When a beautiful rose dies, beauty does not die because it is not really in the rose. Beauty is an awareness in the mind. It is a mental and emotional response that we make'”<sup>17</sup> This seems to indicate that beauty requires more to reality than matter, for by itself matter cannot explain what we all acknowledge to be true of the idea of *beauty*.

The phenomenon of *beauty* is not biologically explainable in that the response is not material. As I have said, *beauty* has no substance, it is not objectively measurable. Although it is possible to measure brain activity when one experiences *beauty*, the brain

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<sup>15</sup> Of course there are things one can do to broaden the range of what he personally calls beautiful such as learning of the techniques of art. But this is not educating oneself in some substance called *beauty*.

<sup>16</sup> That is not to say that we cannot learn to have a deeper appreciation of the beautiful, but that is not the same thing as recognizing beauty.

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Prettijohn, *Beauty and Art 1750-2000* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 2005), 202.

activity does not create the experience of *beauty*, it simply records it. Furthermore, the biological and chemical reaction fails to explain the existential dimension of *beauty*. And, why should I sense *beauty* when I look at the sunset instead of sensing an intense repulsion? Simply measuring the biological/chemical reaction says nothing about why the emotion is one and not the other. That is, the biological/chemical imaging is not the cause of the sense of beauty, it is the evidence that the mental/emotional response of *beauty* has occurred. The brain activity is the affect, not the cause of *beauty*. When I am asked to think on something it may be true that certain parts of my brain light up, but that is the effect not the cause of what I think. It is like when something goes wrong in a machine and a red light comes on, the red light is not the cause of what went wrong; it is the effect of something going wrong. So, it is with *beauty*. All biological/chemical explanations fail as an explanation for beauty as has been demonstrated. Hence, there must be more to reality than matter if we are going to explain the human experience of *beauty*. If there is more to reality than matter, then we are faced with the inevitable conclusion that naturalism as a worldview, is an inadequate view of reality and this may well have serious implications for worldview thinking itself.