

After journeying with the Good and the True, we arrive at The Beautiful – the third of Plato’s transcendentals, and the most interesting, in my opinion.

I find it the most soulful and sublime of the three, the most mysterious and the most powerful.

The original Greek noun that best translates to the English-language words "beauty" or "beautiful" was *kallos*. But *kallos* was used differently from the English word beauty in that it first and foremost applied to humans and bears an erotic connotation.

But let’s refresh our memory of what Plato was expressing when he talked about the Forms of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful.

The theory of Forms questions the reality of the material world, considering it only an image or copy of the “real” world.

According to this theory there are at least two worlds: the apparent world of concrete objects, grasped by the senses, which constantly changes, and an unseen and unchanging world of Forms or abstract objects, grasped by pure reason, which ground that which is apparent.

Aside from being immutable, timeless, and changeless, the Forms also provide definitions and the standard against which all apparent instances are measured. There is thus a world of perfect, eternal, and changeless meanings - the Forms - existing in the realm of Being outside of space and time.

This is why they are called transcendentals – they transcend “reality” and exist independently in their pure, ideal Forms, from whence they In-Form the apparent world.

For Plato, the Form of the Good is the ultimate goal of knowledge – the unitary in which other Forms – such as Form of Truth, the Form of Beauty, and the Form of Justice reside.

Over time, these Forms evolved in Western thinking into the Good, the True, and the Beautiful - the three primary transcendent properties of being.

Plato's student, Aristotle, rejects the idea of the Forms. He argues that these properties are intrinsic to the material objects themselves, and cannot exist apart from them, and so must be studied in relation to them.

Since Aristotle, we no longer necessarily see these perfect platonic forms existing somewhere outside of time, but rather as the natural product of the three fundamental perspectives we use to understand reality: ethics, aesthetics, and reason.

Aristotle notwithstanding, there does seem to be some transcendental meta-category of The Beautiful that contains all that we find pleasing to the eye, the ear, to our hearts and minds and souls.

Beauty is not just in the eye of the beholder.

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At this point, a number of questions come to mind. Why is there even such a thing as beauty? What is it and where does it come from?

Evolution would seem to give us a starting point.

Let us consider the male flame bowerbird. His plumage is a gorgeous display of red and yellow. Like all bowerbirds, when it comes time for courting, he will construct a bower made of twigs and decorate it with colorful found objects: stones, flowers, bits of plastic. Should a female bowerbird show interest, he must respond instantaneously with a convulsive display of dance

prowess or she will leave immediately. If she approves, they mate for a few seconds, then part ways, never to see each other again.

One can hardly imagine a more extravagant affront to the rules of natural selection. Adaptations are meant to be useful, so what is the evolutionary justification for the bowerbird's flamboyant display? Not only do the bowerbird's colorful plumage and elaborate courtship ritual lack obvious value outside of reproductive success, but they also hinder his survival and general well-being, using up precious resources and making him obvious to predators.

To reconcile such splendor with a utilitarian view of natural selection, biologists have favored the idea that beauty in the animal kingdom is just code for something else. According to this theory, ornaments evolved as indicators of a potential mate's positive qualities. A bowerbird with especially bright plumage might have a robust immune system, for example, while one that finds rare and distinctive trinkets might be a superb forager. Beauty, therefore, would not contradict natural selection — it would be very much a part of it.

For whatever reason, Darwin himself disagreed with this theory. He did not think it was necessary to link aesthetics and survival. Animals, he believed, could appreciate beauty for its own sake. I have seen a coyote sitting on a ridge watching a glorious sunset, so as another animal, I tend to agree with Darwin.

His contemporaries thought he gave animals too much credit.

But the idea is being revisited by a new generation of biologists. Beauty, they say, does not have to be a proxy for good genes. Sometimes beauty is the marvelous but meaningless expression of arbitrary preference. Animals simply find certain things appealing — a red crest, a mane of hair, an iridescent scale. And that innate sense of beauty itself can become an engine of evolution.

In the words of Richard Prum, an evolutionary ornithologist at Yale, “Animals are agents in their own evolution. Birds are beautiful because they are beautiful to themselves.”

These biologists believe that there are complex forces at work in evolution that are much more playful and rambling. There are two worlds influencing our evolution as animals: the world we inhabit, and our internal world, which guides and also drives us. The mystery and power of the Beautiful arises from the interplay between these two worlds.

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One more touchstone before we journey on. In the first part of this series, I quoted from an essay by Peter Kreeft titled “Lewis’s Philosophy of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty.” The title refers to C.S. Lewis, the British author of *Mere Christianity*, *The Screwtape Letters*, and *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

*For these are the only three things that we never got bored with, and never will, for all eternity, because they are three attributes of God, and therefore all God’s creation: three transcendental or absolutely universal properties of all reality. All that exists is true, the proper object of the mind. All that exists is good, the proper object of the will. All that exists is beautiful, the proper object of the heart, or feelings, or desires, or sensibilities, or imagination.*

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The Beautiful exists at the intersection of desire and imagination, of creativity and longing, of chaos and order, driven by the generative wildness of life.

This is a place that no empiricism can quite comprehend. As the bowerbird demonstrates, it is paradoxical and not a little mischievous. Beauty is organic, alive, and never quite the same twice.

The image presented to us is one of a Crossroads.

There is a road through the Village. In the village are domestic comforts, reliable life, the fixed order of the intellect, securities of various sorts, and the promise of good things to those who obey. The village gods are Hearth and Plough, Law and Custom.

There is a road through the Forest, mysterious, moonlit, where eyes glow in the shadows, where wild things roam and outcasts live, proud and alone. The forest gods are Thunder, Blood and Stone, Green Fire and Bone.

Between Village and Forest is a meadow where the roads meet. The road brings travelers from far lands speaking strange tongues and bearing wondrous goods. It brings tales of mysterious gods and goddesses; it brings tinkers and gypsies; fire breathers and jugglers. Trickster rules the roads.

From the forest come the outlaws and the rebels. The shape shifters. The Green Men and fierce Red Women. Faery folk and other wildlings lurk along the edges.

Bird-masked dancers whirl around bonfires at the crossroads, casting wild shadows on the trees. The villagers venture out to trade and wonder, bartering food, books and steel for shimmering cloth and foreign spells. Novelty sparks romance. New blood sneaks its lusty way past the disapproving eyes of sceptered village gods and goddesses, seated on their stone thrones.

Beauty walks the Forest Road.

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Why is anything beautiful? Why can a flower, a human being, a landscape, a mathematical equation, and the night sky, all be considered to be beautiful?

It is because they are good and true? Harmonious of proportion? Because they are manifestations of divine perfection? Because they cause us to feel love and longing?

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Our longing is easily manipulated. We encounter hundreds of these manipulations every day, manipulations that misdirect our longing in the service of profit.

Commercial culture does this by conflating beauty with glamour.

A "Glamour" in the old language of Faerie was a spell cast on someone to hide reality from them. Glamour is not beauty. Glamour is an exciting and illusory romantic attractiveness.

This spell makes us ignore or diminish people and things who do not fit the glamour. This spell makes us ignore or diminish the places that do not fit the glamour. This spell keeps us from seeing past the illusion into the beauty of the real.

William Butler Yeats wrote of Shelley's poetry: *The books of all wisdom are hidden in the cave of the Witch of Atlas, who is one of his personifications of beauty, and when she moves over the enchanted river that is an image of all life, the priests cast aside their deceits, and the king crowns an ape to mock his own sovereignty, and the soldiers gather about the anvils to beat their swords to ploughshares, and lovers cast away their timidity, and friends are united; while the power, which in Laon and Cythna, awakens the mind of the reformer to contend, and itself contends, against the tyrannies of the world, is first seen, as the star of love or beauty. And at the end of The Ode to Naples, Shelly cries out to 'the spirit of beauty' to overturn the tyrannies of the world, or to fill them with its 'harmonizing ardours.'*

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There is a deep longing in us for The Beautiful.

Of all the tyrannies of the world, this is perhaps the most grievous... this glamour that conflates our wants and our desires with our true longing, and places us in a sort of trance.

There is a deep longing in us.

It is this longing to follow that star of love and beauty that we feel stirring in our hearts, a longing to overturn the tyrannies of the world, to make a more beautiful world.

Plato distrusted the arts. He thought they were too emotional, too unpredictable, too wild. But what was Good and True for Plato was also Beautiful, and so the converse must also be.

In creating a more Beautiful world, we also create one that is Good and True.

And more than a little wilder.