

# Wilde Lecture 1: The Argument from Beauty

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# Introduction, I

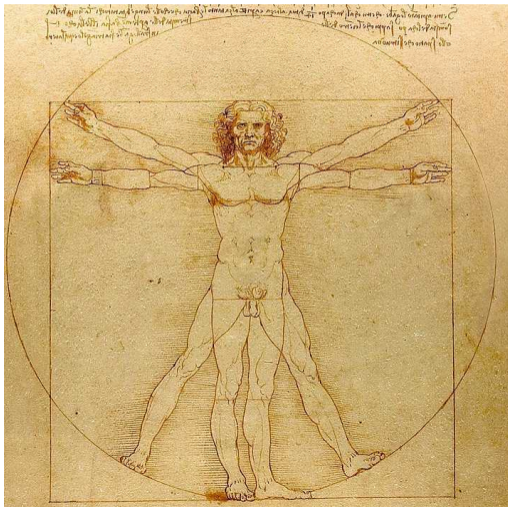


- Many religious people find compelling the idea that the beauty of the world declares the glory of God.
- “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (Ps. 19:1 RSV).
- The beauty of the world makes it psychologically easier to believe in God.
- Kantian argument that the instantiation of beauty can provide a **moral** reason to believe in a creator: we have a duty to give thanks for it, and can only sincerely do so if we believe in a creator.
- But do considerations of beauty provide an **epistemic** reason to believe in God?

# Introduction, II

- I will sketch reasons based on:
  - The concept of beauty
  - Our knowledge of beauty
  - Our sense of beauty
  - The beauty-friendly arrangement of the world: instantiations and accessibility.
- And compare with the moral argument and the problem of evil.

# Diversity



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- We pursue beauty in everything: it matters to us.



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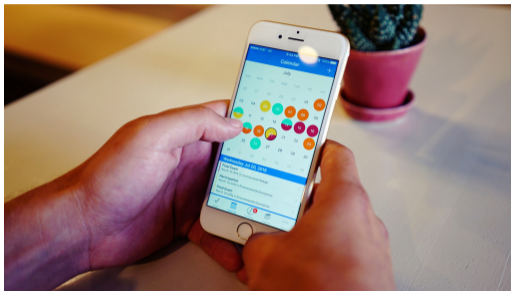
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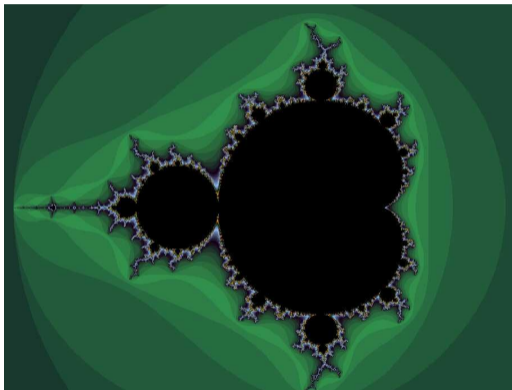
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# Diversity

 $G_2$ 

(smallest exceptional simple Lie group)

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# Diversity

Litwo, Ojczyzno moja! ty jesteś jak zdrowie;  
Ile cię trzeba cenić, ten tylko się dowie,  
Kto cię stracił. Dziś piękność twą w całej ozdobie  
Widzę i opisuję, bo tęsknię po tobie.

Lithuania, my fatherland! thou art like health;  
How one ought value thee, that will learn only one  
Who has lost thee. Today thy beauty in all array  
I see and tell, for I long for thee.

– Adam Mickiewicz, *Pan Tadeusz*

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# Diversity

- Suppose there is a biggest prime and let  $p_1, p_2, \dots, p_n$  be all the primes. Then  $p_1 p_2 \dots p_n + 1$  is not divisible by any smaller prime, so it's a prime. But then there is a prime bigger than all the primes! So there is no biggest prime.
- Plato's *Symposium*: One progresses "from one [body] to two, and from two to every lovely body, from bodily beauty to the beauty of institutions, from institutions to learning, and from learning in general to the special lore that pertains to nothing but the beautiful itself".
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# Diversity

- $E = mc^2$
  - $G = 8\pi T$
  - $i\hbar \frac{\partial \psi}{\partial t} = \hat{H}\psi$
  - All living organisms on earth have a common ancestor.
- Plato's *Symposium*: One progresses “from one [body] to two, and from two to every lovely body, from bodily beauty to the beauty of institutions, from institutions to learning, and from learning in general to the special lore that pertains to nothing but the beautiful itself” .
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# Diversity

- The sum of the angles in any triangle is  $180^\circ$ .
- Every natural number can be uniquely written as a product of primes.
- Every polynomial of degree  $n$  has exactly  $n$  roots (counting multiplicities).
- Every noncommutative division ring is infinite.
- There are only five Platonic solids.
- Plato's *Symposium*: One progresses "from one [body] to two, and from two to every lovely body, from bodily beauty to the beauty of institutions, from institutions to learning, and from learning in general to the special lore that pertains to nothing but the beautiful itself".
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# The manifold nature of beauty

- **Concrete:** natural laws, natural functioning, natural objects, and natural scapes; communities, institutions, customs, and positive laws; visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, and gustatory arts (**qua** sensory, **qua** meaningful); actions, performances, lives, and thoughts; God (if existing)
- **Abstract:** theorems, proofs, and mathematical objects; theories and arguments; plots, settings, and characters; Platonic objects (if existing)
- **Combinations:** expressions/echoes of one kind in another; conjoinings of instances of same or of different kinds
- **What do these have in common?**

# Options

- What do all the instances of beauty have in common?
- Answers in terms of:
  - the character of the instance:
    - brute feature
    - proportion
    - goodness
  - the relation of the instance to:
    - us (as perceivers)
    - their creator
    - a particular special being (God)
- **Claim:** The best versions of the more plausible accounts lead to theism.

## Character of the instance

- Brute feature theories should always be the last resort.
- Proportion theories fail miserably for many of the items on our list, doing best for classical art, and even there failing.
- The good has similar diversity to the beautiful.
- The goodness theory is underappreciated, maybe because there are things that are beautiful that are evil (parts of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*).
- Two options regarding evil works: (1) good in some respect (e.g., camaraderie between workers) or (2) insofar as we perceive it as beautiful, we perceive it as good, but it is an illusion on both counts.
- But the beautiful pulls on our heartstrings differently from the good, more viscerally, more mysteriously, and typically pointing **beyond itself**.



## Relation to actual perceiver(s): Subjectivism

- The beautiful is what we **perceive** as beautiful or are **attracted by**.
- Attraction theory is implausible: one can be attracted to the ugly, say to fulfill curiosity.
- Perception theory needs more detail: qualia of beauty.
- Level of generality in the subjectivism:
  - **particular**: Every particular perceived as beautiful is beautiful.
  - **rules**: We have rules of beauty and everything that is beautiful according to the rules is beautiful.
  - **patterns**: Those things that are beautiful according to the laws of beauty that best systematize our judgments are beautiful (cf. Lewis on laws of nature).
- Particular: problem of bad taste and possibility of error
- Rules and patterns: too much extrinsicality: if I am admiring a proof or painting, it doesn't cease to be beautiful when rules and patterns change.
- And why does beauty matter? (Contingent benefits?)

## Relation to a properly functioning observer

- The beautiful relative to kind  $K$  is what a properly functioning member of  $K$  would perceive as beautiful.
- **Problem 1:** Very complex set of norms embodied in  $K$  given diversity of instances of beauty—and norms cannot be too random for beauty to matter like it does.
- **Solution to 1:** Natural kinds are images of God and God wisely chooses which one to instantiate.
- **Problem 2:** Just as there is beauty the tone-deaf cannot appreciate, there is beauty no humans can appreciate.
- **Solution to 2:** The beautiful *simpliciter* is what is beautiful relative to some kind.
- **Problem 2.1:** Doesn't that let too much in?
- **Solution to 2.1:** Not if natural kinds are all images of God.
- Lectures 3 and 4 will argue that proper function derived from kinds is evidence for theism.
- Thus, this account can pull us towards theism.

## Relation to the instance's creator

- As applied to beauty of abstracta, requires a generalization of creation to include:
  - selection, or
  - a source for abstracta of the sort that God is sometimes said to be.
- As applied to beauty of nature, requires a Creator of universe.
- So, this theory leads to theism.
- **Problem 1:** Not clear what the relevant relation to the creator is.
- **Problem 2:** Beethoven's Ninth would still be beautiful even if it were a mere output of a chance process.
- **Solution to 2:** Maybe beauty requires a necessary Creator behind everything?
- **Problem 3:** God is beautiful and has no source.
- **Solution 3.1:** Descartes' self-caused God.
- **Solution 3.2:** The doctrine of the Trinity: the Father is the source of the Son; the Father and Son are the source of the Holy Spirit.

## Relation to God, I

- God is **divine fundamentally**; things that participate in God are **divine derivatively**.
- When we perceive something as beautiful, we are perceptually representing it as divine: the beautiful is the divine.
- Explains the attraction of beauty without making it non-rational or merely contingently beneficial.
- Explains the mystery and pointing-beyond aspects of beauty.
- This theory works with classical theism, panentheism and some varieties of pantheism.

## Relation to God, II



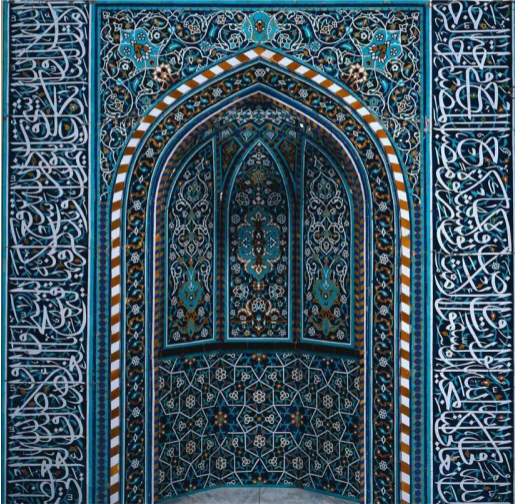
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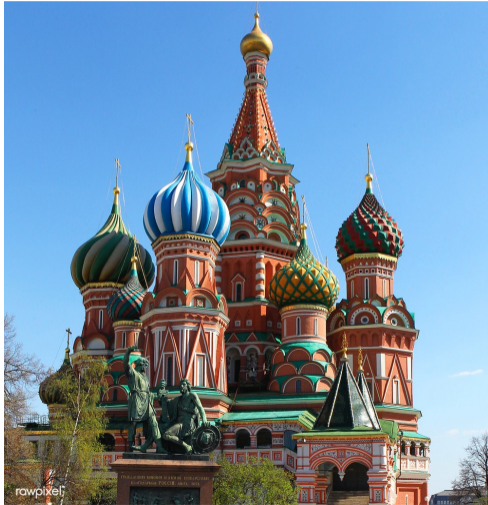
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# Objections to Divinity Theory, I

- **Problem 1:** Atheists appreciate beauty.
- **Solution to 1:** When we see red, we are perceptually representing it as giving off light around 680 nm in wavelength, but we don't usually conceptualize it as such.
- **Problem 2:** Extrinsicity: Even if the Rocky Mountains didn't participate in God, they'd be beautiful.
- **Solution to 2:** Participation is very intimate. The very nature of creatures and their accidents is to **be by participation**. If **per impossibile** an instance of green did not participate in God, its very being would be different.

## Objections to Divinity Theory, II

- **Problem 3:** Too much beauty! On classical theism, **everything** is God or participates in God.
- **Solution 3.1:** Relativize theory. Beauty to a kind  $K$  of beings is divinity that is perceivable to  $K$ s. Then everything may be beautiful *simpliciter* but not to humans.
- **Solution 3.2:** Yes, everything is beautiful, even the corpse of a cat, but we have to see it the right way, in its divinity. And we can still have degrees and aspects of beauty as there are degrees and multiple respects of participation.
- **Problem 4:** Evil beauty.
- **Solution 4.1:** These things may be divine in **some** respect.
- **Solution 4.2:** Or maybe although insofar as we perceive something as beautiful, we perceive it as divine, it is an illusion on both counts. In a visual illusion, one still perceives the false aspect even when one knows it's false.

# Evidence

- The Relation to Properly Functioning Observer theory is a promising theory of beauty. To respond to objections, however, theism needs to be invoked.
- The Divinity Theory is a very promising theory of beauty. It implies a deductive argument from instances of beauty to the existence of God, though not necessarily the God of theism. It can also be promisingly kind-relativized.
- Insofar as other theories of beauty are, arguably, unsatisfactory, this provides conceptual evidence for the existence of God.

# The epistemological argument



- Evolutionary debunking arguments against objective ethical knowledge have a lot of plausibility absent theism.
- These arguments also tell against knowledge of other objective norms such as epistemological ones.
- It is less problematic to be a subjectivist about aesthetic norms than epistemological or aesthetic norms, but still problematic.
- Theism gives a good explanation of how our judgments of beauty (or morals or epistemology) could be truth-tracking: God could have set up evolutionary scenarios in order that we evolve truth-tracking judgments.
- This is some evidence for theism, but a bit weaker than analogous ethical and epistemological arguments.

# The sense of beauty

- Even if beauty is subjective (or even if we have an error theory!), and the sense of beauty is not truth-tracking, we still need to explain why we have it.
- This is harder to do evolutionarily than the moral and epistemic cases: a sense of epistemic propriety directly aids survival and a moral sense helps community survival, even if these are subjective.
- Can speculate about appreciation of mates, fruit, expensive displays, and the like.
- But much of what we find beautiful seems useless. Or harmful: tigers and mountain hiking.
- And mathematical beauty and much of the beauty of laws of nature was irrelevant in the evolutionary period.

## Evolutionary solutions

- **Option 1:** Most of the extent of the sense of beauty is a spandrel, outside a small core that is evolutionarily helpful.
- **Response:** But now pursuit of beauty (e.g., pure mathematics or painting) seems to be the pursuit of a coincidental pleasure, no more significant than drugs or electrical stimulation of brain centers. And if these pursuits happen to be largely beneficial (but: tigers and mountains), then we still need to explain the coincidence between the beauty and the benefit.
- **Option 2:** Evolutionary benefits from expanded core: social cohesion through art, education through stories, relaxation (Anderson).
- **Response:** Highly speculative and still doesn't cover all cases, but it does reduce the problematic spandrel area. But there is still a problem area, with an insignificance worry as before.

# Theistic solutions

- If beauty is objective and significant, God has reason to give us a sense of beauty—a truth-tracking one.
- Even if beauty is subjective, if the activities it leads us to have independent value, God has reason to give us a sense that leads us to the activities.
  - Theists can take on board stories about social cohesion, mate selection, healthy food, relaxation etc.
  - And can add stories about religious pull of art.
- **Residual confirmation:** Even if evolution can give an explanation of the sense of beauty, evolution plus theism gives a better one:  
 $P(\text{sense of beauty} \mid \text{evolution}) < P(\text{sense of beauty} \mid \text{evolution and theism})$ .
- There is, however, an additional theodicy issue in that the sense of beauty can seduce away from the good.



## Arrangement: A Kantian argument

- We can first turn the Kantian pragmatic argument into an evidential one:
  - ① There is reason to give thanks for the beauty of the world.
  - ② There is no reason to give thanks for what lacks a creator.
  - ③ So, the beauty of the world has a creator.
- The difficulty lies in (1).
- But that we **feel grateful** is some evidence that we ought to give thanks, as emotions are evidential.
- (Denying the evidentiality of emotions might lead to moral scepticism.)

## Explanatory question

- Why are there so many instances of beauty around us, including vast ones, like nebulae or even whole galaxies, and tiny ones, like atomic structures of crystals, and structural ones, like laws of physics?
- Why is there so much beauty in mathematics?
- Why are there beings capable of appreciating, creating and uncovering beauty? (Fine-Tuning and evolutionary considerations come up.)

# Theistic explanations

- Many reasons for God to make there be beautiful things and us capable of accessing beauty:
  - Beauty points beyond the everyday and can draw us to God (contingently or on the basis of our nature or because beauty is divinity).
  - Beauty is objectively good and so is its appreciation.
  - Appreciation of beauty is an innocent pleasure, and innocent pleasures are good.
  - God wants us to do good science and sets up a particular genre of beauty as a guide to truth.
  - Artistry is good so God is an artist.
- Abstracta are grounded in God who is ultimately beautiful, and so we expect beauty in the world of abstracta (some of which we cannot yet appreciate) or in our intellectual participation in them.
- All this beauty is more likely if God exists than if God does not.

## Moral parallel: Conceptual argument

- Conceptual argument from beauty is stronger than moral conceptual arguments insofar as:
  - The Divinity Theory of beauty is a better theory than Divine Command Metaethics.
  - There are pretty decent non-theistic moral theories.
- But weaker insofar as:
  - Subjectivism is much less attractive for morality than for beauty.
  - Moral reasons are overriding and hence queerer than aesthetic ones.

## Moral parallels: Epistemic and sense arguments

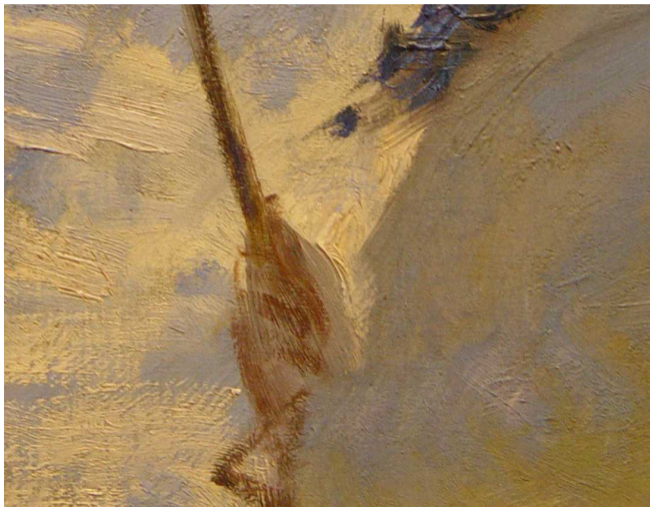
- Epistemic argument from beauty is weaker than moral epistemic argument insofar as subjectivism is much less attractive for morality than for beauty.
- Argument from sense of beauty is stronger than argument from moral sense insofar as the evolutionary benefits of a moral sense are much easier to find.

# Moral parallels: Arrangement explanatory argument and evil



- A moral analogue to the arrangement argument is design arguments based on good in the world.
- Such arguments are weakened by the problem of evil.
- Is there a parallel problem of ugliness?

## Moral parallels: Evil and ugliness



- It is much easier to give an Augustinian holistic solution to the problem of ugliness.
- Ugly things are used by artists as parts of a much greater work, and in the light of the whole isolated ugliness is unimportant, or beneficial.
- In the moral case, such a solution is much more problematic as it risks treating persons as mere means.

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# Ugliness and beauty asymmetry



- It is riskier to judge an artist untalented on the basis of a small part than to judge an artist talented on the basis of small part.
- In much of the best art, the whole can overcome the expectations from the part (e.g., surprising plot twists).
- But an artist who has talent in a small part has talent.
- So, positive judgments can't be confidently made based on a small part but negative ones not so much.

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# Conclusions

- Arguments from beauty provide some evidence for the existence of God.
- In some ways they are stronger than and in others weaker than parallel morality based arguments.
- Notably, aesthetic arguments are quite a bit less subject to undercutting by the problem of evil than standard design arguments.

