



## Chapter 15

# *Beauty as Evidence of Intelligent Design*

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### **Introduction**

FOR MANY CENTURIES, people looked at the natural world and saw evidence of intelligent design not only in its complex structures but in its sheer beauty. With the rise of Darwinian theory, however, and the moral horrors of the last two centuries, it has been exceedingly difficult for intellectuals to see this world as beautiful. Any beauty we might perceive, they think, must be a kind of illusion. In this chapter, I lay out some reasons for thinking that beauty in nature is real and that it is yet another indication that our world is the product of intelligent design rather than chance and necessity.

### **What Are the Transcendentals?**

But first we need some background. Let's start with what philosophers call *the transcendentals*. To be transcendent is to rise above our usual categories. So for God to be transcendent is, for instance, for Him to be beyond our usual limitations of matter, time, and space. What the ancients and medievals called *the transcendentals* were properties of being (or real things) that transcended all their differences. For all the differences between water, worms, humans, and angels, all real beings have certain transcendental properties or characteristics.

All beings have unity, goodness, truth, and beauty. The idea is that these are, in fact, just different ways to look at being.<sup>1</sup> So every real being has a unity to it; it is one whole thing or substance. Every real thing is true in the sense of being

<sup>1</sup> This is why the transcendentals are interconvertible: they are ultimately just ways of looking at the same reality.

intelligible or graspable by our *intellect*. Every real thing is good in that it can be appreciated by our *will*. And every real thing is beautiful in that it is capable of pleasing us when we understand it with our intellect *and* appreciate it with our will. So, in the classical view, truth is being as perceived by the intellect; goodness is being as appreciated by the will; and beauty is being as pleasing by using both intellect and will.<sup>2</sup>

I know what you are thinking: Is everything really good? What about Hitler? And is every real being truly beautiful? What about Chihuahuas? In reply, this understanding of goodness isn't about moral goodness but about the goodness of existence itself (ontological goodness). And, yes, Hitler existed as a human being, and it is good to exist as a human being. Similarly, you might not think Chihuahuas beautiful in every respect. I certainly don't. But there is a beauty to their very being. It is an astounding and beautiful thing that there should be dogs — and even dogs of different sizes and shapes. When you watch a dog show, you don't find each dog equally aesthetically appealing. But your heart and mind are still captivated by each and every one. Each expresses a unique way for dogs to be, and it is beautiful and pleasing that they should exist. But to say that all being is beautiful is not to say that it is all beautiful to the same degree.

Importantly, for the ancients and medievals, these transcendental properties of being point beyond themselves to the ultimate reality which grounds them. The presence of beauty and goodness in limited ways in our world seems to reflect the reality of ultimate goodness and beauty beyond our world — whether we're talking about Plato's notion of ultimate goodness or the God of classical theism. The experience of truth, beauty, and goodness in finite things seems to awaken in us a deep desire for a goodness, truth, and beauty that is infinite and eternal. This is not simply a nineteenth-century Romantic notion. This has been the reflective experience of thoughtful people from pagan antiquity through the Christian era and beyond.

<sup>2</sup> Notice that because of the intertwined nature of the transcendentals, it makes sense that our moral character and our sensitivity to truth (or lack thereof) affect the nature of our aesthetic judgments. See Philip Tallon, "The Argument from Play and Enjoyment: The Theistic Argument from Beauty and Play," in *Two Dozen (or so) Arguments for God*, ed. Jerry L. Walls and Trent Dougherty (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 321–340.

### What Is Beauty?

Let's hone in on beauty, now. Beauty has classically been thought to relate to form or structure. Beautiful things aren't haphazardly organized but have interesting patterns of color and shape. "The classical conception is that beauty consists of an arrangement of integral parts into a coherent whole, according to proportion, harmony, symmetry, and similar notions."<sup>3</sup>

Notice again how closely the perception of beauty is to the notions of truth and goodness. In perceiving something as beautiful, we sense its order and intelligibility (truth) as well as its goodness or admirability. We sense not just that we *happen* to feel a certain way about the object but that it is *intrinsically* worthy of our admiration and positive sentiments.

When we think of beauty, we almost immediately think of fine art. But notice that beauty goes well beyond art. Beautiful art, in fact, very often reflects what we see first in nature — its colors, lines, and proportions.

### The Ancients vs. the Moderns

As with many other issues, there is a great divide between the ancient and medieval understanding of beauty and beauty as understood by modernity. The ancients and medievals held that beauty is objective, that the natural world overflows with beauty, and that this beauty is the product of intelligent design. In a fragment of one of Aristotle's dialogues preserved by Cicero, Aristotle argues with a thought experiment:

If there were [people] who had always *lived* underground, in good dwellings filled with light that were adorned with statues and pictures, and furnished with everything in which those abroad who are thought

<sup>3</sup> Crispin Sartwell, "Beauty," sect. 2.1, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2016), online at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/beauty>. It seems that the classical view holds that aesthetic judgments are based upon but do not reduce to non-aesthetic features of shape, line, color, and the like. Aesthetic qualities emerge from the relation of parts and thus "supervene" (as philosophers say) on the arrangement of these non-aesthetic properties instead of reducing to them. There is an analogy with the kinetic theory of heat: showing that heat emerges from or supervenes on the motion of particles in no way shows heat to be illusory; rather, it explains how heat emerges from the interactions of other real features of our world.

supremely happy, who had nevertheless never gone out above ground, who had, however, heard and received a report that there was some governance and power of the gods, and who had then at some time, when the jaws of the earth opened, been able to escape from these hidden dwellings and to come out into these places which we inhabit, when suddenly they saw the earth, the seas, and the sky, understood the greatness of clouds and the power of winds, and looked at the sun, and understood its greatness and beauty, but especially its causal power, that it makes the day with light poured out over the whole sky, and when, by contrast, night darkened the earth, they saw the whole sky spangled and adorned with stars, and the changing phases of the moon's lights waxing and waning, and the rising and setting of all these, and their paths fixed in all eternity and unchangeable, when they saw this, most certainly would they have judged that there are gods and that these great works are works of gods.<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, for Aristotle, nature's beauty vastly outshines any human art — so much so that it obviously reveals its intelligent cause.

In Plato's *Symposium*, Plato argues that our experience with temporal, fading beauty reveals a deep longing within each of us for what we truly desire: unity with the source of all beauty — Beauty itself and ultimately the Good itself (the source of all reality). St. Augustine takes this in an obvious Christian way: What could the good source of all reality that reveals a designing intelligence and incredible power be other than God?<sup>5</sup>

Moderns, by contrast, have tended to view beauty as subjective;<sup>6</sup> they have tended to think of the apparent beauty of the natural world as either illusory or, even if real, the very lucky outcome of unintelligent forces. My how our view of

<sup>4</sup> Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, 2.95, quoted in Michael Maria Waldstein, *Glory of the Logos in the Flesh: Saint John Paul's Theology of the Body* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2021), 258–259.

<sup>5</sup> St. Augustine, *De Natura Boni contra Manichaeos* (Concerning the nature of the good, against the Manicheans), chap. 1.

<sup>6</sup> The language of *objective* and *subjective* can be confusing, since objective beauty requires a subjective experience for our awareness of it — and thus the objectivist about beauty admits there is something subjective. The real question is whether beauty is a real feature of our world or only an illusion of human consciousness.

nature has darkened! In the eighteenth century, and into the nineteenth, there was a grand tradition of looking at nature and making natural theological arguments, not only for God's existence but for His benevolence, from His intricate and beautiful designs.<sup>7</sup> But during the nineteenth century, the view of nature changed. Perhaps Tennyson captured it best when he spoke of "Nature, red in tooth and claw" in 1849.<sup>8</sup> After Darwin's theory of natural selection and the onslaught of the world wars, our view of nature was so radically changed that Richard Dawkins could write:

The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.<sup>9</sup>

This loss of a sense of the goodness and beauty of the natural world is surely part of the reason<sup>10</sup> for the continued decline of theism among Western intellectuals. This is tragic, in part, because at an intuitive level even hardened atheists will admit that the existence of beauty is what gives them the most pause.<sup>11</sup>

### Adjudicating the Dispute

So how might we adjudicate this dispute in the Western intellectual tradition between the ancients and medievals on the one hand and moderns of the last two centuries on the other? I will point to four different lines of evidence that suggest an intelligent cause behind the beauty of the natural world. Each of

<sup>7</sup> The tradition may be said to have culminated in William Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802) and the *Bridgewater Treatises* (1833–1836).

<sup>8</sup> Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam A. H. H.*, canto 56.

<sup>9</sup> Dawkins, *River Out of Eden*, 133.

<sup>10</sup> Notice how this view of the natural world only comes about as we have much less contact with the natural world than previous generations, because of the Industrial Revolution. This is surely no coincidence. Even most biologists spend far more time in front of their computers (writing grant proposals, performing computer simulations, and so forth) than out in nature.

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, C. S. Lewis's reflections on his conversion in *Surprised by Joy*. Note, too, that we have to be talked out of the world's beauty by naturalism. It is not the "natural" view. Richard Dawkins says, in *Climbing Mount Improbable* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), p. 256, that he asked his daughter what flowers were for, and she said, "To make the world pretty, and to help the bees make honey for us." This is the intuitive human view.

these lines of evidence makes it more likely than not that there is a designer of our world.

I do not claim that any of these lines of evidence is overwhelming and “proves” that our world is the product of design. Still, note two things. First, each of these lines of evidence is independent, and thus I am offering an inference to the best explanation argument that is much stronger than any one of these lines of evidence separately. Second, if any (or all) of the other arguments for intelligent design (from Behe, Dembski, Meyer, Axe, and many others) make design more likely — and I believe they do — then this aesthetic case for design could function as part of a larger cumulative case argument for intelligent design that is stronger still.

In what follows, I look at four facts involving beauty that favor intelligent design much more strongly than any competing hypothesis. We will see that while there is something to be said in favor of competing hypotheses regarding an individual fact, no competing hypothesis explains all four data points nearly as well as design.

### **Evidence #1: The Existence of Rational Standards of Beauty**

The first fact supporting the design hypothesis is that there are normative facts about aesthetic value. Naturalism has long tried to dismiss all normativity (norms or standards) from the world, especially moral normativity. But today the vast majority of ethicists recognize that there are objective facts about moral value: committing genocide is objectively wrong, for instance. Similarly, while naturalists have tried to dismiss aesthetic values — claiming that aesthetic statements are simply expressions of emotion<sup>12</sup> — that there are true aesthetic claims is difficult to deny.

One often hears that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” If this is right, then perhaps there are no true statements about beauty but only true statements about what various individuals prefer. The Enlightenment philosopher David

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*. Notice that such folks have a very low (and mistaken) view of emotions. Emotions are typically more like perceptions than raw feelings or sensations. See Robert C. Roberts, *Emotions in the Moral Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013). If Roberts is right, then emotions can be more accurate or less accurate in their perception of moral or aesthetic value.

Hume claimed that “beauty is no quality in things themselves: it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty.”<sup>13</sup> He thought the beautiful is just whatever happens to cause pleasure to a given subject. Hume’s position is supported by the fact that there is so much disagreement about aesthetic judgment. Because of such disagreement, there must not be any facts about whether something is beautiful or any facts about whether one object is more or less beautiful than another.

On the face of it, however, our aesthetic judgments are judgments about the objects themselves, not expressions of emotion or statements about our own preferences. If subjectivism about beauty were correct, we could never be wrong about our aesthetic judgments. But if you think my children’s drawings are more beautiful than a Rembrandt, you are quite mistaken. Moreover, on a subjectivist view of beauty, we wouldn’t expect so many aesthetic judgments to be shared cross-culturally. Yet as the philosopher of art Denis Dutton notes:

Taste for both natural beauty and for the arts travel across cultures with great ease. Beethoven is adored in Japan. Peruvians love Japanese wood-block prints. Inca sculptures are regarded as treasures in British museums, while Shakespeare is translated into every major language of the Earth. Or just think about American jazz or American movies — they go everywhere. There are many differences among the arts, but there are also universal, cross-cultural aesthetic pleasures and values.<sup>14</sup>

Notice too that many of our aesthetic disagreements are about matters of degree — about how beautiful something is — rather than about whether an object is beautiful or ugly. Our judgments are not as diverse or arbitrary, then, as it might first appear. And where they do diverge, there are plausible explanations.

For instance, our wiring can differ so that some are more sensitive to some kinds of order, harmony, beauty than other people. A few people even have extreme deficiencies in aesthetic appreciation. Those with “musical anhedonia,” for example, have pleasure centers in the brain that do not reward listening to music. So they

<sup>13</sup> David Hume, *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary* (1742; London: J. B. Bebbington, 1862), 155.

<sup>14</sup> Denis Dutton, “A Darwinian Theory of Beauty,” TED, TED Conferences, 2010, [https://www.ted.com/talks/denis\\_dutton\\_a\\_darwinian\\_theory\\_of\\_beauty/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/denis_dutton_a_darwinian_theory_of_beauty/transcript?language=en).

take no pleasure in it (unlike the rest of us). More than this, from a philosophical perspective, no finite thing can contain all of beauty. And so, while every substance can be considered beautiful, it may also have some measure of disorder and lack of harmony. If this is right, it would explain much of our disagreement in that some pick up on the beauty that is present and others notice beauty that is lacking.<sup>15</sup>

Even if genuine disagreement were rampant, however, the sheer fact of disagreement itself doesn't imply that no one is right. In fact, it would be strange if we argued about our aesthetic judgments and there were no truth of the matter. People don't tend to argue about things with no truth value. We don't usually expect people to share our subjective tastes. In fact, Humean subjectivism about aesthetic judgment leaves no room for us to develop our tastes and sensibilities, as most of us think we have done as we have matured. On this view, there could never be an expert in art or someone who has honed their sense of judgment about beauty. Yet there clearly are experts.

So we have many indications that there are objective aesthetic facts; that our world contains not only moral values but aesthetic ones; that there is an objective standard for what is beautiful. The question, then, is what accounts for this? If the world is wholly material, just a bunch of atoms moving around, where does the normativity come from? What grounds these facts or makes them true? How could there be an objective moral or aesthetic standard if there is just your view and my view but no objective, God's-eye viewpoint?

If there is a good and intelligent being responsible for our world, however — one who is beautiful in that he is admirable and would please us in being known — then it makes sense that there are such standards of both moral and aesthetic value.<sup>16</sup> So the fact that there is an objective standard and hence facts about what is beautiful and ugly favors an intelligence behind the material world.

<sup>15</sup> See Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* (1933; Providence, RI: Cluny Media, 2020), chap. 5. Modern art is so contentious that it leads many people to believe that disagreement over beauty is more common than it really is. As Philip Tallon points out in the previously cited "The Theistic Argument from Beauty and Play," one reason for this is that much of modern art is *intentionally* ambiguous. I would add that the more art has strayed from trying to be beautiful and has become almost wholly about abstract ideas, the more it would make sense for our judgments to diverge.

<sup>16</sup> This isn't to say that such a being must voluntaristically declare the standard but that the standard exists because he exists as such an admirable being. Hence, things which reflect more of being, which cohere together, are harmonious, have depth and so forth, are beautiful insofar as they approximate the likeness of such a being.



## Evidence #2: The Existence of Real Beauty

The second fact about beauty that favors an intelligent origin for our world is the actual existence of natural beauty itself. Previously I only argued that the existence of objective standards of beauty confirms that the world is designed. But here I argue from the much more obvious fact that our world is beautiful. This is to be expected on the intelligent design (ID) view, but not on naturalistic views of the origin of our universe, planet, and biological life.

Two facts are especially important to keep in mind as we proceed. *First*, beauty is to be expected on ID, because beauty is perceived by intelligent agents, they value it, and they can select for it when they create or design things. Natural selection and the like, by contrast, are blind and hence insensitive to beauty. Hence it is not to be expected.

*Second*, and just as important, our uniform and repeated experience indicates an intelligent origin in the cases where we can observe both beauty and its origin. We don't observe the kind of order and harmony involved in beauty arising through chance or trial and error processes. Sometimes beauty comes from simple laws, but of course ID theorists like Robin Collins (2009) have argued for an intelligent origin of the laws of physics,<sup>17</sup> and Benjamin Wiker and Jonathan Witt (2006) have made ID arguments from the order, harmony, and beauty seen in the laws of chemistry.<sup>18</sup> The point is that in non-controversial cases in art, literature, music, moral character, and so forth, beauty proceeds invariably from intelligence.<sup>19</sup>

Now, naturalists often invoke natural selection as an explanation for why we find the world beautiful. Yet consider what you would expect *blind* natural selection to produce — even if it were as powerful as advertised. Its only “goal” is survival and reproduction — not to produce beauty or other things of value. On natural selection, all we should expect are cobbled-together utilitarian life forms that evolved to compete for resources or rapid reproduction. After all, beauty provides no selective advantage for organisms that cannot perceive beauty. Think about how ugly purely functional designs, such

<sup>17</sup> Collins, “The Teleological Argument.”

<sup>18</sup> Wiker and Witt, *A Meaningful World*.

<sup>19</sup> This of course parallels Stephen Meyer's argument for ID from the informational content in DNA. See Meyer, *Signature in the Cell*.

as those of parking garages, tend to be. This, it seems, is the best we should expect from natural selection.<sup>20</sup>

Two common Darwinian hypotheses are that we evolved to find safe environments attractive and that we evolved to see certain landscapes as beautiful because they resemble the African savannah on which we supposedly came of age as a species. But notice that we find all kinds of unsafe environments beautiful (e.g., glaciers, windswept deserts, volcanoes) as well as dangerous animals (e.g., lions, tigers, cheetahs). Plus, we find many landscapes that do not resemble the savannah beautiful (such as seashores) as well as, say, Romanesque or neoclassical art which cannot be found on the savannah.

Because natural selection pretty clearly fails to explain beauty, from Darwin and Wallace on the tendency has been to explain beautiful organic structures through “sexual selection.”<sup>21</sup> The idea is that organisms mate more often with those who have certain bodily characteristics and thus those characteristics, even if they do not directly aid fitness, will increase in the population. Many Darwinians have thought of these characteristics as proxies for fitness. Applied to humans, the idea is like this: you evolved to see your baby as beautiful so that you wouldn't eat it.<sup>22</sup> Those who didn't have an aesthetic preference for their offspring were less likely to pass on their genes.

<sup>20</sup> Bernard Brandstater, in “Intelligent Design: The Argument from Beauty,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2004), 12–20, 15, argues that on the hypothesis of natural selection one would expect “tough, rugged, even ugly surviving-type things” rather than the delicate beauty of flowers in the rain forest.

<sup>21</sup> Some, like Jerry Coyne, think of sexual selection as a special class of natural selection. See his article, “An Evolutionary Biologist Misrepresents Sexual Selection in The New York Times,” *Why Evolution Is True*, May 8, 2017, <https://whyevolutionistrue.wordpress.com/2017/05/08/an-evolutionary-biologist-misrepresents-sexual-selection>. Coyne's suggestion is not without merit. But things are more complicated, because the relationship between the two is indirect at best. Darwin, in *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871; New York: Penguin, 2004), 243, differentiates sexual selection from natural selection because the former focuses on reproduction rather than survival: sexual selection “depends on the advantage which certain individuals have over others of the same sex and species solely in respect of reproduction.” So sexual selection doesn't make one more fit or adapted but simply attracts more mates and hence leaves more offspring.

<sup>22</sup> Dutton, “A Darwinian Theory of Beauty.”

Sexual selection is often synonymous with “female choice,” because many of the beautiful structures to be explained are in males. The theory is that female eggs are more rare and hence valuable and hence females need to be choosy with their mates. Ernst Mayr, Julien Huxley, and others have observed that nothing Darwin said has been as contested as sexual selection. From the beginning, people have wondered whether Darwin introduced this principle only to handle cases where natural selection obviously failed.<sup>23</sup>

Evidential worries about sexual selection remain to this day. For instance, one would think that humans (given their intelligence) would be the most choosy about mates and sexual selection would be greatest in us. However, writes Steve Jones, “There is little evidence (in spite of much prurient speculation about beards, breasts and buttocks)” that these features have been modified by sexual selection.<sup>24</sup> One certainly wouldn’t have predicted the rise in obesity in the post-World War II era, given the nearly universal aversion to obesity in mates.

Further increasing the implausibility of sexual selection theories of beauty is that many leading proponents of sexual selection, for example, Richard Prum,<sup>25</sup> follow Darwin in claiming that beautiful bird features, for instance, evolve because others find them subjectively attractive rather than because they are proxies for fitness.<sup>26</sup> This seems extremely far-fetched among lower forms of life that display stunning beauty.<sup>27</sup> And it is implicitly an admission that the evidence indicates that beauty in nature is not adaptive or even a proxy for fitness (contrary to all Darwinian expectations).

<sup>23</sup> Ernst Mayr, “Sexual Selection and Natural Selection,” in *Sexual Selection and the Descent of Man: The Darwinian Pivot*, ed. Bernard Grant Campbell (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1972), 87–104.

<sup>24</sup> Steve Jones, *The Language of Genes* (New York: Bantam Doubleday, 1993), 92.

<sup>25</sup> Richard O. Prum, *The Evolution of Beauty: How Darwin’s Forgotten Theory of Mate Choice Shapes the Animal World* (New York: Doubleday, 2017).

<sup>26</sup> Darwin spoke of animal mate preferences as displaying a “taste for the beautiful” and an “aesthetic capacity.” See Richard O. Prum, “Aesthetic Evolution by Mate Choice: Darwin’s Really Dangerous Idea,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B* 367, no. 1600 (2012): 2253–2265, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2011.0285>. See also Dutton, “A Darwinian Theory of Beauty”: “Darwin . . . had no doubts that the peacock’s tail was beautiful in the eyes of the peahen.”

<sup>27</sup> Coyne, “An Evolutionary Biologist Misrepresents Sexual Selection.”

Even if beauty in the biological realm could be well explained by natural or sexual selection, not all examples of beauty in the natural world are *biological!* Hence, sexual selection cannot explain them even in principle.<sup>28</sup> The world is not just beautiful but beautiful at every level: from supernovas, to planet Earth at a distance, to Earth up close, to animal and plant life, to inside the cell, and so on without end.

To sum up this second line of reasoning, beauty is ubiquitous in the natural world and this is much, much more to be expected if our world is designed than if it is the product solely of non-intelligent forces with no foresight, no aesthetic preferences, and no ability to grasp aesthetic values.<sup>29</sup>

### **Evidence #3: The Human Capacity for Aesthetic Experience**

The third fact about beauty that supports design is the fact that we are built with a capacity for aesthetic experience. This seems much more to be expected on intelligent design than on naturalistic evolutionary accounts of the origin of the human person. Even if there are objective aesthetic values and real beauty in the world, why would blind evolutionary forces create creatures with an aesthetic sense if survival and reproduction are ignorant of those values? Other animals without an aesthetic sense seem to survive and reproduce just fine. In this regard, beetles are surely more successful than humans. Why would we need an aesthetic sense on Darwinian theory?

What we observe looks more like a conspiracy than a happy accident. Not only is there real beauty in the world, but there are creatures capable of appreciating it (even though this adds little to nothing to their survival). We not only need to have the right kinds of sense organs but an intellectual power capable

<sup>28</sup> Paul Davies, in *The Mind of God: The Scientific Basis for a Rational World* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 176, notes that beauty is a criterion of theory choice in physics because it has proved a good guide through experience: "If beauty is entirely biologically programmed, selected for its survival value alone, it is all the more surprising to see it re-emerge in the esoteric world of fundamental physics, which has no direct connection with biology. On the other hand, if beauty is more than mere biology at work, if our aesthetic appreciation stems from contact with something firmer and more pervasive, then it is surely a fact of major significance that the fundamental laws of the universe seem to reflect this 'something.'"

<sup>29</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 190–191.

of comprehending the intelligible patterns and a desiring faculty (will) capable of delighting in them. This delight is not mere pleasurable sensation, like that of a dog being scratched behind the ears. It is a higher-order appreciation which follows the intellectual act of appreciating the worth, value, or admirability of the arrangement of parts.

Against the above account, one could argue that aesthetic appreciation is just a result of having will and intellect, which *do* promote survival and reproduction. Hence, our being built to perceive and appreciate beauty is a happy accident of evolution. Yet it isn't nearly as clear as it might seem at first glance that having rational powers of intellect and will greatly increase one's ability to survive or reproduce. No other animal has them, for instance, and many of them seem much better at surviving and reproducing. Rational powers could come in handy, but they also lead to slower reactions and overthinking matters instead of responding quickly and instinctually.<sup>30</sup> And rationality introduces a host of moral qualms and complications that keep one from doing what one might instinctually do to survive and reproduce (such as eating other humans, mating with everyone possible, or murdering rivals). We've used our rational powers to make some medical advances, but we've also used them to degrade our own environment, wage war on our own species, and abort our own children. And the more one hones one's powers of intellect through education today, the less offspring one leaves: education levels are inversely proportional to the number of children one produces.<sup>31</sup>

Saying that our capacity for aesthetic appreciation is a result of our powers of will and intellect only pushes the question back to how in the world those evolved. And it is not as if there is a clear and compelling account of the evolution of human intelligence, given the vast differences between us and even the most similar brute animals. As one recent study in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* argued:

Microscopic study of the human brain has revealed neural structures, enhanced wiring, and forms of connectivity among nerve cells not

<sup>30</sup> Rousseau recognized this in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*.

<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of the U.S. Census Bureau statistics on this, see Cheryl Wetstein, "Education Level Inversely Related to Childbearing," *The Washington Times* (May 9, 2011), <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/may/9/education-level-inversely-related-to-childbearing>.

found in any animal, challenging the view that the human brain is simply an enlarged chimpanzee brain. . . . We . . . [examine] eight cognitive cases — teaching, short-term memory, causal reasoning, planning, deception, transitive inference, theory of mind, and language — and find, in all cases, that similarities between animal and human abilities are small, dissimilarities large.<sup>32</sup>

If we had a clear account of the step-wise evolution of our faculties from ape ancestors with only slight modifications, that would be one thing. But as it is, punting to the difficult task of explaining our other faculties in evolutionary terms seems like little more than a promissory note.<sup>33</sup>

So the question remains as to why we have faculties that allow us to make true aesthetic judgments. Evolution does not seem to help, as making true aesthetic judgments does not add to survival or reproduction. Hence, I conclude that the existence of beings like us, who have faculties for aesthetic appreciation, faculties that are able to be honed to make true aesthetic judgments, favors the design hypothesis over naturalism.

<sup>32</sup> David Premack, "Human and Animal Cognition: Continuity and Discontinuity," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 104, no. 35 (2007): 13861–13867, 13861, <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.0706147104>.

<sup>33</sup> Most Darwinian theories of the evolution of our aesthetic perception and judgment really reduce to subjectivism about aesthetic value — which, as I've already argued, is implausible. Darwin clearly thought that our moral sense evolved without regard to our perception of moral value. He writes: "If, for instance, to take an extreme case, men were reared under precisely the same conditions as hive-bees, there can hardly be a doubt that our unmarried females would, like the worker-bees, think it a sacred duty to kill their brothers, and mothers would strive to kill their fertile daughters; and no one would think of interfering." Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, 122.

It has been forcefully argued that our faculty of moral judgment (Sharon Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value," *Philosophical Studies* 127, no. 1 (2006): 109–166) and our faculties in general (Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), chap. 10) are likely unreliable given naturalistic evolution. After all, they evolved for survival and reproduction rather than truth. Similarly, on naturalistic evolution, our aesthetic judgments — even if they aid group cohesion — are unlikely to be true, since even random aesthetic judgments would aid group cohesion so long as they are shared.

#### Evidence #4: Aesthetic Experiences

Last, but not least, the nature of our aesthetic experiences themselves testifies against naturalism and in favor of design. It could be that there is real beauty in nature and that we are built to perceive it, yet the experience of beauty might be mundane or matter-of-fact. Aesthetic experiences might be like our experience of the solidity of material objects, that is, utterly unremarkable and signalling little need of further explanation. And yet, in the actual world, the experience of beauty seems to stir our souls — to point beyond the ordinary world — like little else. In fact, for many, aesthetic experiences with both art and nature have seemed to put us in touch with ultimate goodness or a transcendent reality.

Listen to the qualitative description of such experiences by atheist philosopher Anthony O’Hear:

In experiencing beauty we feel ourselves to be in contact with a deeper reality than the everyday. . . . Art can seem revelatory, just as it does seem to answer to objective standards. It can seem to take us to the essence of reality. . . . It is as if our . . . appreciation of things external to us . . . [reflects] a deep and pre-conscious harmony between us and the world from which we spring. If this feeling is not simply an illusion . . . it may say something about the nature of reality itself.<sup>34</sup>

O’Hear is not alone. Many naturalists admit that their experiences of overwhelming beauty give them pause about naturalism, and for good reason. Agnostic philosopher Paul Draper, for instance, readily admits that our enjoyment of beauty is evidence for a transcendent Creator.<sup>35</sup> Roger Scruton too, so far as I can tell a purely secular thinker, clearly senses the transcendence-indicating force of such experiences. He even thinks we need such transcendent experiences to have a fulfilled life.<sup>36</sup> On naturalism, it is hard to see why experiences of great beauty would seem as if they stem from a transcendent source. But if there is a transcendent,

<sup>34</sup> Anthony O’Hear, *Beyond Evolution: Human Nature and the Limits of Evolutionary Explanation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 195, 199.

<sup>35</sup> Although, it should be added, he thinks it is outweighed by the evidence of evil. See Paul Draper, “Seeking but Not Believing: Confessions of a Practicing Agnostic,” in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 204.

<sup>36</sup> Roger Scruton, *Why Beauty Matters*, BBC documentary film (London: BBC, 2009).

designing intelligence, this makes perfect sense. Further, many of us have had a sense of extreme gratitude upon witnessing a grand sunrise, finding a delicate wildflower, or seeing one's child for the first time. Many have had a sense of gratitude upon such experiences of beauty, even if they do not think there is a cosmic or transcendent intelligence. Such experiences clearly evidence in favor of there being such a cosmic or transcendent intelligence, for they are just what we would expect if such experiences were gifts from a cosmic or transcendent intelligence.

It isn't just objective beauty's existence, here, but the intrinsic *quality* of the experience itself that testifies against naturalism. People often think that such experiences are too private and personal, or too mystical and numinous, to be the basis of an argument to design. Some people think that evidence can only consist in physical things rather than in experiences.<sup>37</sup> Experiences seem too subjective. But if experiences do not count as *prima facie* evidence, science is in trouble. What is one's evidence that there is a real material world rather than that we are in the Matrix or being deceived by Descartes's evil demon? Surely it is the fact that we have strongly indicative experiences in which there *seem* to be material objects like trees, coupled with the fact that we have no strong counterevidence against the reality of the material world, that justifies our belief in the material world.

This leads many epistemologists to think that evidence for our beliefs consists in experiences and that experiences lend *prima facie* support to the truth of the content of the experience.<sup>38</sup> If this is the correct account of epistemic justification, then experiences of beauty which seem to point beyond themselves to the transcendent — experiences had by sensitive people everywhere from pagans like Plato, to Christians like C. S. Lewis, to agnostics like Draper and Scruton — are at least *prima facie* evidence in favor of a transcendent source responsible for our world.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> I argue against this view in Logan Paul Gage, "Objectivity and Subjectivity in Epistemology: A Defense of the Phenomenal Conception of Evidence" (Ph.D. diss., Baylor University, 2014).

<sup>38</sup> For a defense of this view, see Logan Paul Gage and Blake McAllister, "Phenomenal Conservatism," in *Debating Christian Religious Epistemology: An Introduction to Five Views on the Knowledge of God*, ed. John M. DePoe and Tyler Dalton McNabb (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 61–81.

<sup>39</sup> To be clear, though intelligent design does not entail a transcendent designer (even if it provides evidence for a transcendent designer), a transcendent designer of the beauty of our world and our experience of it entails intelligent design.



More than this, such experiences favor an *intelligent* origin of the material world rather than some amorphous transcendent force. After all, as I have argued, only an intelligent being would be sensitive to aesthetic value and design a beautiful world where we are built to share in this aesthetic pleasure. The fact that O’Hear, Scruton, Draper, and others report such experiences indicates that they cannot be dismissed as the product of wish fulfillment or preconceived expectations.

Darwinians can offer counterargument to the effect that we only *think* that aesthetic experiences put us in touch with the transcendent. But like skeptics of other kinds (e.g., moral skeptics or external world skeptics), they need to offer strong arguments to overcome the most natural interpretation of our experience: namely, that we are really and truly in touch with the transcendent — that it speaks to us through such experiences. The default view should always be the most natural interpretation of the experience as it presents itself to us. If we deny such commonsense epistemology, we will deny that we have any access to the material world and undermine science itself.

Such overwhelming experiences of beauty certainly function as good evidence that our world is the product of intelligent design rather than unintelligent forces *for the person experiencing them*. But notice that, because we have numerous such reports of these experiences across cultures, all of us have good testimonial evidence that we can perceive a transcendent reality through aesthetic experience, even if we have not had such experiences ourselves.

### **Conclusion: Summary and Consequences for Science**

I have argued that four things — (1) objective aesthetic values, (2) the existence of beauty in the natural world, (3) our capacity for aesthetic perception and judgment, and (4) the experiences of beauty themselves — all favor an intelligent cause for the natural world rather than naturalism. Perhaps each one of these facts, considered separately, only slightly evidences in favor of ID. But we must remember the power of accumulating evidence. Four independent lines of evidence in favor of a single conclusion can be quite powerful when considered together. And that’s what we have here: a cumulative case that points in a single direction. These four facts indicate the truth of the ancient and medieval, commonsense view that our world is intelligently designed.

In closing, I’d like to suggest that the argument from beauty adds not just quantitatively to the case for ID but qualitatively. It could well be the case

that our world gave signs of design without much aesthetic beauty. Picture a world made of simple mechanical devices that are still beyond nature's ability to produce. Such a world might point to a designing intelligence. But the stark fact of beauty goes beyond this. It points to an artist sharing the goodness and joy of artistic creation that goes well beyond mere functional mechanisms. In this way, it supports not just intelligent design but theism. It confirms what the Church has always taught. As Aquinas puts it, "all creatures are related to God as art products are to an artist. . . . Consequently, the whole of nature is like an artifact of the divine artistic mind."<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, in *Contra Gentiles: On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*, ed. Joseph Kenny, O.P., trans. Anton C. Pegis, James F. Anderson, Vernon J. Bourke, and Charles J. O'Neil (New York: Hanover House, 1955–1957), 3.100, <https://isidore.co/aquinas/ContraGentiles.htm>.