

Living Beauty

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In his essay, “Goose Music,” Aldo Leopold admits to having “congenital hunting fever,” and that, coupled with the fact that he has three sons to train in its virtues, keeps him shivering in his jacket at daybreak, fingers so frozen that the geese have nothing to fear from his aim. It’s not clear how many shots he fires, but they are all wide of their mark. The hour is early and the cold is intense, and Leopold has just missed what he describes as a “big gander.”

But Leopold gives no indication of aggravation or disappointment. Almost as quickly as that big gander veered away from his gunfire, he rejoices in the morning’s outcome. “[M]iss or no miss, I saw him, I heard the wind whistle through his set wings as he came honking out of the gray west, and I felt him so that even now I tingle at the recollection.” Hunting, it turns out, is not only about the pursuit of game. It is also about the pursuit of beauty. “Poets sing and hunters scale the mountains primarily for one and the same reason—the thrill to beauty.” Whether with weapon or recorder, game hunters, fishermen, “field-glass hunters,” “rare plant hunters,” “nature-loving poets,” and “professional conservationists” all hunt for “living beauty.” To be fully *human*, Leopold declares, we must participate in the natural world; to be fully *alive*, we must experience the living beauty of the natural world.

Leopold’s notion of beauty exceeds the conventional confinement of beauty or aesthetics to art or art history. If we think of beauty only as having to do with appearance or pleasure or art, we won’t understand the new philosophical territory on which Leopold planted the science of ecology. Leopold’s allegiance to the standards of careful observation led him to trust his direct experience of nature as evidence that there was something more at work in the world than either scientific or economic materialism could measure. When he invited his readers to enjoy the early spring sky dance of the woodcock or to sip a cup of coffee as field sparrows, robins, orioles, and wrens welcomed the new day, he was beckoning readers toward a way of experiencing the world that presupposed a sweeping metaphysical shift. And when he sat out after sunset next to the Rio Gavilan in northern Mexico, listening to the music in the river, he knew there was a grandeur and richness to wilderness that exceeded its usefulness and monetary value.

Leopold’s reference to beauty as essential to land health is the most important signifier of this new worldview. He understood nature as a network of social relations between incalculable varieties of beings, all filled with resident vitality and intrinsic value—and yielding beauty. For Leopold, beauty

was the “key-log” in unjamming the whole mess made by economic and scientific mechanism. Beauty, he maintained, is fundamental to an ecological worldview. Not to recognize this was to make a place of great aliveness into a mere repository of commodities.

The importance of Leopold’s insight should not be underestimated. When it is, Leopold is made into a much more conventional thinker than he was. And we remain tied to an explanatory system that, no matter how well it explicates the ebb and flow of energy or the interdependencies of processes, explains away experience of the intrinsic, immediate worth of the natural world.

In sharp contrast to Leopold’s sensitivities to the wild world as a place limned with value is the assumption that beauty is simply a judgment that originates in the human mind. It appears in conventional wisdom as the claim that “beauty is only in the eye of the beholder.” This assertion is the product of the modern philosophical tradition, particularly as shaped by Rene Descartes and Immanuel Kant.

In this tradition, objective reality is thought of as a landscape of “bare facts,” fully describable in terms of its physical characteristics. According to Descartes, judgments of color, emotional intensity, ethical worth, and aesthetic value are like a brocaded silk cloth, overlaid on the material world that lies untouched beneath it. Any value that might be attributed to a fact is not intrinsic to the fact itself but is an embellishment of the fact by the individual experiencing it. For example, the sweet smell of an orange and its vibrant color are not fundamental to the nature of an orange; after all, over time brilliant color fades and sweetness dissolves. But though it may shrivel, an orange continues to have physical dimension and form. These are the properties that are considered to be primary qualities of the orange. All other qualities are secondary or tertiary and not part of the objective reality of the orange.

Beauty, like sweetness and orangeness, is a judgment formulated by a perceiver, descriptive of his or her unique experience. Just as an orange may be sweet to one person, bitter to another, so beauty is a personal sentiment. It is not an objective quality of the world, but a mental laminate, layered onto physical forms by our subjective experience.

Kant radically extended this anthropocentric approach. We cannot know the world in itself, says Kant. We can only know it as it is ordered by our minds. The world gives us raw data—the “thatness” of some world beyond our minds—but the “whatness” of the data is created almost whole cloth in our minds. All knowledge then, not just our judgments about beauty, is “in the eye of the beholder.” And the beholder, the human subject, is the source of the rational order of the world. Filtered as it is through our mental lens, the world is made in the image of the human mind.

The assumption that beauty is a subjective production of the human mind implies the tacit and damaging proposition that the reason why there is no inherent value in the world (apart from that given to it by human beings) is because reality fundamentally consists of merely physical entities. The idea that beauty is entirely subjective is coincident with the idea of a valueless, lifeless nature. The exception, of course, is human experience. It is the human subject who endows lifeless nature with value. In this way, modernist philosophy continues the habit of making humans ontologically different from the natural world (even as it affirms that humans are genetic relatives of the great apes). Nature is physical, material, mathematically measurable, and mindless. It functions like a machine. Human life can be likewise described, with the one exception that countermands all else: Humans have minds. They are subjects in a world of objects, chess players in control of not only the board but also the rules of the game. The human project becomes a game of domesticating, controlling, and deliberately remaking nature to human benefit.

A world devoid of anything that makes an orange sweet, a berry bush dewy, a late fall day glorious or a summer morning glad, is a world without any value except what is given to it by an external source. That value is, more often than not, the value that comes with utility. Nature's value is as a useable resource for human purposes or enjoyment. All the many constituents of the natural world, whether as single lives or in relation with each other, have no aim of their own or capacity for feeling or freedom. They—and all of nature—are lifeless.

The word *mundane* literally means “belonging to the world.” But in a world bereft of life and beauty, it connotes boredom and tedium, the dullness of a place stripped of the qualities that foster character and personality. The word *pedestrian*, too, bears this same stamp: to walk in such a world is “unexciting” and “unlovely.” Together, these synonyms give etymological evidence of a devalued world.

In a deeply dug grave, somewhere in this unremarkable landscape, nature and beauty lie interned together, victims of the mechanism and materialism that define modern science and philosophy.

“No word means much by itself,” said Wendell Berry, talking about the word *sustainability*. “[Y]ou have to find a context for it in which it can mean something.” Our contemporary use of the word *beauty* is enmeshed in the philosophical and methodological assumptions of modern science that give primacy to the material and measurable aspects of reality. Where intrinsic value is denied to experience, as it is in Cartesian-Kantian metaphysics, aesthetics (and ethics) contribute nothing to our knowledge of reality. Under these conditions, beauty (and all aesthetic inquiry) was reduced to personal, unverifiable judgment. Aesthetics becomes peripheral, an unnecessary way of knowing. It took refuge in the realm of art and the philosophy of art as a way of inquiring into the meaning of cultural production but not of nature or reality itself. (Aesthetics eventually regained some power but only as a mercenary tool of commerce, with beauty as its most lucrative agent.)

But our modern context for the word *beauty* is strikingly different from the preceding two thousand years of western thought. Beginning with the sixth-century-B.C.E. Greek philosopher Pythagoras, and extending through the Renaissance, beauty was linked to meditations on the order and structure of the universe. The Greek word *cosmos* means “order,” and the order that was discovered came from the relations of numbers and the harmony that resulted. Because beauty was assumed to be the consequence of harmonious order, the cosmic order was regarded as beautiful. This was a mathematical–aesthetic vision of the universe.

Out of this vision emerged what has been called “The Great Theory of Beauty.” It is based on the idea that the structure of the universe can be expressed by a set of mathematical and musical proportions. These proportions are recapitulated throughout the cosmos, giving coherence to the arrangements of life, from microcosm to macrocosm. In the visual arts, the word *symmetry* was used to describe the goal of right proportion. In the aural arts, the word was *harmony*. In his text on architecture, the first-century-B.C.E. Roman architect and engineer Marcus Vitruvius Pollio (Vitruvius) showed that this theory could be applied architecturally as well, and he established what he believed to be right relationships of height-width-length in order to achieve structural symmetry. The Pantheon in Rome is often cited as an example of the Vitruvian ideal. In the mid-fifteenth century, Leone Battista Alberti applied Vitruvius’ principle that beauty is “the harmony of all parts in relation to one another” to the magnificent Basilica of Santa Maria Novella. And in 1490, Leonardo da Vinci sketched his version of the *Vitruvian Man*—the now-iconic image of a male body inscribed within both a circle and a square, drawn so that the human figure’s measurement from forehead to chin is one-tenth of the total height and the span between the outstretched arms is equal to the

distance from heel to head. “Man,” Leonardo declared, “is the model of the world,” a replication of the geometric beauty of the cosmos.

The Pythagorean inheritance is a philosophical system in which the entire universe participates in harmonious relations. Thus beauty abounds. So compelling was this image of the cosmos and of human life—of an intelligible world that, despite all the vagaries of human existence, was harmonious and beautiful—that it was sustained throughout the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance. Johannes Kepler (1571–1630) embraced it, and he titled his 1619 work describing the new calculations of planetary orbits *Harmonice Mundi* (“harmonies of the world”). When Kepler found that the celestial orbits were elliptical rather than circular and thus, according to the Pythagorean system, harmoniously imperfect, he first reacted with aversion to his own discovery. Eventually, he became convinced that an even greater order was present, one that preserved the principal Pythagorean values of mathematical order, ratio, harmony, and beauty.

Some have interpreted Kepler’s loyalty to a universe in which fact and value are interlaced, in which the empirical structure of the universe can be declared beautiful, as nothing more than a holdover of the medieval mind, a psychological and intellectual handicap he needed to overcome in order to cross cleanly and completely to the side of modern science. But to contend that the genius Kepler was either more naive than we moderns or that his mystical inclinations were the result of knowing-not-enough about reality is quite obviously a modern conceit. The same must then be assumed of Plato, Plotinus, Cicero, Augustine, Boethius, Aquinas, and Copernicus, all of whom upheld the idea of harmonic proportion and cosmic beauty as unapologetically as we assume the law of gravity. Surely, their desire for an intelligible universe was as strong as ours. And surely they were at least as aware as we of the ruthless and heart-breaking ills that relentlessly shadow our lives. Yet, they believed that in its deepest structure, the universe was so ordered as to yield harmony and beauty.

THE FACT THAT IN the modern era we have tried to understand both the world and ourselves apart from beauty is neither an oversight nor a minor philosophical decision. And the fact that we have lived as if beauty doesn’t matter in the “real world” is not unrelated to the callous ways in which we have uprooted places of great beauty and life.

We need a more accurate way of seeing the world. The natural world refutes the position that reality is a dull affair, devoid of meaning and value. Our encounters with nature are neither mundane nor pedestrian. These facts are a signal that some philosophical mistake has been made by those who portray the natural world as bare and lifeless matter.

Mechanism, says the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, is true under certain general abstractions but false as a fully explanatory model of experience. In spite of the fact that mechanistic explanations of reality have been immensely useful in expanding human technological abilities, there remains much of importance they cannot account for—life, feeling, freedom, purpose, consciousness, moral worth, and beauty. Quantum physics and relativity theory can be added to the list. Despite these inadequacies, we cling to the modern scientific worldview as if it were the whole truth about reality.

Whitehead set out to correct the exaggerations of the modern worldview, with its roots in seventeenth-century physics and its commitment to a metaphysics based primarily on what can be seen and measured. In Whitehead’s view, a more accurate philosophy addresses all experience, not just physical experience. “The various human interests which suggest cosmologies are science, aesthetics, ethics, religion,” he wrote. Each inquiry discloses something important about the nature of reality. The task of philosophy, Whitehead argues, is not to deny or neglect one aspect over

another but to coordinate the partial truths vouchsafed by each. Since the seventeenth century, the dominant cosmology has been the one derived from science. This has constituted both real gain and real loss. A more adequate metaphysics would not discard the whole range of experiences that occur in our lives. Philosophical adequacy (and honesty) requires an appeal to lived experience. Aesthetic experience is without doubt a part of our experience of the world. Explaining it away is bad metaphysics.

Whitehead built a new philosophy, one that reversed the judgment reached by mechanistic philosophy. “It is the essence of life that it exists for its own sake, as the intrinsic reaping of value.” This was Leopold’s intuition as well. Leopold’s description of ecological “rightness” was meant as a guide for a new kind of science, one that involved vitality and value and recognized values beyond utility and profit margin. Whitehead’s metaphysics, which he called a philosophy of organism but which is now better known as process philosophy, begins where Leopold’s empirical studies led him: with the insistence that the world is best understood as a marvel of *relations*, suffused with a worth and creativity that cannot be reduced to dead, valueless matter or figured in dollars and cents. “How do we add content to the notion of bare activity?” Whitehead asked. “This question can be answered only by fusing life with nature.” Nature is alive, and because it is alive, it is imbued with value and aesthetic worth.

For both Leopold and Whitehead, the value most associated with livingness is beauty. Beauty refers to the quality of aliveness and the vivacity that inheres in living beings and is intensified in the relations between beings. It is descriptive of the way things organize themselves, a measure of the degree of life present throughout a living structure. Beauty contributes to the success of life and the enjoyment of being alive. It is what we name those experiences of life that affirm our own vitality in relation to the vitality of other beings.

Beauty is the value that arises from an innumerable number of finely tuned adjustments of actuality-to-actuality, adjustments that enable and sustain life. This means that it is not a quality—blue or shiny or well-proportioned, or a composite of these—overlaid on a substance. It is not owned by the world of art or fashion or cosmetics. It is not “skin deep.” Nor is it simply “in the eye of the beholder.” It is embedded in life, part of the dynamic, relational structure of the world created by the concert of living beings. And it is what we name those relational structures that encourage and support freshness and zest so that life can continue to make life.

To conceive of beauty in this way, as both aim and consequence of life, involves a very different metaphysics from the Cartesian-Kantian narrative, one that connects livingness with feeling and value. In an aesthetic-organic metaphysics, the aim of life is to be alive in ways that affirm the full measure of life beyond mere survival. To be sure, this worldview requires a detailed exposition. But beauty is so clearly a part of our experience of being alive and encountering the livingness of other beings that it is astounding we have relinquished this plain fact.

NATURE, LIFE, AND BEAUTY cannot be untangled. The philosophical attempt to do so has done great harm to the world. What makes wilderness wild is the great “willful” effort exerted by the abundance of life residing in relation. And where there is much life, there is the potential for great beauty. Indeed, beauty and biodiversity are concurrent, the multiplicity of life yielding patterns of living vibrancy.

Neither wilderness nor wild beauty is something humans can make. They are the production of many life-seeking creatures in relationship, adjusting life to life, often over durations that exceed human

history. Because the natural world is not constructed like a machine, once it is dismantled all the power tools in the world cannot reassemble it. If there are no more woods or wolves, they cannot, at a later date, be retrofitted back into the contraption of nature. The beauty they generated, the invaluable issue of millions of life events, is likewise irreparable. Life, wilderness, biodiversity, and beauty are an interlaced knot; when the cord is cut, the intricacies are lost, the entire weave undone.

Leopold's essay, "Goose Music," begins with the gander's getaway but ends with the haunting question, "What if there be no more goose music?" In an anthropocentric narrative, the loss of goose music would mean the end of a valued game bird. For Leopold and Whitehead and any who believe that every living being is a storehouse of value, it would mean much more: the loss of a unique form of life, the loss of its unique beauty, and reverberations of loss throughout the whole elegant symphony of life. "We do not live *on* the earth," says Wendell Berry, "but *with* and *within* its life."⁸ Absent the goose and its distinctive voicing of life, its V dance of migration, and its willful presence, the community of life-within-life is literally *dismembered*. We fall downward—as if shot by a marksman who cares little for the whistle of wind through pinioned feathers—into a wasteland of our own making.
