

Beauty and Perception

Welcome back to Lecture 5 of the **Primacy of Beauty**. In the last session, we explored Scarry's work and developed a framework for **plausibility**, identifying it as foundational to rationality and cognition. We outlined:

- **Convergence** → Trustworthiness
- **Elegance** → Power
- **Compression** → Invariant extraction
- **Variation** → Deep learning
- **Precedent-seeking & setting** → Normativity
- **Coherence** → Informative structure
- **Balance** → Holistic harmony

These components form the scaffolding of what we experience as something that "makes sense" and deserves serious attention. Beauty, then, was defined as a *species* of plausibility: an emergence of **embodied, enacted, evolving existential plausibility** occurring within an **imaginal, flowing niche** of mutual belonging and relevance realization.

Beauty as Preparation for Truth and Goodness

Beauty, according to Scarry and Han, is not just decorative or superficial—it trains us for deeper pursuits:

- It **prepares us for truth** by nurturing discernment, clarity, and metacognitive flexibility.
- It **prepares us for justice** by promoting *unselfing*, fairness, and proportionality.

Beauty motivates us to care about something beyond ourselves. It becomes an ally of both truth and the good.

Sedivy and the Ineffable Intelligibility of Beauty

Sonia Sedivy brings this further by emphasizing **beauty's ineffable nature**—its *excess of intelligibility*. Like insight and flow, beauty cannot be captured by static concepts. It eludes closure.

Beauty, as Sedivy emphasizes, lifts facts into intelligibility.

Beauty brings elasticity and expansion to our minds. While Sedivy doesn't emphasize back-and-forth plausibility or insight/flow as Vervaeke does, she zeroes in on **the connection between perception and conception**.

Presence and the Presenting of Plenitude

We explored the dual structure of perception:

- **Moreness:** The sense that the thing is part of a larger relational field.
- **Suchness:** The immediate here-now-thisness of direct presence.

Michael Polanyi and Esther Lightcap Meek argue that perception gives us a touchstone for reality—a **presenting of plenitude**. This is what makes something feel *real*.

In perception, we contact—not just represent—reality.

The question Sedivy then takes up (with Kant) is:

How does this inexhaustible plenitude become intelligible within conceptual thought?

Kant and the Imagination

Kant distinguishes between:

- **Normal cognition:** Categorical, rule-governed projection onto perception.
- **Beauty:** A **free, reciprocal play** between imagination and understanding.

This "free play" makes us aware of the **non-rule-based**, imaginative dimension of cognition. Beauty reveals to us that **we are capable of ongoing meaning-making**, and it does so through **non-algorithmic resonance**, not fixed rules.

This gives rise to the *promise* of beauty:

"Don't be afraid. You can always translate perception into conception."

Even in the face of **horror**—where this promise breaks down—the reassurance from beauty helps us endure.

Beauty reassures us that intelligibility will return.

Beauty as Emergent Relevance Realization

Vervaeke reframes Kant's insight:

*Beauty is the **celebratory realization** of relevance realization not failing.*

In predictive processing terms: beauty shows us that our brains can successfully transform the flood of perceptual input into coherent meaning.

Roger Scruton puts it poetically:

"In the experience of beauty, the world comes home to us, and us to the world."

Conceptual Metaphor and Gesture: Imaginal Bridges

To ground this in cognitive science, Vervaeke draws from:

- **Lakoff and Johnson:** Conceptual metaphors (e.g., *grasping an idea, rising up to truth*) structure our abstract thought using sensory-motor experience.
- **Susan Goldin-Meadow:** Gesture is not decoration—it's essential to cognition.

This implies that *metaphor* and *gesture* are **imaginal processes** that **bridge perception and conception**.

Dance is embodied metaphor. Poetry is linguistic gesture.

Beauty flows through this entire fabric of thought. It's not *extra*—it's foundational.

Exaptation and Cognitive Reuse

Using insights from Michael Anderson and Barbara Tversky, Vervaeke describes how the brain:

- Reuses biological and cognitive machinery (e.g., balance → justice) through **exaptation**.
- The **cerebellum**, originally for motor control, is repurposed in meditation and metaphor.

*Beauty arises from **transjective imaginal exaptation**—neither top-down nor bottom-up.*

Wittgenstein, Knowing-How, and Procedural Insight

Sedivy turns to Wittgenstein to critique Kant's reliance on rules. Wittgenstein's **rule-following paradox**:

- Rules don't specify their own application.
- **Procedural knowledge** (knowing *how*) underlies **propositional knowledge** (knowing *that*).

*Judging appropriateness requires **relevance realization**, not just algorithmic logic.*

We thus see beauty as something **ineffable**, grounded in *non-propositional, procedural* awareness.

Toward Plato: Beauty and the Metaxu

This leads us back to **Plato**, via Drew Hyland:

- Beauty is found *between* (**metaxu**) dianoia (discursive thought) and noesis (direct apprehension).
- **Betweenness** is not a flaw, but a feature—it's foundational.

*Human beings live in this **between**: animals and gods, perception and reason, body and soul.*

Plato sees beauty not as an abstract ideal, but as a **lived bridge** between modes of knowing.

Final Reflection

Beauty, then, is not ornamental. It is *ontological*. It reassures us, draws us into deeper reality, and affirms that our capacity for meaning-making is trustworthy. It is not captured in definitions, but enacted through our very being.

We now return, through a long detour of philosophy, back to Plato—where the **question of beauty** becomes central to understanding who we are and how we should live.