

Lecture 4: Beauty and Meaning

The Imaginal and Rationality

To be **rational** and **reasonable**, one must be **metacognitive**. That means knowing how to think about thinking and navigating the imaginal—your internal simulation of the minds of others. As children, we develop this capacity by *imitating* how others pay attention to us. This internalized awareness matures into self-reflection.

To be rational, you must also *imagine* your **future self**, and form a caring relationship with that imagined version. Experiments show that people who vividly imagine their future selves as loved ones are more likely to make rational long-term decisions (e.g., saving for retirement).

Beauty is a powerful trainer of rationality. It motivates, awakens attention, and binds cognition to emotional salience. It prepares us for both truth and justice.

Beauty and Justice

Scarry highlights how **beauty unselfs us**. It shifts our focus from egocentric perception to care for something beyond ourselves. This is essential for **justice**, which requires objectivity and detachment from narrow self-interest.

Iris Murdoch put it well:

"Anything which alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity, and realism is to be connected to virtue."

Beauty cultivates this through its power to:

- **Decenter the self** (Solomon Effect)

- **Balance perspective**
- **Frame reality proportionally**

Interestingly, the word **fair** refers both to **justice** and **beauty**, revealing a deep linguistic and conceptual connection.

The Inseparability of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful

Scarry and others argue for the ancient view that **truth, goodness, and beauty** are interrelated. You can't sincerely pursue one without invoking the others.

Even a scientist who *claims* to be indifferent to beauty is often subconsciously guided by it. Many of the greatest scientific theories were held onto because they were **beautiful**—plausible in a deeply felt, transjective way—before the evidence arrived.

This sets us up for the next philosopher in our journey: **Sonia Sedivy**.

Sedivy on Beauty

Sedivy, in her book *Beauty and the End of Art*, argues that **beauty has an excess of intelligibility**—it *makes sense beyond what can be articulated*. We can't reduce beauty to language or conceptual categories.

Scarry once said:

"A beautiful thing lifts facts into intelligibility."

Sedivy builds on this, asserting that beauty **makes cognition and consciousness more elastic and plastic**, helping us develop a more **capacious** awareness.

However, Sedivy focuses more on the **link between perception and presence** than the broader phenomenology of beauty described by Scarry.

Plenitude as Presencing

When we perceive something fully present before us, two things happen:

1. We sense that it has **more properties** than we can grasp—*moreness*.
2. We understand it through its **relations** to other things—*suchness*.

These two poles—moreness and suchness—are **interwoven** in perception. This leads to **plenitude**, the inexhaustible intelligibility of reality, **presencing** before us in the here and now.

This, according to Polanyi (and developed by Esther Meek), is our **contact with reality**—our touchstone for what's *real*.

We use two kinds of language to mark realness:

- **Confirmation** (evidence, coherence)
- **Realization** (insight, transformation)

Beauty binds both. It is *ordered surprise*. It grounds and astonishes us at once.

The Ineffability of Beauty and Insight

Much like **insight**, **beauty is ineffable**. It can't be fully explained, only experienced. You can't describe the beauty of a sunset or a piece of music without diluting it.

Our cognition requires **definitions** and **concepts**, but reality itself exceeds both. Beauty reminds us of this, and helps us navigate it.

Sedivy uses **Kant and Wittgenstein** to explain this. Kant proposed that we don't passively receive the world—we **structure** it through our mind. But when we experience **beauty**, something different happens.

Kant called it:

"A free and harmonious interplay between imagination and understanding."

In beauty, the **imaginal** becomes more than a bridge. It becomes the dance itself.

Beauty as the Bridge Between Perception and Understanding

Beauty, according to Sedivy, teaches us how to **link perception to understanding**—how to move from the particular to the universal without flattening the uniqueness of experience.

Kant's **reciprocal stimulation**—where imagination and understanding feed each other—sets the stage for beauty to teach us how to *think reality*.

This prepares us for a return to **Plato**, whose influence shaped so many thinkers from Augustine to Aquinas. Plato sees beauty as a **portal** to the transcendent, to the true and the good. But rather than leap there directly, we've walked a long road—through Han, Scarry, and Sedivy—only to find that the ancient view still calls to us.

Beauty, in the end, is not decoration. It is the **educator of reason**, the **companion of truth**, and the **foundation of justice**.

Beauty teaches us to see, to love, to know, and to become.