

The Primacy of Beauty – Dr. John Vervaeke

Lecture 2: The Return to Beauty

Relevance Realization: The Core of Intelligence

Modern cognitive science and early AI research (Newell & Simon) revealed that solving problems is not about having more information—it's about knowing what *information matters*.

This process is called **relevance realization**.

- Every problem has an *initial state*, *goal state*, and *path constraints*.
- In complex problems (like chess), the number of possible paths is astronomically large.
- Humans solve problems not by brute force, but by intuitively ignoring most of the space and homing in on relevance.

“Obviousness is not a feature of the world—it’s a cognitive achievement.”

Transjective Reality: Not Subjective, Not Objective

Dr. Vervaeke introduces the concept of **transjectivity**—a fittingness between agent and arena.

- Relevance, affordances, adaptivity, insight, and meaning are not found *in us* or *in the world*.
- They emerge from the *relationship* between us and the world.
- This breaks the false binary of “subjective vs. objective.”

“You don’t detect relevance. You realize it.”

Insight as Frame-Breaking + Frame-Making

Insight is when we *break out of an old frame* and *reframe the situation* in a new way.

- The classic “nine-dot problem” shows how hidden assumptions block insight.
- Realization involves a perceptual and conceptual shift.
- Insight = fluency spike in relevance realization.

Beauty may be the perceptual equivalent of insight—a **moment where the world opens up and shines with intelligibility.**

The Imaginal Realm

Using Henry Corbin’s distinction:

- **Imaginary:** Passive mental images (e.g. picturing a sailboat).
- **Imaginal:** Active perception through a symbolic lens (e.g. a child *becoming* Superman while playing).

Beauty, like insight and flow, occurs in the *imaginal space*—where perception, meaning, and transformation meet.

Flow: A Cascade of Insights

The **flow state** (from sports, music, improv, etc.) is a state of continuous, evolving insight.

- Time distorts, ego vanishes, attention sharpens.
- Flow isn’t just productive—it feels *beautiful*.
- Flow is “unselfing”—you become more alive, less self-centered.

“Flow reveals the ego is not necessary for optimal agency.”

Beauty as Realization

What do fluency, insight, and flow all have in common?

- They *reveal* something real.
- They produce *joy, clarity, connectedness*.
- They happen through participation, not passive observation.

Beauty, then, is a cognitive event. It emerges when we participate in a **reality that exceeds us**, and feel ourselves changed by it.

“Beauty is imaginal, flowing niche construction.”

The Return to Beauty: Elaine Scarry’s Five Features

Dr. Vervaeke introduces Elaine Scarry’s *On Beauty and Being Just* — a key text in modern beauty theory.

She identifies **five qualities** of beauty:

1. **Beauty is Sacred**
2. It evokes reverence and mystery.
3. Beauty feels like an encounter with something *beyond*.
4. **Beauty is Unprecedented**
5. We feel struck by it: “I’ve never seen anything like this.”
6. Like insight, it breaks our habitual frames.
7. **Beauty is Life-Giving**
8. It revitalizes us.
9. Augustine called beauty “a plank in the waves”—a life raft in chaos.
10. **Beauty Evokes Reflection**
11. It makes us wonder, question, grow.
12. Wonder is deeper than curiosity—it changes how we see ourselves and the world.
13. **Beauty Has Clear Discernibility**
14. It reveals things as intelligible.
15. Like Aquinas’s *claritas*, beauty brings splendor and luminous insight.

Beauty and Meaning in Life

Scarry’s beauty isn’t semantic or decorative—it’s existential.
Beauty gives us **meaning in life**, which research shows is built on:

- **Purpose**
- **Coherence** (the world must be intelligible)
- **Significance**

- **Matting**

We want beauty to exist even if we don't.

We believe beauty connects us to reality.

We feel **deeply connected** to beautiful experiences.

“Beauty demands reverence—it transforms perception into participation.”

Beauty vs. The Smooth

We don't want a flat, smooth, predictable world.

We want a world that's **alive, responsive, inexhaustible.**

Beauty is not just pleasant—it's **necessary.**

- It helps us mature.
- It corrects our errors.
- It opens us to mystery.
- It returns us to life.

Summary Points to Remember

- Beauty is not subjective—it's **transjective.**
- Insight, fluency, and flow all link beauty to **intelligence and reality.**
- Beauty helps us frame and reframe the world—it brings us alive.
- Elaine Scarry identifies five sacred traits of beauty.
- Beauty is not a luxury—it is **vital to meaning, growth, and connectedness.**

Looking Ahead

In the next lecture, we'll continue with Scarry and connect beauty with **truth, goodness, and justice** — the classical transcendentalists.

*“Beauty is not in the eye of the beholder—it is in the **bond** between the beholder and the world.”*