

# The Primacy of Beauty – Dr. John Vervaeke

## Lecture 1: The Decline of Beauty

### What Happened to Beauty?

Beauty once held a sacred place in human experience.

Plato, Dionysius, Augustine, and Aquinas all saw beauty as a **name of God**, not just a quality of appearances.

It was considered a way in which *truth occurred* — a disclosure of reality.

*“God is not just beautiful. God **is** beauty.” – Augustine*

Today, however, beauty has fallen.

We don't treat it as sacred. We treat it as *subjective preference*, or worse, as consumer indulgence.

### The Hermeneutics of Suspicion

Modern thinkers like **Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud** taught us to distrust appearances.

This is the “hermeneutics of suspicion” — the idea that everything hides an agenda.

We've been trained to believe:

- Appearances deceive.
- Meaning is projection.
- Nothing is what it seems.

But this skepticism depends on its opposite — the idea that some appearances actually *disclose* reality.

*“You can't call something an illusion unless you compare it to something real.”*

### Beauty as Disclosure

The ancients saw beauty as the **moment of realization** — when something appears, and we suddenly see *what is true*.

- Not just aesthetic pleasure.
- A moment of insight.
- A *revelation* of realness.

This is beauty not as *decoration*, but as *transformation*.

### **The Aesthetics of the Smooth**

Philosopher Byung-Chul Han critiques how modern society replaces beauty with *smoothness*:

- No friction.
- No resistance.
- Easy, clean, consumable.

From phones to interfaces to pornography, the world is designed to go down easy.

*“The smooth is the enemy of mystery.”*

### **Pornography and Modal Confusion**

Porn is a metaphor for our approach to beauty today:

- It reduces the other to a consumable object.
- It hides reality behind total availability.
- It *removes mystery* and challenge.

This leads to **modal confusion**:

- Treating being-needs (love, truth, beauty) as having-needs (possession, consumption).
- Trying to “have” beauty instead of *becoming* through it.

### **Mystery vs. Problem**

Beauty is mysterious — not a puzzle to solve, but a depth to dwell in.

- A *problem* ends when solved.
- A *mystery* invites endless contemplation.

*“You want your partner to be a mystery—not a solved problem.”*

### **Contemplation, Not Consumption**

We don't just consume beauty—we contemplate it.

- Consumption says: *Take it in.*
- Contemplation says: *Be changed by it.*

Beauty is a calling. It's **kallos** in Greek: *to call forth*.

### **Fromm's Modes: Having vs. Being**

Erich Fromm identifies two existential modes:

- **Having Mode:** Control, possess, consume.
- **Being Mode:** Grow, become, mature.

Beauty only appears in the being mode.

*“When we treat being-needs with having-mode strategies, we corrupt them.”*

### **The Cognitive Science of Beauty**

Modern psychology supports the depth of beauty through **fluency research**:

- When something is easier to process, we perceive it as more **true** and **beautiful**.
- This is **domain-general** — it applies across art, text, language, etc.
- Suggests beauty is tied to **cognition**, not just emotion or biology.

### **Beauty, Intelligence, and Intelligibility**

Dr. Vervaeke connects beauty to:

- **General Intelligence** – the ability to solve diverse problems.
- **Anticipation** – our ability to predict and prepare.
- **Relevance Realization** – the cognitive act of discovering what matters.

All of these help us realize what is *intelligible* – a deep form of truth.

### **The Imaginal vs. Imaginary**

Drawing on philosopher **Henry Corbin**, Vervaeke introduces:

- **Imaginary** – passive, image-as-object (like imagining a sailboat).
- **Imaginal** – active, image-as-lens (like a child *becoming* Superman).

The imaginal realm is where **beauty happens**:

- It's between perception and imagination.
- Between top-down prediction and bottom-up data.
- It's how we *see through* into depth.

### **Fluency and Depth**

Modern beauty has become:

- Flat
- Shallow
- Smooth
- Subjective

But true beauty invites us into:

- Depth
- Challenge
- Mystery
- Meaning

### Summary Points to Remember

- Beauty once meant *disclosure of being* and sacredness.
- Modernity replaced it with *suspicion* and *surface*.
- The “smooth” world hides mystery, depth, and transformation.
- Beauty belongs to the **being mode**, not the having mode.
- It requires **contemplation**, not consumption.
- Cognitive science confirms beauty is tied to fluency, anticipation, and relevance.
- The **imaginal** is the space where beauty truly lives.

### Next Lecture

We'll go deeper into the ancient concept of beauty as a path to truth and the good.

*“Beauty is not a luxury — it’s the call to become fully real.”*