

Finding Beauty Where God Finds Beauty: A Biblical Foundation of Aesthetics

T. David Gordon¹

Framing the Question

Philosophically, we are at a new moment in history. Today, most people are post-Realists, or Nominalists. Prior to Nominalism, the prevailing philosophies in the West were all variations on Realism. In those systems, Reality is a given, and perception is viewed as the ability to observe, in varying degrees, what is Real. Nominalism (from the Latin *nomen*, “name”), as a philosophy, suggests that there is no Reality, or that if there is Reality, it has no *inherent* meaning.² To the contrary, what a realist calls “meaning” is his or her *imputation* of value [or significance] onto an otherwise meaningless universe, somewhat analogous to how a critic might impute meaning to a canvas randomly covered with paint. As its own label suggests, “Nominalism” implies that words are mere “names” that humans give objects, but these names only reveal information about the “namers” and nothing about the objects so named.

Not surprisingly, all aesthetic theory within a Realist framework is therefore entirely different from such theory within a Nominalist framework. Within a Realist framework, aesthetic theory is a discussion about how and why Reality (or parts thereof) actually *is* beautiful (or enticing, captivating, sublime, pleasant), and how/why we are able to *perceive* (αἰσθάνομαι)³ that beauty (enticement, sublimity, etc.) and/or develop our abilities/sensibilities to *describe* such beauty. Within a Nominalist framework, there is no beauty within Reality itself; “beauty” is a mere *name* employed to impose meaningful structure onto a Reality that has none. Aesthetic theory within this framework is the discussion of how/why so many individuals and cultures have found it necessary to impose such meaning, and how/why they have done it in a particular manner.

Thus, at the basis of aesthetic theory is this great divide between Realism and Nominalism: Is Reality itself meaningful (in which case, our perceptive faculties are to discover or perceive or experience such meaning and attempt to articulate it), or is Reality in itself not meaningful (in which case, all “meaning” language is merely our discussion of

¹T. David Gordon is Professor of Religion and Greek at Grove City College, Grove City, Pennsylvania.

²Nominalism does not deny the existence of matter. It affirms that material reality exists and that it can be measured; but it can be measured only by the objective measures of such instruments as rulers and scales. We can weigh an alligator and report its weight (in pounds or kilograms); but we cannot speak of its purpose, or character, its “meaning.”

³The English word “aesthetic” comes from αἰσθάνομαι (*aisthanomai*).

ourselves, individually or culturally understood)? When I say “the Grand Canyon is beautiful,” is this a meaningful statement about the Grand Canyon itself (the Grand Canyon really *is* beautiful), or is it merely a statement about Gordon (Gordon *regards* the Grand Canyon as beautiful)? This great divide is often spoken of in other terms, as objective/subjective or absolute/relative, but beneath those categories is the broader metaphysical question of Realism and Nominalism.

As shall be seen, Christian Theism is unabashedly Realist, and that so from the opening words of the Bible. As Christians, we refer to Reality as “creation,” indicating our belief in an intelligent Creator; for us, Reality/Creation reflects or displays the intelligent intention, purpose or meaning of the One who made it: “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” (Ps 19:1).⁴

Further, in some prominent biblical texts that describe the process of creation, this Creator is referred to as *Logos* (“reason,” “meaning,” “word,” “language”):

In the beginning was the Word (ὁ λόγος), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος). He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him (πάντα δι’ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο), and without him was not any thing (οὐδὲ ἓν) made that was made. (John 1:1–3)

The statement is comprehensive, both positively (πάντα, “all things”) and negatively (οὐδὲ ἓν, literally, “without him, not even one thing was made”). Thus, all that *is* has been *made*, and all that has been made, without one exception (οὐδὲ ἓν), is made by this God who, in his Second Person, is titled ὁ λόγος (*ho logos*).

This Creator, who makes all of reality that exists outside of himself, *perceives* and *names* the reality he makes: “And God *saw* (וַיִּרְאֵ) that the light was good. . . . God *called* (וַיִּקְרָא) the light Day, and the darkness he *called* (קָרָא) Night” (Gen 1: 5, cf. also 1:8, 10). In *perceiving* and *naming* what he makes, God recognizes and confirms his creational intent, or meaning. God perceived/saw that “the light *was* good” before he “*called* the light Day.” What was (in this case light) preceded his naming it; the reality existed before the name. For the creature made in God’s image, then, the goal of all *human* perceiving and naming is to approximate, as closely as is humanly possible, the *divine* perceiving and naming of what is actually there. That is, we are not free to misconstrue God’s creation; to perceive it

⁴And, of course, there are reflections of this in human creative acts. Renoir’s paintings disclose something about Renoir; they are his creative products that reflect, insofar as he was a skillful artist, his creative intentions, wishes, or purposes. This is why the aleatoric artists were not rebelling against a particular *school* of art, but against the concept of meaningful art *itself*. Musicians who pulled musical notes out of a box, pasted them to a sheet randomly, and played whatever came out, or painters who threw buckets of paint against a wall, were not opposed to a particular school of art in their respective fields; they were expressing opposition to the notion of meaningful creation *per se*. They were, in this sense, true Nominalists. Beauty does not exist; therefore the artist need not attempt to create (or re-create) it, and it is illusory to think one can or should.

⁵The expression, “and God saw” appears seven times in the creation narrative of Genesis 1, at verses 4, 9, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, and 31.

differently than God does or to name it differently than God does.⁶ We are not morally free, for instance, to *perceive* the darkness *as* light, or to *call* it “light.” If God the Creator orders his creation in certain ways, for instance, it is our duty to perceive and label that order as correctly as we can. If the Creator orders it in a manner that the first or second laws of thermodynamics express it, it is our duty to perceive it and name it as such. We are not free to say that matter *can* be created or destroyed, if matter *cannot* be created or destroyed. If reality has the characteristic of entropy that Carnot (1796–1832) said it has, it is our duty to recognize this characteristic and to name it as properly as we can.

Significantly, in God’s case naming *precedes* creating; meaning *precedes* reality: “And God *said*, ‘Let there be light,’ and there *was* light” (this pattern recurs through the rest of the creation narrative). Meaning/definition/naming actually precedes the existence of the created thing itself; it is not a mere interpretation after-the-fact. Before a particular aspect of what we call created reality exists, it exists in the mind and speech of God; *what* it is (light) precedes *that* it is. Note then the four-part progression: naming–creating–perceiving–naming: “Let *light* be . . . and there *was light* . . . and God saw that the *light* was good . . . and God called the *light* Day.” The meaning-ascribing language brackets the creation of reality itself. Before making, God *expresses* (verbally/linguistically) what he will make; he then *makes* it; he *perceives* that it is “good” (טוב, i.e. that it corresponds to his creational purpose);⁷ and he *calls* it what he originally intended it to be (in this case, “light”).

Nominalism reduces this four-part progression to two parts: the existence of something and the naming of it. However, Nominalism denies that any meaning precedes existence, and therefore denies any objective truthfulness to the naming that is attached to reality.⁸ It is *mere* naming that humans attribute to reality, but such naming cannot make any claims of correspondence to the actual nature of reality. For Christian Theistic Realism, by contrast, there is naming/meaning *before* there is created reality, and naming/meaning *after* there is created reality. Furthermore, in the case of God, the two namings, *and the reality they name*, correspond. There is a true correspondence, such Realism would say, between *naming* and *nature*. The truthfulness, then, of all human naming/meaning is dependent on, reflective of, and *responsible to* the divine naming/meaning. If God

⁶Ironically, we seem to intuitively grant this when dealing with human creators. If an acquaintance says that “Good fences make good neighbors,” citing Robert Frost (“Mending Wall”), we good-naturedly dispute the statement, arguing that Frost put this statement (twice) in the mouth of the dull-witted and parochial neighbor of the poem (not in the mouth of the narrator); that the narrator says the only other repeated line in the poem (“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” which is also the opening line); and that the narrator says, “Before I built a wall I’d ask to know/What I was walling in or walling out,/And to whom I was like to give offence.” Oddly, perhaps, we seek to find Frost’s own meaning in his art, but do not seek to find God’s meaning in his.

⁷And this approving adjective “good” appears seven times in the creation narrative, as each aspect of creation receives this divine expression of approval and creative satisfaction. In its final appearance, the modifier is heightened, “And God saw *everything* that he had made, and behold, it was *very* good” (מאד טוב).

⁸Students of philosophy will note that Existentialism is in this sense a revival of, and particularly-nuanced expression of, Nominalism: essence does not precede (human) existence; existence precedes essence.

names/describes his creation as orderly, we are not free to name/describe it as disorderly; if God names/describes his creation as harmonious, we are not free to name/describe it as inharmonious.⁹

For aesthetic theory, then, the specifically Christian Theistic branch of Realism will suggest that, if God actually created the universe with the intent to make it beautiful, then it is our duty to recognize that it is beautiful; we can no more call the beautiful “ugly” or “inconsequential” than we can call the darkness “light.” So the question to raise of Holy Scripture is whether the Creator invested his created order with the property that we call the “beautiful” or the “sublime” (or other synonyms). Beauty, for such Theistic Realism, is not “in the eye of the *beholder*,” it is in the eye of the *Maker*, and it is in the *mind* of the Maker and on the *lips* of the Maker before it is in his eye or ours.

The Creational Reality as Described in Genesis 1 and 2

Without repeating what was said above about divine meaning preceding creational reality, note the sixth and final creative day, in which the human was made:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our *image*, after our *likeness*. And let them *have dominion* over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in his own *image*, in the *image* of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and *have dominion* over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” (Gen 1:26–28)

The entire Mosaic narrative of creation is remarkably brief: the two distinct narratives of the creation of all things in Genesis 1 and 2 comprehend only 56 verses. Needless to say, the narrative might have been substantially longer. In this abbreviated narrative, repetition is not only mnemonically important but also intellectually significant. What is repeated carries special weight (such as the repetition of “And God saw that it was good”). Note in this three-verse narrative of the creation of humans two ideas are repeated: that the human is made in God’s image or likeness, and that the human is given a mandate to fill the created order and exercise dominion over it (each of which is italicized above). The two are not unrelated: Who, but a creature analogous to God in important ways, could possibly exercise intelligent and responsible dominion over the rest of God’s created order? The traits that are distinctively human (such as personality, creativity, garrulousness, language, rationality, imagination, morality, and aesthetic sensibility) are necessary to the task of exercising responsible stewardship over the created order.

The image of God has broader consequences, however. Implicit in what the theologians call *Imago Dei* (being made in the image of God) is *Imitatio Dei* (the duty to

⁹I am not saying here that God *does* so describe the present created order; after the Fall and the curse of Genesis 3, the created order reflects both the original divine order and the disorder of his just curse; it reflects both the original created harmony and the disharmony of human rebellion and his curse thereon.

imitate God). Thus, the distinctively human traits mentioned above (personality, creativity, garrulousness, language, rationality, imagination, morality, and aesthetic sensibility) should be cultivated and developed. A newborn infant, for instance, enjoys these human distinctives only in their latent form; the remainder of life is opportunity to develop these potential capacities that reflect the divine image. But God's works are also to be imitated, albeit on a creaturely scale. And what works has God done prior to Genesis 1:26? If the Bible stopped at the end of Genesis 1, what work of God would we imitate? Creativity. The only express activity of God recorded before the record of the creation of the human is creativity; God is a maker. If the Bible ended here, we would know that the human is, in the essence of his being, analogous to God in whose image he is made; and that the human will devote himself to creativity; to making things.

Genesis 2 presents a second account of creation, a more human-centered account, with more detail about the making of the human. This second account augments the account of Genesis 1:

When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the land, and *there was no man to work the ground*, and a mist was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground—then the LORD God formed the man *of dust from the ground* and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is *pleasant to the sight and good for food*. . . . The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden *to work it and keep it*. . . . Then the LORD God said, "*It is not good* that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." . . . So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man."

In this richer, more-detailed narrative of the creation of humans, we cannot observe every important matter but restrict ourselves to those that are most pertinent to our concern. Three ideas in the narrative demand brief attention.

First, note the remarkably close relation of the human to the material earth. *Terra firma* is not only his home; it is indeed his womb. Note that before the creation of the human "there was no man to work the ground," as though the ground itself were defective without the presence of the human. And then "God formed the man *of dust from the ground*," and put him in the garden "to work it and keep it."¹⁰ The human is created for the

¹⁰English translations commonly refer to the man "working" or "tilling" the ground or garden; but the original is different. In verse five, and in the first verb in verse fifteen, the verb is *avad* (לעבד), ordinarily translated "serve." The second verb in verse fifteen is *shamar* (וילשמרה), ordinarily translated "guard." When employed together, the two verbs commonly describe priestly activity, in texts such as these: "They shall keep guard (*shamar*) over him and over the whole congregation before the tent of meeting, as they minister (*avad*) at the tabernacle. They shall guard (*shamar*) all the furnishings of the tent of meeting, and keep guard over (*shamar*) the people of Israel as they minister (*avad*) at the tabernacle" (Num 3:7; cf. also Num 8:26; 18:7).

purpose of working, tilling, or keeping the very ground from which he was made. This is the Genesis 2 version of what Genesis 1 was called exercising dominion over the created order.

The second component we observe in Genesis 2 is that the responsibility to till/keep/work (serve/guard) the ground is corporate. After the appearance of the adjective “good” seven times in Genesis 1, the language of Genesis 2:18 is strikingly different: “It is *not good* for the man to be alone.” Plainly this communicates the creational inadequacy of a single human or even of a single sex within a multiplicity of humans. Genesis 1 associated the two-sexed complexion of the human race with the image of God: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; *male and female* he created *them*. And God blessed *them*.” Both Genesis 1 and 2 present the human as a social being, not a solitary one; and each presents humanity as a complementary community of male and female, a community which, in all its plurality and diversity, together enjoys the responsibility of exercising dominion over the earth or tilling/keeping the garden.

The third important concept to note in Genesis 2 is the two properties of the garden where the human was placed: “And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food.” Notice the ground from which the human was made is not itself designed to sustain him; to the contrary, *other* things spring *from* the ground (as the human did), things that are necessary to the human’s continued existence and well-being. The vegetation which, like the human, ultimately comes from the ground, is well-suited to sustain and bless the human. And of all its rich and multiform excellences, Genesis 2 mentions two: that this vegetation is “pleasant to the sight and good for food.” Further, the text here is anthropocentric: the vegetation is pleasant to *human* sight and good for *human* food. Surely Moses was not affirming that the created order would feed Yahweh. As American pragmatists, whose bookstores groan beneath the burden of “how-to” manuals, we may overlook that there are two traits, not one; and we may forget the order. The garden is both beautiful *and* practical, both lovely *and* life-sustaining, both pleasing *and* functional. The garden reflects the reality that God, the paradigm of all human creativity, is both Artist and Artisan. Notice, therefore, that a truly thankful human will be grateful for both properties; not merely one, especially in light of Romans 1, wherein Paul describes rebellious humanity by saying, “For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him” (Rom 1:21). We teach our children to thank God daily for their food (“God is great, God is good, and we thank him for this *food*; by his hands we all are *fed*, give us, Lord, our daily *bread*”), a prayer entirely justified by the Genesis 2 reality that the vegetation is “good for food.” But why do we not teach our children to thank God for those things that are beautiful, equally justified by the same text that also affirms that the vegetation is “pleasant to the eyes”? Are we unintentionally teaching them to be ungrateful for one of the two great properties of the created order? Does not Romans 1:21 urge us to thank God for all of his good gifts? If God chose to make the world not only practical but also beautiful, is it not ungrateful not to thank him for the second trait?

Adam had the priestly duty of “serving” and “guarding” God’s temple/earth, a duty that should have caused him to banish the unholy serpent from the garden.

Humans, then, till/keep/work the garden by cultivating these two latent properties and by continually developing them. In their plurality, in their male-and-femaleness, in their communal and social nature, humans will develop both the creative capacities of the artisan, whose works serve a utilitarian or practical purpose, and the creative capacities of the artist, whose works bring pleasure or delight. And, if there is any significance to the order of the two (and I do not insist that there is), the artist (“pleasant to the sight”) is mentioned *before* the artisan (“good for food”). Most interpreters who address the matter regard each of these expressions (“pleasant to the sight” and “good for food”) as synecdoches, figures of speech in which a part is intended to express the whole. The garden was not only pleasant to the sight; it was pleasant to the other four senses as well—aromas of honeysuckle wafted through the air, the delicate texture of the trillium pleased the fingers that held them, the nectar of fresh pears delighted the palate, and the birds inhabiting the branches cheered the first humans with their care-free chorus. Similarly, the garden was not merely good for food; it was good for shelter, for clothing, for tool-making, and many other human necessities.

God, in whose image the human was made, created an inhabitable world that was both beautiful and practical. As Maker, God was and is both Artist and Artisan. The world that he instructed those made in his image to rule over, to till and keep, was and is a world replete with both the potential for beauty and the potential for utility. While some humans develop their creativity more in the arena of the useful (e.g. engineers, carpenters), others do so more in the arena of the beautiful (e.g. playwrights, poets); each benefits from the labor of the other and should be appreciative of the other’s efforts. For our purposes, however, we note that the aesthetic impulse is built into the created order. The yearning either to make or to appreciate what is beautiful is part of the image of God, who was pleased (saw that it was “very good”) when what he had made was both beautiful and useful.

When Christian Theists refer to “beauty,” then, they regard themselves as speaking objectively, about the nature of Reality itself, rather than speaking merely subjectively, about *themselves*. No one would deny that the world is “good for food;” all would regard this as an objective statement, not about our feelings but about reality itself. But Genesis 2 affirms equally that this created order is “pleasant to the sight.” It is just as objectively true that the creation is beautiful as it is objectively true that it is useful. Beauty is not an attribute that we impute *to* Reality; it is an aspect *of* Reality, which we develop the capacity to perceive (αἰσθάνομαι), enjoy, and express. We acknowledge that others (Nominalists) perceive the matter differently; and we can enjoy sharing the world with them. We even enjoy listening to symphonies with them, but we *describe* the satisfaction we derive differently than they do. They are satisfied that they can *regard* as beautiful something that actually *isn’t*; we are satisfied that we can *perceive* as beautiful something that actually *is*.

The New Testament is, of course, deeply informed by the realities of the Old Testament, including the creation narrative. So informed, Paul exhorted the Philippians: “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely (προσφιλῆ), whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things (ταῦτα λογίεσθε)” (Phil 4:8). Did Paul command the Philippians to think about fictions, or about realities? Is “whatever is just” merely in the eye of the beholder, or does justice actually exist? Are some things objectively “true” or “honorable”? Virtually all orthodox Christians affirm that everything in

this list is objectively real except one: “whatever is lovely.” But Paul regarded “whatever is lovely” as worthy of our consideration, and indeed, just as worthy of our consideration as “whatever is true.” Paul was a Realist; not a Nominalist. For Paul, all of reality has been created purposefully by a God who assigned meaning verbally to that created order even before he created it. He created the world to be a setting in which whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, or worthy of praise could be displayed. Do human societies ever achieve perfect justice in this life? Obviously not, but it is a worthy goal. Do our artists achieve perfect loveliness in this life? Probably not; but it is appropriate to pursue.

Further, our theistic Realism drives us to treat the matter of aesthetics with greater significance than some do. We resist the notion that what is practical/useful is more important than what is beautiful/pleasant, because the Genesis narrative requires that we do so. The ability to make, enjoy, or speak about what is beautiful is every bit as important and humane as the ability to make, enjoy, or speak about what is useful.¹¹

By returning the discussion of aesthetics to a more significant role, we are acting counter-culturally. Our culture, insofar as it is driven by academic concerns, is largely nominalist. The empirical sciences (which receive the lion’s share of the academic treasury) do not study the aesthetic quality of the material world; they measure the length of sound-waves or the degree of refraction of light rays, for example. They can explain, neurologically, why the human brain can detect musical intervals,¹² but they cannot explain how/why this was useful or necessary in their evolutionary approach to human development, and they surely would not be willing to admit that it is simply a gift from God so that the creation of melody and harmony would be possible and pleasant for humans made in God’s image. It is not their provenance, as empirical scientists, to address such matters as what the Greeks called “the good and the beautiful” (καλὸν κάγαθόν).

Similarly, insofar as our culture is driven by commercial concerns, it is also nominalist. One can sell more music by deferring to the preferences or tastes of the consumer—however uncultivated those tastes may be—than by attempting to produce music (or other art) that conforms to the highest standards of musical art, and might, therefore, be beyond the present reach of the would-be consumer. Commerce wishes to sell products now to a purchasing market that may have very undeveloped sensibilities; it does not wish to wait until the consumer develops its aesthetic sensibilities before it sells to it. Commerce has nothing to gain from a conversation about whether beauty exists, and how to develop one’s sensibilities to perceive it. Unquestionably, it has everything to gain from

¹¹We could entertain a conversation about whether, in our fallen condition, “the useful” is a more *pressing* concern than “the beautiful,” and I believe such a conversation would be fair. But I don’t think the answer to that conversation is self-evident. It may very well be that, in a fallen world of scarcity, the scarcity of beauty is as burdensome as the scarcity of the useful. Who can forget that the character of Andy, in the film *The Shawshank Redemption*, endured the dehumanized nature of prison life by humming Mozart?

¹²Daniel J. Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession* (New York: Penguin, 2006). Without the ability to detect intervals, creating or distinguishing melody is not possible. When an infant recognizes a tune sung by a parent, even if the parent sings it in different keys from night to night, it is because the intervals (the distance between notes, which can be measured mathematically) between the notes are the same. Similarly, harmony cannot be detected (for the same reason) without the neurological ability to detect interval.

saying it is just a matter of a consumer's preference. Commerce, for this reason, is enthusiastic about the latest pop star, but indifferent towards the Rachmaninov Piano Concerto no. 2.

If Romans 12:1-2 calls us to resist conformity to "this age," then one thing Christian Realists will need to resist in our age is aesthetic relativism, the nominalist notion that "beauty" is merely something that we impose on the created reality around us. Our Christian transformation, in part, requires us to affirm what God affirms about his created order, including his statement that the creation around us is objectively both "pleasant to the sight and good for food." Such Christian transformation requires us to treat with equal seriousness the efforts of scientists and nutritionists to develop the nourishment that the created order affords *and* the efforts of artists, art critics, and aesthetic theorists to develop the ability to discover, produce, and enjoy the beauty that the created order affords.