

# Jonathan Edwards's Synthesis of Definitions of Beauty

David de Bruyn<sup>1</sup>

Beauty is integral to Christian worship. Christian worship, spirituality, and spiritual formation can be said to be in pursuit of beauty. The psalmist states that his "one desire" is the perception of God's beauty (Psalm 27:4). Howard argues,

Christian formation is not simply the application of principles to our lives, it is rather the ever-increasing embodiment of Beauty. Hence we must learn to see the aims of our growth in Christ not simply as responsibilities or commands but also as experiments in a beautiful life.<sup>2</sup>

If beholding God's beauty is commended by Psalm 27:4 as a central pursuit in a believer's life, then recognizing and perceiving beauty is fundamental to Christianity and to Christian worship.

Indeed, the perceptive powers generally thought necessary to recognize beauty are needed in worship. The fact that artists and art critics describe the procedure of understanding beauty in art in such similar terms to those who speak of worshipping God is striking. These overlaps include the use of the imagination as a form of perception, the pursuit of disinterested pleasure in the object, the practice of immersion into the object to understand it on its own terms, and careful contemplation. If the skills for recognizing beauty overlap with the skills to experience the presence of God, then Christians should be in pursuit of the beauty of God.

---

<sup>1</sup> David de Bruyn, DTh, is pastor of New Covenant Baptist Church in Johannesburg, South Africa, and professor of church history and apologetics at Shepherds' Seminary. This article is an amended and edited version of content from the author's dissertation, "God's Objective Beauty and its Subjective Apprehension in Christian Spirituality" (University of South Africa, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Evan B. Howard, "Formed into the Beauty of Christ: Reflections on Aesthetics and Christian Spiritual Formation," *Ogbomosho Journal of Theology* 16 (2011): 8.

Further, Christian worship requires art. At the very least, music and poetry are commanded (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16), and the act of corporate worship cannot be performed without art. The arts are fundamental to both private and public worship, and without the ability to perceive the beautiful in art, there will be little sensed beauty in worship. To put it another way, lacking the ability to see beauty in general may hamper the Christian's ability to encounter and experience God.

The neglect of beauty within Christian liturgy and practice in the last century have had visibly negative effects on Christian worship. Concessions to the Enlightenment pursuit of value-free objectivity have produced a less fruitful era for Christian expression in terms of music, poetry, literature, architecture, and the plastic arts.

Perhaps some of the difficulty in restoring beauty as a deliberate aim in worship is the absence of an agreed-upon definition of beauty in the Christian world. True, beauty is far more than an abstract idea; it is a quality to be embodied. Defining beauty conceptually is just the beginning of pursuing beauty. Such a definition is, however, a very important beginning for practical ends. A working definition of beauty and God's beauty can be used by pastors, teachers, and worship leaders as they seek to disciple God's people in corporate and private worship.

A definition of *beauty* or *the beautiful* has eluded the grasp of those who wish a definition with mathematical precision. This more than two-millennia-old discussion remains open, and no definition has satisfied its perennial participants or become the final word.

Few theologians in the Christian tradition have given as much attention to defining beauty as Jonathan Edwards did. Pseudo-Dionysius, Augustine, Boethius, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Von Hildebrand all deserve honorable mention, but Edwards remains peerless for the emphasis he laid upon beauty, and for the explanatory power of his definition.

The sheer volume of writings on beauty, from antiquity to the present day, is enormous. Christians of the last 1900 years have added to this store when referring to beauty while expounding theology, spirituality, or some form of apologetics or philosophy. Synthesizing the competing views of beauty is a herculean challenge.

This paper contends that Edwards attempted such a synthesis and achieved more than moderate success. Understanding and incorporating his definition in Christian worship may lead to a revived pursuit of beauty in Christian worship and spirituality.

## Definitions of Beauty

Definitions of beauty and the beautiful can be broadly classified into four types: classical, transcendental, subjective, and theological. Some definitions attempt combinations of these, though for the purposes of this paper, particular definitions will be judged to be primarily allegiant to one category or the other. A brief survey of these four types of definitions and their proponents follows.

### Classical Definitions

Classical definitions use some form of what Farley calls "the Great Theory of Beauty,"<sup>3</sup> which originated in Pythagoras and was developed by Plato and later Platonists. Christians influenced by Plato developed similar versions of the same idea.

The Great Theory defines beauty as essentially *proportion*. At the heart of this theory is the idea that beauty is fundamentally the harmony of parts to a whole.<sup>4</sup> Beauty is symmetry between composite parts or elegant relationships between parts that combine to make a unified, whole form. This symmetry is what provokes pleasure in the beholder. Plotinus saw beauty as "that which irradiates symmetry."<sup>5</sup> When the human mind or spirit senses the order and harmony of things, it experiences the pleasure of beauty.<sup>6</sup>

Christians found in this formula a way of linking beauty to God himself. Augustine, drawing on Plato, regarded equality as the

---

<sup>3</sup> Edward Farley, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2001), 17.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Earle J. Coleman, "The Beautiful, the Ugly, and the Tao," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 18 (1991): 213.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 134.

main principle of beauty, where harmony and unity are reducible to equality.<sup>7</sup> Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle's expansion of Plato's definition into integrity, harmony, and clarity,<sup>8</sup> coined what became a standard definition of beauty during the High Middle Ages, stating that beauty includes three conditions: perfection or integrity, proportion or harmony, and brightness or clarity.<sup>9</sup> Richard Harries, bishop of Oxford, saw all beauty as characterized by wholeness, harmony, and radiance, though differing in its forms.<sup>10</sup>

Materialist and Darwinian accounts of beauty in symmetry also exist. Goldman suggests that humans find beauty as they spot order within complexity, since the intellect ever seeks patterns of order.<sup>11</sup> Some see beauty as the human recognition of mathematical and geometrical patterns in nature and transposed into art.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, objections are levelled at both the Christian and non-Christian forms of this definition. Guy Sircello criticizes all theories of beauty that are some form of the classical theory as "unitarian" and sees them as destined only to increase the demise of beauty.<sup>13</sup> Calvin Seerveld strongly challenges Christian forms of the classical theory, or the classical idea of metaphysical beauty, saying that Scripture does not bear out this notion, feeling that the core of what is often considered aesthetic is in Scripture "lucidity": "a playfulness, which assumes vital, sensitive formative ability, is at the core of imaginativity."<sup>14</sup>

While classical definitions have never persuaded all, the perennial return to the notions of harmony and symmetry in the

---

<sup>7</sup> Oleg K. Bychkov, "What Does Beauty Have to Do with the Trinity? From Augustine to Duns Scotus," *Franciscan Studies* 66 (2008): 199.

<sup>8</sup> James A. Martin, *Beauty and Holiness* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 16.

<sup>9</sup> Kin Yip Louie, *The Beauty of the Triune God*, Kindle, Princeton Theological Monograph (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publishers, 2013), §735.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Harries, *Art and the Beauty of God* (London: Mowbray, 1993), 24–25.

<sup>11</sup> Alan H. Goldman, "Aesthetic Qualities and Aesthetic Value," *The Journal of Philosophy* 87, no. 1 (January 1990): 33.

<sup>12</sup> Eric Newton, *The Meaning of Beauty* (London: Longmans Green and Co., 1950), 25.

<sup>13</sup> Guy Sircello, "Beauty in Shards and Fragments," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48, no. 1 (1990): 21.

<sup>14</sup> Calvin Seerveld, "Christian Aesthetic Bread for the World," *Philosophia Reformata* 66 (2001): 160.

discussion of beauty is significant enough to warrant giving the classical idea of beauty as harmony some consideration.

## Transcendental Definitions

The second group of definitions employs the transcendentals to define beauty. The phrase "truth, goodness, and beauty," coined by Plato, is well known as the triad of transcendentals. Transcendental definitions of beauty define beauty in relation to the unseen and ultimate qualities of truth and goodness, or as some combination of these. In these definitions, beauty is understood as identical to the good,<sup>15</sup> as a form of moral goodness,<sup>16</sup> as the "radiance of the true and the good,"<sup>17</sup> or even as the "capacity to proclaim truth and to realize goodness."<sup>18</sup>

Mortimer Adler claims that beauty is a synthesis of truth and goodness: "like the good in that it pleases us, like the true in that it is not acquisitive desire."<sup>19</sup> Savile states that Hegel saw art's role to "reveal truth in pleasing, sensible form."<sup>20</sup>

Again, those in Christendom have found this definition useful. Pope John Paul II defined beauty in this way:

[I]n a certain sense, beauty is the visible form of the good, just as the good is the metaphysical condition of beauty. This was well understood by the Greeks who, by fusing the two

---

<sup>15</sup> Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art*, 134.

<sup>16</sup> Anthony Skillen, "The Place of Beauty," *Philosophy* 77, no. 299 (January 2002): 36.

<sup>17</sup> Stratford Caldecott, *Beauty for Truth's Sake: On the Re-Enchantment of Education* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 31.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Munson and Joshua Farris Drake, *Art and Music: A Student's Guide*, Kindle, *Reclaiming the Christian Intellectual Tradition* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), §301.

<sup>19</sup> Mortimer Adler, *The Great Ideas*, ed. Max Weismann (Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 2000), 156.

<sup>20</sup> Anthony Savile, "Beauty and Truth: The Apotheosis of an Idea," in *Analytic Aesthetics*, ed. Richard Shusterman (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 127.

concepts, coined a term which embraces both: *kalokagathía*, or beauty-goodness.<sup>21</sup>

Wainwright conceives of beauty along the lines of divine design: truth reveals the Creator's design, goodness is when creatures act in light of the Creator's purpose, and beauty is the result – when all is shaped according to the divine design.<sup>22</sup>

Bishop Harries distinguished between beauty and glory by saying that “when goodness, truth, and beauty are combined we have glory. When boundless goodness, total truth, and sublime beauty are combined in supreme degree, we have divine glory.”<sup>23</sup>

The transcendental theory has had its critics, too. Cory disputes the equivalence of beauty and truth, saying each requires the other, but they are not forms of one another.<sup>24</sup> Von Hildebrand goes beyond truth and goodness, saying that beauty is the radiance of *every* value: qualitative values, moral values, intellectual values, and aesthetical values.<sup>25</sup>

The transcendental theory has the power of explaining why beauty seems to have much to do with fittingness and excellence. The overlap between goodness, which is to say, what ought to be, and beauty, shows that beauty must have a strong relationship to truth and goodness. The repeated declaration that God saw that the creation was “good” (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31) is not primarily a statement about the created order's ethical state, as much as its aesthetics: its excellence, fittingness, and beauty.

---

<sup>21</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Letter of His Holiness the Pope to Artists*, 1999, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf\\_jp-ii LET\\_23041999\\_artists.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii LET_23041999_artists.html).

<sup>22</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright, “The True, the Good, and the Beautiful: The Other Story,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 107 (July 2000): 24.

<sup>23</sup> Harries, *Art and the Beauty of God*, 54.

<sup>24</sup> Herbert Ellsworth Cory, “The Interactions of Beauty and Truth,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 22, no. 15 (July 1925): 395.

<sup>25</sup> Alice von Hildebrand, “Debating Beauty: Jacques Maritain and Dietrich von Hildebrand,” *Crisis Magazine*, August 2004, 41.

## Subjective Definitions

A third kind of beauty-definitions defines beauty almost entirely as its effects or experience within the perceiving subject. These expound beauty in terms of the peculiar aesthetic pleasure, or its ethical effect upon the subject. Such explanations adopt some form of emotional or psychological theory that locates beauty in the response of the perceiver.<sup>26</sup>

Some, such as McMahon, see the experience of beauty as the human pleasure of awareness of the process of problem-solving in perception.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps partly borrowing from the classical theory, this definition sees the human mind as experiencing beauty when it recognizes relationships of harmony and unity, be these components of a physical object, or concepts within an idea. Kant's idealism saw beauty as the mind's recognizing purposiveness, without having an acquisitive interest in the object. Lorand believes that beauty is a complex concept, best understood by its numerous opposites: ugliness, meaninglessness, boring, kitsch, insignificant, or irrelevant.<sup>28</sup> Though these represent real values, they cannot be united, and therefore beauty is a "high degree of inner order." For others, such as Elaine Scarry, beauty cannot be defined as an unattached ideal, but one can point to beautiful objects and describe their effects, causing one to be deliberative, saving life, and increasing justice.<sup>29</sup>

To be clear, proponents of this definition do not necessarily deny that objects of beauty have outward qualities that might be construed as beautiful. Rather, their claim is that beauty itself must be defined as the subject's response to these qualities, not as something that exists entirely independently of observation or inherently in the unperceived object. Philosopher Roger Scruton defines beauty as that which pleases, while stating that beauty is nevertheless

---

<sup>26</sup> F. Duane Lindsey, "Essays toward a Theology of Beauty Part I: God Is Beautiful," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 131, no. 522 (1974): 121.

<sup>27</sup> Jennifer McMahon, "Towards a Unified Theory of Beauty," *Literature and Aesthetics* 9 (1999): 23.

<sup>28</sup> Ruth Lorand, "Beauty and Its Opposites," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 52, no. 4 (1994): 402.

<sup>29</sup> Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 9.

the subject-matter of a judgement of taste. This judgement of taste is “about the beautiful object, not about the subject’s state of mind.”<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps one might summarize the valid insight of this definition thus: what is experienced as beauty may exist *separately* from a perceiving subject, but it does not truly exist *without* a perceiving subject. That is, while beauty is not merely the inner experience of perceiving subjects, something’s beauty is impossible to speak of without perceiving subjects.

## Theological Definitions

The fourth kind of definitions employs theological ideas to define beauty. Theological definitions take God himself as the foundation of beauty, or as the ultimate form of it. In these definitions, beauty is either an attribute of God, or a way of speaking of God’s being or relations. Importantly, theological definitions insist that one define beauty with God’s revelation in Scripture, not primarily with philosophy or aesthetics. De Gruchy warns against attempting to define God’s beauty based upon our own definitions of beauty, rather than using the form of beauty revealed in creation and redemption.<sup>31</sup> Revelation, then, must be the key for understanding beauty as it relates to God.

Understanding beauty as being, and God’s being as the ground of all being, makes beauty equivalent to God. Spiegel summarizes the idea: “As all being is either God or is derived from God, so all that is beautiful either *is* him or comes *from* him.”<sup>32</sup> The idea of beauty as being prevailed in medieval Christendom.

According to Lindsey, Karl Barth saw the beauty of God as the more precise designation of the glory of God, “the sum total of the divine perfection in irresistible self-manifestation.”<sup>33</sup> Wooddell ventures that something “is beautiful insofar as it reflects the char-

---

<sup>30</sup> Roger Scruton, *Beauty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5.

<sup>31</sup> John W. de Gruchy, *Holy Beauty: A Reformed Perspective on Aesthetics within a World of Unjust Ugliness* (Richmond, VA, 2001), 6.

<sup>32</sup> James S. Spiegel, “Aesthetics and Worship,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2, no. 4 (1998): 42.

<sup>33</sup> Lindsey, “Essays toward a Theology of Beauty Part I: God Is Beautiful,” 127.

acter, nature, or will of God."<sup>34</sup> Munson and Drake similarly regard beauty as the forms through which people recognize the nature and ways of God.<sup>35</sup> Similar to these definitions are those that regard the triune love of God as primordial beauty. Jeremy Begbie insists that God's beauty be defined as dynamic love, not a static structure.<sup>36</sup>

Here, proportion, radiance, perfection, and pleasure can be united in light of the reciprocal love of the Godhead. In *The Beauty of the Infinite*, David Hart argues that "true beauty is not the idea of the beautiful, a static archetype in the mind of God, but is an infinite music, drama, art, completed in but never bounded by the termless dynamism of the Trinity's life."<sup>37</sup> Robert Jenson has insightfully recognized the dilemma of subject and object, of beholder and beheld in the topic of beauty, and finds its ultimate reconciliation in God himself, that the triune God of Christianity is beautiful, and all that he perceives that reflects his own beauty. "In God there is a genuine I and a confrontation with another, and their harmony in loving beauty is reliable."<sup>38</sup>

Some medieval theologians combined the classical idea of symmetry with the Trinity, seeing beauty in the three persons of the Trinity as equal, that is, mutually related through the common relation of equality (their beauty results from the proportion of equality, parallel to earthly beauty). Others saw God's beauty simply in his excellence, while some saw it in the relations of procession between the Persons of the Godhead.<sup>39</sup>

Conversely, some writers have rejected metaphysical notions of beauty. Edgar agrees with Seerveld and Begbie that beauty should be thought of as that which alludes to God and which faith-

---

<sup>34</sup> Joseph D. Wooddell, *The Beauty of the Faith: Using Aesthetics for Christian Apologetics*, Kindle (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), §1327.

<sup>35</sup> Munson and Drake, *Art and Music: A Student's Guide*, §245.

<sup>36</sup> Jeremy Begbie, "Created Beauty: The Witness of J. S. Bach," in *The Beauty of God: Theology and the Arts*, ed. Daniel J. Treier, Mark Husbands, and Roger Lundin, Kindle (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), §182.

<sup>37</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 177.

<sup>38</sup> Robert W. Jenson, "Beauty," in *Essays in Theology of Culture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 152.

<sup>39</sup> Bychkov, "What Does Beauty Have to Do with the Trinity? From Augustine to Duns Scotus," 212.

fully represents his attributes and ways.<sup>40</sup> God's ways are both good and great, and faithful representation of this is a gargantuan task.<sup>41</sup>

Theological definitions, then, insist that beauty is defined derivatively from what God is: his being, attributes, or relations. Beauty cannot be a concept to which God conforms; the very concept must be derived from the perfection within God.

## **Analysis of the Various Definitions**

A Christian conception of beauty cannot be satisfied with a definition of beauty that excludes or neglects God. Beauty must be defined in relation to God and using Scripture. With this qualification in mind, each of the four definitions of beauty will now be examined.

First, is beauty the harmony or proportion so loved by Platonic aestheticians? Its constant refrain in discussions of beauty is certainly indicative of the attractiveness of the idea, and it would be bold to dismiss it out of hand. The classical theory explains much, particularly in visual perception, or in the beauty of intellectually elegant ideas (in mathematics, for example). For all that, beauty-as-harmony fails to deal adequately with the phenomenon of unitary beauty. Some phenomena, such as light, or the beauty of a single

---

<sup>40</sup> William Edgar, "Aesthetics: Beauty Avenged, Apologetics Enriched," *Westminster Theological Journal* 63, no. 2001 (2001): 120.

<sup>41</sup> Since the time of Immanuel Kant, some writers have distinguished the idea of beauty from the idea of the sublime, a modern example being Gilbert-Rolfe (1999). They argue that being awed, humbled and overwhelmed with the dangerous beauty of a storm is qualitatively different from being cheered and delighted by the beauty of a tranquil landscape, calling for distinct words to describe the two: the storm being sublime, and the landscape being beautiful. Such a distinction was inevitable to the Enlightenment, attempting as it did to describe human reason and experience without reference to God. This nuance of the discussion of beauty need not detain the reader, for in the spirituality of Christianity, both will be combined in the experience of God. God's beauty is both "unbounded" in his infinitude, and "bounded" in the creation and the Incarnation, meaning that Kant's or Burke's distinctions are not a problem for the study at hand. See Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, "Aesthetics," in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Holder, The Blackwell Companions to Religion (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005), 357.

color, are not beautiful by virtue of harmony, but because of their simple, singular beauty. The pleasure obtained by beauty cannot be finally reduced to admiration of symmetry, for some beauty is the beauty of the simple, or the sublime, or even the tragic—in which the disharmonious nevertheless attains a beauty in our eyes. Certainly, the beauty of God's harmony with his own being in the Trinity is unquestionable, which this paper will develop further. To make this harmony the very essence of beauty, however, is to make harmony an ideal to which God himself conforms. God's beauty must almost certainly *contain* the qualities of harmony or symmetry, but it will not do to say that it is equivalent to those qualities. Harmony then becomes the ultimate good, perhaps unwittingly displacing other attributes of God, claiming in an unwarranted fashion to be the supreme good.

Second, is beauty equivalent to truth and goodness? If beauty obtains a correspondence between internal appreciation and external realities, then beauty cannot be entirely separated from truth.<sup>42</sup> Nor can hating what is beautiful to God be considered moral or good, so loving beauty is itself virtuous, or good. Perhaps one might say with Scarry that beauty is allied with truth, but not identical to it.<sup>43</sup> Its nature as some kind of ultimate value must place it into relationship with other ultimate values such as goodness or truth. Nevertheless, defining beauty solely in terms of the abstract transcendentals of truth and goodness (whether one grants them independent existence or not) potentially leaves beauty in the realm of a philosophical construct, rather than an attribute or property to be experienced.

Third, can beauty be defined as pleasure in a subject? Beauty may represent a phenomenon in a perceiving subject, but that phenomenon corresponds to something outside the subject. As Hart points out, the fact that beauty can surprise one shows that beauty is not merely a projection of one's own desires, but an evocation of desire by the object.<sup>44</sup> It may be true that no beauty exists without

---

<sup>42</sup> David Lyle Jeffrey and Gregory Maillet, *Christianity and Literature: Philosophical Foundations and Critical Practice*, Kindle, Christian Worldview Integration Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), §480,

<sup>43</sup> Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 52.

<sup>44</sup> Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*.

beholders; it is equally true that beholders do not create beauty out of themselves. One must examine the subjective experience of beauty, but Christians must insist that a real phenomenon exists outside the subject, in recognizable properties in the object. A definition of God's beauty must include the concept of pleasure in another (pushing one inexorably to a Trinitarian view of God's being), but more is needed to sustain a robust view of God's beauty. It appears the remaining option for a working definition of God's beauty is to harmonize these three definitions with the fourth category: theological definitions of beauty.

Is beauty another name for God's uncompounded, infinite being? Defining beauty as equivalent to God's being creates its own problems. If beauty is God's being simply considered, and God's being is the ground of all being, how does one then explain ugliness in the order of things? If beauty is to be predicated of God's being, the idea must refer to solely God's being *in himself*, transcendent above immanent reality. For unquestionably, in secondary reality – the created order – God's beauty is not perfectly reflected; indeed, it is often parodied, warped, and distorted.

Moving one step away from God's being simply considered, is God's beauty one of his attributes, or the sum total of his will and ways? Is God's beauty the name for when God's glory is displayed and experienced? This is a generally safe assumption, since Scripture does link God's beauty with his glory (1 Chr. 16:29; Job 40:10; Ps. 29:2). Yet to say that God's beauty is God's glory is merely to substitute a biblical word for a philosophical one, and merely drives one to define both more explicitly.

Is the Trinity's life the essence of God's beauty? Is God's beauty particularly related to the Trinity: the symmetry of relations, the harmony of three who are one, or the relationships of love with one another? If God's beauty represents not merely his essence or being, but the radiance and pleasurable splendor of this essence, then God's delight in God would be one of the strongest contenders for a working definition of God's beauty.

While each of these four definitions captures part of the idea and phenomenon of beauty, they appear insufficient taken on their own. This deficiency could be addressed if a synthesis of the definitions were attempted.

## Jonathan Edwards's Definitions

Jonathan Edwards's writings on beauty represent one of the most compelling solutions to defining beauty. The seventeenth-century American theologian's writings on beauty<sup>45</sup> represent a fascinating (though perhaps unintentional) synthesis of these four definitions of beauty, combining harmony, the transcendentals, the subjective, and the varying theological definitions in one.

Edwards's view of beauty was fundamental to much of his theology. Farley goes as far as to say that in Edwards's interpretation of philosophical and religious themes, "beauty is more central and more pervasive than in any other text in the history of Christian theology."<sup>46</sup> Edwards does not just theologize about beauty: beauty (loveliness, sweetness) is the fundamental motif through which he understands the world, God, virtue and "divine things." Similarly, McClymond and McDermott write:

Beauty is fundamental to Edwards's understanding of being. It is the first principle of being, the inner, structural principle of being-itself. This stress on beauty set Edwards apart from other Protestant authors. . . . One might interpret the whole of Edwards's theology as the gradual, complex outworking of a primal vision of God's beauty that came to him in the wake of his conversion experience.<sup>47</sup>

Edwards regarded God's beauty as his most distinguishing attribute. Writing in *Religious Affections*, Edwards stated, "God is God, and distinguished from all other beings, and exalted above 'em, chiefly by his divine beauty. . . . They therefore that see the

---

<sup>45</sup> Edwards's discussed beauty in many of his writings. His work *The Mind* gives one of the clearest explications of his vocabulary of beauty. Here Edwards presented a classical or neoclassical ideal of beauty. In *A Dissertation Concerning the Nature of True Virtue* (1749), Edwards argued for God's beauty being the ground of all other forms of beauty. Its companion work, *A Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*, continues the thesis that the ground of being is God's own happiness, not the creature's.

<sup>46</sup> Farley, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic*, 43.

<sup>47</sup> Michael J. McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, Kindle (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), §1116.

stamp of this glory in divine things . . . see that in them wherein the truest idea of divinity does consist.”<sup>48</sup>

Edwards’s views on beauty are understood within the context of the subjectivist turn of the mid-eighteenth century, which “experienced a crucial shift in the history of aesthetics from beauty as being to beauty as human self-transcendence,” from an external property to a human sensibility.<sup>49</sup> Edwards sought to avoid the objective/subjective dichotomy inherent in some forms of British empiricism and other epistemologies.<sup>50</sup> What set Edwards apart from his contemporaries, and what makes him so relevant to the contemporary discussion, was his ability to combine subjective and objective aspects of beauty in a theory grounded in God’s beauty. Moody states that beauty appealed to Edwards because it seemed to be a way to form a concept of objectivity that could be subjectively channeled.<sup>51</sup>

## The Classical Definition in Edwards

In *The Mind*, Edwards defended his own form of the Great Theory of Beauty: beauty consists in a relatedness between entities. The relatedness may be an exact correspondence, such as one finds in geometry, or a more sophisticated proportionality, such as one finds in music.<sup>52</sup>

Having said that, Edwards embraced the idea that beauty could include disproportion as well as proportion. “What seems to be disproportionate in a narrow context might appear proportionate in a broader context.”<sup>53</sup> An opposite situation occurs when something appears to be beautiful when taken in a narrow context, and

---

<sup>48</sup> Edwards, *Religious Affections* (1754), ed. Paul Ramsey, Works of Jonathan Edwards Online, 2:298 (edwards.yale.edu).

<sup>49</sup> R. Venter, “Trinity and Beauty: The Theological Contribution of Jonathan Edwards,” *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif / Dutch Reformed Theological Journal* 51, no. 3 (2010): 187.

<sup>50</sup> J. A. Martin Jr., “The Empirical, the Esthetic, and the Religious,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 30, nos. 2–4 (1975): 113.

<sup>51</sup> Josh Moody, *Jonathan Edwards and the Enlightenment* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005), 105.

<sup>52</sup> McClymond and McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, §1173.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, §1173.

yet appears disproportionate, or even ugly, when considered in a larger context.<sup>54</sup> When things disproportionate, unequal, or irregular are harmonized, it intensifies the beauty of the whole. In his sermon "The Excellency of Christ," Edwards demonstrates how apparently opposing attributes in the person of Christ make him as beautiful as he is.<sup>55</sup> Mitchell explains: "Edwards calls the beauty of exact correspondence *simple beauty*. He calls the beauty of proportionality *complex beauty*. These kinds of beauty fit into a larger classification called *secondary beauty*."<sup>56</sup> Secondary beauty applies to physical things as well as abstract concepts or immaterial matters. A well-ordered society can be beautiful. A harmonious community can be beautiful. Well-executed justice can be beautiful.

Thus, for Edwards, *primary beauty* is the relatedness between persons, and Edwards traces beauty back to the first and primary person: God himself. Edwards laid stress in his writings on this kind of beauty. In Edwards's thinking, the usual concepts of beauty, such as abstract proportionality or harmony in created forms of beauty, were really to be understood only as symbolic counterparts to a higher kind of correspondence, that of wills in persons. Correspondence or symmetry, or harmony between persons—intellectual or volitional beings—was what Edwards called "consent": a term that suggested volition, affection, and love to God and to one another.<sup>57</sup> Consent is Edwards's spiritual and moral equivalent of created or sensible harmony and symmetry. That is, symmetry in the created realm, such as gravity or music or color, has a higher analogue in the consent of spiritual love and union. The ultimate harmony is loving union with God, and the ultimate form of such harmonious symmetry would be God's love for God, meaning his intra-trinitarian love. Directional activity tending toward union was, to Edwards, found in nature—a stone "consents" to the law of gravity, but this is only a type of love in the spiritual world. Reality,

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., §1186.

<sup>55</sup> Louis J. Mitchell, "The Theological Aesthetics of Jonathan Edwards," *Theology Today* 64, no. 1 (April 2007): 41.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>57</sup> McClymond and McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, §1137.

in its most basic form, is relational and dispositional, not static, self-contained substances.<sup>58</sup>

Thus, at the fundamental level, beauty is *being's consent to being*. God's benevolence toward being in general and toward other benevolent beings is the essence of beauty.<sup>59</sup> God's relatedness to himself and to his creatures is primary beauty. Edwards was not claiming that beauty and existence are essentially the same. Existence is fundamental to *agreement*, and agreement is at the heart of beauty. Parting from the ancients and some medievals, Edwards said that being, or existence, is fundamental to beauty, but it is not beauty itself. Beauty is consent, and primary beauty is being's consent to being. The greater the scale of being, the higher the potential for agreement, and therefore for beauty. Beauty is harmonious benevolence. Being is the ground of beauty.

## The Transcendental Definition in Edwards

Edwards also assimilates the transcendental definition by combining truth, goodness, and beauty by defining beauty as "true virtue" (or *true goodness*, in modern parlance), which is the beauty of love for that which is most perfect—God himself.<sup>60</sup> In *The Nature of True Virtue*, Edward points out that virtue is considered to be a kind of beauty, but specifically a moral beauty, for no one considers the beauty of nature to be virtuous.<sup>61</sup> He then distinguishes common morality from saving virtue. For Edwards, mere selflessness or morality arising out of selfishness is not true virtue.<sup>62</sup> True virtue is essentially a supreme love for God. This love of God is the beauty of God, the saints, and the angels. When a moral being finds pleasure in God's beauty, that pleasure and desire constitutes his or her spiritual beauty, or moral goodness. God is ultimately beautiful because

---

<sup>58</sup> Venter, "Trinity and Beauty: The Theological Contribution of Jonathan Edwards," 186.

<sup>59</sup> John Mason Hodges, "Beauty Revisited," *Reformation and Revival* 4, no. 4 (1995): 66.

<sup>60</sup> Louie, *The Beauty of the Triune God*, §3393.

<sup>61</sup> Edwards, "On the Nature of True Virtue," in *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey, Works of Jonathan Edwards Online, 8:539.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:612.

of what he loves and because of who he is. Holy affections, loving and desiring what God loves, are the subjective analogue to the holy beauty of God.

By using the term "being," Edwards is using the philosophical term for the essence or truth of what is. When the ground of existence finds moral or ethical delight in himself, this is beauty. To put it in transcendental terms: Beauty is the living Truth's goodness to himself, or the Good's truthful response to himself.

## The Subjective Definition in Edwards

When Edwards turned to deal with the subjectivity of beauty in the experience of observers, he again formulated a theocentric response to the eighteenth-century discussion of "taste" in his use of the term *sensibility*. Delattre, noted twentieth-century professor of American studies and religious studies, suggests that beauty and sensibility are the "objective and subjective components of the spiritual life" in Edwards's writings.<sup>63</sup> Martin identifies two word groups used interchangeably throughout Edwards's works: an "affections group" (affections, consent, love, will, pleasure, inclination, and disposition) that describe the action of an intelligent being toward other intelligent beings (the actions of the subject); and a "beauty group" (beauty, glory, holiness, proportion, and excellency) that describe both the object of consent and the result of mutual consent.<sup>64</sup>

Balancing objective and subjective sides of beauty so that neither eclipsed the other was what Edwards's intricate theory of sensibility and "sense of the heart" attempted to do.<sup>65</sup> Some of Edwards's work on sensibility was a response to Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson. In *The Nature of True Virtue*, Edwards referred to Hutcheson by name three times.<sup>66</sup> Mar-

---

<sup>63</sup> Roland Andre Delattre, *Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 3.

<sup>64</sup> Ryan J. Martin, *Understanding Affections in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 113.

<sup>65</sup> McClymond and McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, §1194.

<sup>66</sup> A. Owen Aldridge, "Edwards and Hutcheson," *Harvard Theological Review* 44, no. 1 (January 1951): 35.

tin believes that Edwards was a “Platonic empiricist.”<sup>67</sup> But he was by no means a parrot of popular philosophy.

For Edwards the “sense of the heart” was an appreciation of beauty that is given to a person by God. In his *Treatise on Grace*, Edwards writes that “the first effect of the power of God in the heart in regeneration is to give the heart a divine taste or sense, to cause it to have a relish of the loveliness and sweetness of the supreme excellency of the divine nature.”<sup>68</sup> Edwards believed that beauty is definitely something subjectively experienced, in *On the Nature of True Virtue* sounding like one of the earlier *philosophes*:

It is evident therefore by this, that the way we come by the idea or sensation of beauty, is by immediate sensation of the gratefulness of the idea called “beautiful”; and not by finding out by argumentation any consequences, or other things that it stands connected with; any more than tasting the sweetness of honey, or perceiving the harmony of a tune, is by argumentation on connections and consequences.<sup>69</sup>

Edwards, however, went beyond Locke’s view that the mind is merely passive in the process of perception. Edwards believed that the organ that sensed beauty was the “habit of mind,” where sense-ideas received through regular physical channels are ordered in their true relational context by the mind, and then delighted in by the mind.<sup>70</sup> Edwards taught the imagination is before the inclination: the imagination reveals the relations between ideas; the inclination takes pleasure in them.<sup>71</sup>

But at the heart of this was the work of regeneration. Edwards sought to explain the ordering activity of the mind and its predisposition toward one thing and not another, in terms of its regenerate or unregenerate state. Regenerate hearts are given a new

---

<sup>67</sup> Martin, *Beauty and Holiness*, 28.

<sup>68</sup> Edwards, “Treatise on Grace,” in *Writings on the Trinity, Grace, and Faith*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee, *Works of Jonathan Edwards Online*, 21:174.

<sup>69</sup> Edwards, “On the Nature of True Virtue,” 8:619.

<sup>70</sup> Sang Hyun Lee, “Mental Activity and the Perception of Beauty in Jonathan Edwards,” *Harvard Theological Review* 69, nos. 3–4 (October 1976): 390.

<sup>71</sup> Sang Hyun Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 156.

inclination, and with it, the ability to see as beautiful what could not be seen before. A human being, once given a new habit of mind, could experience the transcendent beauty that is God. Equally so, an unregenerate person may well perceive other forms of secondary beauty, but lacking the God-given sense of the heart, may yet fail to see the primary beauty that is God. Edwards believed that the scriptural word "spirit" referred to the affections of the mind. If a person obtains new affections, these are part of one's essence, and if one's essence has changed, one also has a new nature. Such a one participates in the divine nature, which explains the consequent love for divine beauty. By partaking of God's love for God, one now has a sensibility for primary beauty.<sup>72</sup>

In this way, by referring to sensibility, habit of mind, or the *affections* as the faculty that perceives or fails to perceive beauty, Edwards placed the blame for failing to see God's beauty at the door of the unbelieving, hard heart, while upholding the truth that God is beautiful to the heart ready to see him. Put simply, just hearts have increasingly just sentiments. Indeed, for Edwards, the essence of true virtue is "benevolence to being in general." When a human being showed the same "consent" towards God, which could be variously understood as faith, belief, hope, obedience, or love, he or she was displaying true virtue, or spiritual beauty.<sup>73</sup> God's love for God manifest in a believer was the believer's relish for God's beauty.

By grounding all beauty in God's loving relatedness to himself and developing that definition to encompass all forms of beauty, Edwards could ground beauty in ultimate reality while acknowledging the diversity in the experience of beauty. Diversity in aesthetic taste is satisfactorily explained by the habit of the mind, be it regenerate or unregenerate. Therefore, for Edwards, the *philosophes* were correct to say that much beauty is known by experience, but wrong to deny that any ontological structure of beauty existed. The perception of beauty lay not merely in some neutral innate sense, but in inclinations of the heart, which could be regenerate or unregenerate. Thus, only believers could sense and enjoy the prima-

---

<sup>72</sup> Louie, *The Beauty of the Triune God*, §2627.

<sup>73</sup> McClymond and McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, §6424.

ry beauty of God and, having done so, would be even more capable of sensing and enjoying secondary beauty.

Edwards also managed to undermine and transcend the conventional duality of subject and object. For Edwards, beauty is not a property; it is a disposition. It is objective in the sense that it is an actual state of affairs—the way God relates to himself and his world—but it is subjective in that it is a heartfelt disposition: relation and consent on the part of God. Beauty is simultaneously objective and subjective.<sup>74</sup>

## The Theological Definition in Edwards

For Edwards, beauty was not a concept one could divorce from God.<sup>75</sup> Edwards is distinct in this respect. While other writers “claim that aesthetic experience points to the goodness of God, Edwards claims that true aesthetic experience is inseparable from the perception of God.”<sup>76</sup> The aesthetic experience is not merely a gift from God; he is the very essence of the aesthetic experience.<sup>77</sup>

Edwards’s definition of beauty was “being’s cordial consent to being in general.”<sup>78</sup> This *consent* is benevolence, union, or love: the benevolence of God toward being in general and specifically toward other benevolent beings.<sup>79</sup> Here Edwards defines beauty as God’s response to his own ontological being, agreeing with medievalists that God himself is the ground of beauty, not a concept that could be abstracted from God.<sup>80</sup>

Edwards anticipated the objection to grounding beauty in God himself. Complete simplicity cannot be beautiful, for it has no relations of proportionality. Similarly, in primary beauty, a solitary person cannot display this consent, of loving union with himself or herself. In order for God to be beautiful, God must have propor-

---

<sup>74</sup> Farley, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic*, 47.

<sup>75</sup> Owen Strachan and Douglas Sweeney, *Jonathan Edwards on Beauty*, Kindle (Chicago: Moody, 2010), §679.

<sup>76</sup> Louie, *The Beauty of the Triune God*, §1522.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, §1520.

<sup>78</sup> Edwards, “On the Nature of True Virtue,” 8:620.

<sup>79</sup> Hodges, “Beauty Revisited,” 67.

<sup>80</sup> Strachan and Sweeney, *Jonathan Edwards on Beauty*, §679.

tionality and consent in God's being.<sup>81</sup> Edwards solved this problem elegantly by putting forward the relatedness of the three Persons in the Godhead as the essence of primary beauty. God's beauty is not merely his being in some static, abstract sense. The beauty is how God dynamically responds to God's being. God's dynamic benevolence, as inclined and expressed to himself and his works, is beauty. Trinitarian love is at the heart of what God's beauty is. The Trinity is the ground of proportionality and consent to Being. Edwards explained in *The Mind*:

As to God's excellence, it is evident it consists in the love of himself. . . . But he exerts himself towards himself no other way than in infinitely loving and delighting in himself, in the mutual love of the Father and the Son. This makes the third, the personal Holy Spirit or the holiness of God, which is his infinite beauty, and this is God's infinite consent to being in general.<sup>82</sup>

He goes on to say: "Tis peculiar to God that he has beauty within himself, consisting in being's consenting with his own being, or the love of himself in his own Holy Spirit whereas the excellence of others is in loving others, in loving God, and in the communications of his Spirit."<sup>83</sup> Louie writes that for Edwards, God is beautiful only because God is triune.<sup>84</sup> Unlike many other writers, for Edwards beauty is not one of many attributes of the simple divine essence, but a "moral perfection of God, which is embodied in the triune life of God."<sup>85</sup> God's love for God is God's beauty and his chief glory. Edwards has perhaps the best theological definition of beauty, combining essence with dynamic response.

With this theocentric view of beauty, Edwards explained all other forms of beauty, which he termed *secondary beauty*. Beauty in the universe is essentially an enlargement and overflowing of the

---

<sup>81</sup> Mitchell, "The Theological Aesthetics of Jonathan Edwards," 38.

<sup>82</sup> Edwards, "The Mind," in *Scientific and Philosophical Writings*, ed. Wallace E. Anderson, Works of Jonathan Edwards Online, 6:364.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 6:365.

<sup>84</sup> Louie, *The Beauty of the Triune God*, §3143.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

divine life.<sup>86</sup> It is essentially the beauty of harmony or proportion, and in Edwards's mind, can be manifested in several ways.

The believer himself is a special recipient of God's beauty. Beauty is what genuine religion looks like.<sup>87</sup> Virtue within a believer is those qualities of heart that combine to love God or express benevolence to being in general, and even love for his creation.<sup>88</sup> A believer's beauty is simply a reflection of God's beauty. To love God is to love what he loves, which is to become as he is, and to reflect his beauty.<sup>89</sup> At the societal level, a perfectly harmonious society wherein active and mutually supportive social consent takes place would be an example of secondary beauty.<sup>90</sup>

## Analysis

Edwards defines beauty as "being's cordial consent to being in general."<sup>91</sup> This definition, combining all four theories, is difficult to improve upon. First, he maintained the classical notions of cosmological harmony and symmetry with the idea of being "consenting" to being: the ultimate harmony must be the fullest reality being in harmony with the fullest reality. Second, he nodded to the transcendental triad of truth, goodness, and beauty by explicitly defining true virtue as beauty. Third, he conceded the valid objections of eighteenth-century *philosophes* to the medieval being-as-beauty notion, and agreed that part of the definition of beauty must include the activity of subjects perceiving beauty. This he did with the concept of sensibility: hearts must be regenerated by saving grace to be able to taste and see that the Lord is good. Perception of beauty is dependent upon being in union with the source of beauty: God

---

<sup>86</sup> Roland A. Delattre, "Aesthetics and Ethics: Jonathan Edwards and the Recovery of Aesthetics for Religious Ethics," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31, no. 2 (2003): 281.

<sup>87</sup> Mitchell, "The Theological Aesthetics of Jonathan Edwards," 42.

<sup>88</sup> Joseph D. Wooddell, "Jonathan Edwards, Beauty, and Apologetics.," *Criswell Theological Review* 5, no. 1 (2007): 86.

<sup>89</sup> Wooddell, *The Beauty of the Faith: Using Aesthetics for Christian Apologetics*, §2018.

<sup>90</sup> Martin, "The Empirical, the Esthetic, and the Religious," 112.

<sup>91</sup> Edwards, "On the Nature of True Virtue," 8:620.

himself. Finally, he agreed with traditional Christian theology that beauty must be grounded in God.

Edwards, however, managed to advance the Christian understanding of beauty. Instead of making beauty equivalent to being, he defined it as the action and disposition of being. Beauty is not simply God: it is God's loving union with himself. This allowed him to ground beauty in God, while finding a way to explain how such a transcendent beauty could be manifest in immanent reality in great variety. The large varieties of beauty are emanations of God's beauty. Secondary beauty is an analogy for primary beauty. All secondary beauty ultimately points back to the ground of beauty: being's consent to being.

Edwards thus achieved a monumental synthesis of philosophy (both classical and contemporary) and theology.

Can his definition be improved? The conceptual ideas that underly Edwards's definition are difficult to improve upon, but perhaps the nomenclature is worn with age. The word "consent" has contemporary connotations of permission that obscures Edwards's original meaning of *loving union*, giving the word "consent" an archaic flavor. Similarly, the term "being" retains a technical philosophical meaning that is largely unclear to those outside philosophical academia. Perhaps an updated definition may be something along the lines of "ultimate reality's willing union with ultimate reality."

What then are Christians pursuing God's beauty in pursuit of? According to Edwards, they are pursuing the gloriously revealed intra-trinitarian love of God's own being: the delightful union of God with himself, a union to which believers are called. Beauty in worship, spirituality, or sanctification is the pursuit of positional and experiential union with the trinitarian God through the gospel. Such union is the believer's beauty and holiness, the basis of the deepest affections, and harmonious with one's created purpose.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored four schools of defining beauty. Jonathan Edwards still represents perhaps the best synthesis of these definitions, defining it as being's consent to being: God's lov-

ing union for and with his own being simply considered, and union with all that reflects him. While the nomenclature of this definition may need updating, its explanatory power remains unsurpassed. Christian worship, art, and spirituality should pursue that which communicates believers' loving, joyful union with the triune God, which is their true virtue: the shared beauty of God.