

Q&A: Is beauty evidence for the existence of God?

by John Mark Reynolds

The existence of beauty suggests that God exists and that he is good. Beauty alone is not a sufficient proof for God's existence, but it serves as a confirmation to those whose belief is based on other reasons and experiences.

The harmonious plan of the cosmos allows for variation and freedom for created beings. There is a fundamental pattern and order to creation, but also room for the unexpected within the design plan. Too much regularity would seem stagnant, so thankfully creation shows variability and the capacity to adapt and change. So delightful is the universe that elegant mathematical and scientific theories work better in explaining it than inelegant ones.

These observations suggest that an engineer or artist lies behind the cosmos as its cause and designer. But is our recognition of beauty just a useful natural adaptation? After all, it would be to our advantage to develop a liking for the ecosystem that sustains us. But humans do not just find their local environment pleasing. We also discover that newly explored areas of the cosmos are beautiful.

For instance, when my son first went up in a plane and saw "cloud land," he turned to me with wonder and said, "It's so beautiful." It did not surprise him. Even though the scenery from above the clouds was previously unknown to him, he had learned to expect beauty when he came to new vistas of creation.

Gratuitous beauty, beauty that has no survival value for humankind, exists! Whether we dive to the bottom of the ocean or spy distant corners of space, we find things that are stark, weird, unknown, but beautiful. This superabundance of beauty is a hint that a good and loving God exists.

We do find instances of ugliness, but the ugly is less fundamental than beauty. Ugliness exists as a twisting or disruption of the beautiful created order. Scripture teaches this (Rm 8:20), and it is confirmed in our observations of nature. For instance, every unborn child will grow to beautifully express the divine image (through their talents and attributes) unless their development is somehow aborted by sin.

Viewed with our widest telescopes, the cosmos shows awe-inspiring beauty. This beauty is repeated in the most focused examination of the basic elements of the massive cosmic structure. It is only in the middle range, where we find humans making choices and shaping their world by wrong actions, that the pattern of beauty is twisted and marred. Yet, even there, the staggering ability of humankind to create beauty based on the common image of God within us reminds us that beauty is fundamentally real.

For Christians, existence is good, and goodness is beautiful. As a result, nothing created can be wholly bad or utterly ugly. Even the most shattered part of creation remains part of the beautiful whole, made from the beautiful elements of creation. Parts of creation, especially humans, require redemption. But even the shattered image of God in fallen humans retains enough beauty to remind the keen observer of God.