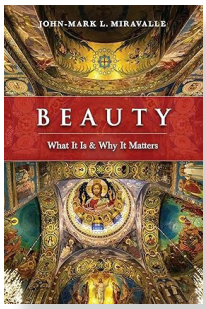

Beauty: What It is and Why It Matters

John-Mark L. Miravalle

While many believe that political solutions are needed to address the problems in society, the professor of theology John-Mark L. Miravalle argues that many social problems are caused by the absence of beauty in the world. For as Miravalle explains in Beauty: What It Is and Why It Matters, beauty is a fundamental human need. Without beauty, we become spiritually impoverished, societies descend into moral and cultural decay, and life appears barren, meaningless, and not worth living. Miravalle quotes Fyodor Dostoevsky:

> **"Mankind can live without science, it can live without bread, but it cannot live without beauty. Without beauty, there would be nothing left to do in this life. The whole secret is here, the whole of history is here." (Fyodor Dostoevsky, Demons)**

In this book summary, we explore the nature of beauty, why we need it, and why the pursuit of beauty enriches our lives and improves our character.

The Relationship between Truth, Beauty, and Goodness

Throughout history, philosophers and theologians have regarded beauty as one of the three ultimate values, alongside truth and goodness. We are instinctively drawn to this trinity of values because they possess intrinsic worth – they are valuable in and of themselves.

> **"…it's good in itself to experience beauty. The late moralist and ethicist Germain Grisez and his colleagues famously articulated a list of goods that were so basic that no one needed to justify pursuing them. You just pursue these goods because they are good, and it's good to achieve them. Not surprisingly, aesthetic experience makes that list. If someone were to ask, "So, why do you want to experience the beautiful?" the answer would be something along the lines of, "Because it's beautiful!" You don't need to justify it any further." (Beauty: What It Is and Why It Matters)**

Beauty Stimulates the Highest form of Pleasure

But we do not pursue beauty only because it is valuable in and of itself. For experiencing beauty is also highly pleasurable. Many thinkers throughout the ages have defined beauty as that which is inherently pleasing, engaging, or delightful to the senses. Thomas Aquinas, for example, famously defined beauty as "that which pleases when seen."

Most pleasures satisfy a desire only to awaken new desires. The pleasure of aesthetic experience, in contrast, brings our restless desires to a halt. In the presence of something beautiful, we cease wanting anything more and simply delight in what is before us. For this reason, the pleasure that accompanies the experience of beauty is arguably the purest and highest form of pleasure available to man.

> **"The delight we experience when perceiving beauty is the supreme passion. All the other feel-**

> **ings pull us toward or away from something, but delight in the beautiful is the passion of rest; it is "the repose of the appetite in the good."" (Beauty: What It Is and Why It Matters)**

Beauty Motivates Virtue - Makes us Better Human Beings

The delight that beauty evokes also improves our character. As Miravalle puts it, "beauty motivates virtue." Think of a time you stood in awe before a magnificent painting, listened to a beautiful piece of music, or gazed upon a majestic mountain range. In such moments, our thoughts are rarely petty, selfish, or degrading. Beauty lifts us above the ordinary concerns of daily life and awakens within us a longing for a nobler life. In the words of Miravalle, beauty "stirs in us, obscurely, vague and indeterminate heroic potentialities." Friedrich Nietzsche echoed this idea when he wrote: "What do we long for when we see beauty? To be beautiful." Or as Miravalle continues:

> **"So beauty makes us long for higher things, which motivates us to pursue higher things, which leads to our ultimate fulfillment." (Beauty: What It Is and Why It Matters)**

The connection between beauty and virtue becomes even more apparent when we recognize that virtue is a form of beauty. A person who has cultivated wisdom, courage, temperance, and fortitude, possesses a beautiful character. He has made himself and his life into a work of art. As Thomas Aquinas wrote: "Spiritual beauty consists in a man's conduct or actions being well-proportioned in respect of the spiritual clarity of reason." Or as Miravalle summarizes:

> **"So our goal here is simple: to tap into the synergy, the mutual reinforcement, of goodness and beauty, morality and aesthetics. We're going to try to pursue beauty because that's part of living well, and we're going to try to live morally in order to make our lives beautiful." (Beauty: What It Is and Why It Matters)**

It is our Purpose to Perceive Beauty

Because beauty motivates virtue and provides one of the purest forms of pleasure, Miravalle argues that we possess a fundamental need for beauty and that it is our purpose to pursue it.

> **"Beauty is like happiness, love, understanding — it's what the human person was made for. Experiencing beauty is itself a kind of a mix of love, happiness, and understanding. In any case, an orientation toward beauty is intrinsic to our nature. Attaining beauty is part of our purpose. And since it's everyone's responsibility to fulfill his purpose, beauty is everybody's moral responsibility." (Beauty: What It Is and Why It Matters)**

Why is Beauty Vanishing From Our World?

If we have a fundamental need for beauty, why are so many people turning away from it? Why is modern architecture so uniform and dull, music formulaic and mediocre, and modern art disfigured and grotesque? Or as the late English philosopher Roger Scruton observed:

> **"Beauty is vanishing from our world… and a cult of ugliness is taking its place." (Roger Scruton, Why Beauty Matters)**

Beauty - A Mixture of Order and Surprise

To understand this modern flight from beauty, we must understand that beautiful objects and phenomena

consist of a mixture of order and surprise. This is especially evident in nature.

Consider a forest of trees. Every tree possesses a common structure and form that gives it order and intelligibility. This underlying order is so precise that scientists can mathematically model the patterns found in leaves, branches, and the growth of trees themselves.

> **"…nature is permeated with patterns, forms, and structures that can be seen and grasped and, usually, be given numerical expression…Nature is orderly." (Beauty: What It Is and Why It Matters)**

But nature is also surprising. Although all trees possess a common structure, no two trees, or even two leaves from the same tree, are the same. Every element of nature expresses itself in a unique way, and this element of novelty evokes wonder and surprise. The surprise a tree evokes, mixed with its underlying order, is what makes it beautiful.

> **"Walk in the woods on a fall day, and look at the trees without their leaves. Even though each of the trees conforms to a consistent pattern — they all share a common nature and have the same basic structure — look at the overwhelmingly diverse expression of that pattern! All the different shapes the branches take, the different directions they point in, the different crisscrossing designs you get from looking at them in various clusters. It's dizzyingly complicated, too much to take in." (Beauty: What It Is and Why It Matters)**

We Need Order and Surprise

Given that beautiful phenomena consist of a mixture of order and surprise, and that we have a need for beauty, it follows that we have a need to perceive order and surprise in our environment.

> **"If human beings have been designed for beauty — and we have — and if beauty involves order and surprise, then we've all been designed for order and surprise." (Beauty: What It Is and Why It Matters)**

Temptations Away from Beauty - Banality and Disorder

But as we have seen, beauty calls us to rise above our weaknesses and pettiness and strive for a more virtuous life. Many are unwilling to answer this call, for it is often easier to live a vulgar and undisciplined life. Instead of embracing beauty, therefore, many people pursue order and surprise in isolation from one another. Some seek order without surprise, resulting in the dullness and predictability that Miravalle calls banality. Others seek surprise without order, and consume content that is shocking or disturbing.

> **"Those who forget the intrinsic connection between order and surprise will think they have to pick one or the other…These are the two temptations we'll talk about now; the temptation to pursue surprise without order (which is disorder) and the temptation to pursue order without surprise (which we'll call banality)." (Beauty: What It Is and Why It Matters)**

Surprise without Order – Shocking and Disturbing Content

Those who pursue surprise detached from order seek out experiences that shock and disturb. Miravalle points to horror films, snuff films, hardcore pornography, and even the spectacle of "circus freaks." We see the same impulse at work in social media feeds saturated with shocking and disturbing content, and in much of modern art, which has abandoned the pursuit of beauty in favor of transgression. Instead of creating works that unite order and surprise, many modern artists seek merely to startle the audience. Marcel Du-

champ's famous urinal, displayed as art under the title Fountain, is a well-known example.

> **"…transgression has been the law in many of the fine arts for a long time now. For many in the "art world," the only requirement for an artist is to break boundaries, to do something novel, or to startle or shock the audience." (Beauty: What It Is and Why It Matters)**

The problem with seeking out things that shock or disturb us is that we quickly become habituated to them. As our sensitivity diminishes, increasingly shocking and disturbing experiences are needed to pique our interest. Hence, the pursuit of surprise divorced from order becomes a path into ever more degrading content that corrupts the soul.

> **"…we're often tempted to pursue a good — namely, surprise — isolated from the order to which it ought to be joined. And when surprise becomes the only goal, it instantly turns into perversion...Shock tactics always undermine themselves, since it gets harder and harder to shock people as they get more and more desensitized to various forms of disorder." (Beauty: What It Is and Why It Matters)**

Order without Surprise - Banality

The other substitute for beauty is the pursuit of order without surprise - banality. We see banality in cities dominated by sterile concrete towers, in suburbs of cookie-cutter houses, and in formulaic music that is predictable and uninspiring. We also see it in what Roger Scruton called the cult of utility, where things are created solely for practical function and efficiency, with little concern for whether they are beautiful.

> **"Another temptation lies in reducing everything to pure functionality. This is where you don't care whether something's beautiful, "as long as it gets the job done." This way of thinking expresses itself in mass-produced houses, mass-produced cars, mass-produced clothing, and mass-produced food." (Beauty: What It Is and Why It Matters)**

Yet in prioritizing practicality above all else, we have created a world that functions efficiently while becoming increasingly barren, sterile, and monotonous - in a word, ugly.

> **"One obvious example of what has befallen us is the loss of aesthetic sensibilities in architecture. Where once the role of architecture was to help beautify the shared space of our cities and neighborhoods, now the role of architecture is to build utilitarian structures as cheaply as possible. The result has been a profound loss of beauty. It's a kind of vandalism. What modern building would people a thousand years from now flock to visit as we do the Notre Dame Cathedral today? If the Gothic cathedral was the architectural statement of the Middle Ages, the "big box" store may well be the architectural statement of our age. This is tragic." (Beauty: What It Is and Why It Matters)**

And as Miravalle continues:

> **"Why do we go along with this craziness? Because it's more profitable, more cost-effective, and quicker. In other words, it's more convenient. It demands less of us. It would take a lot more time, effort, and self-sacrifice to keep things beautiful." (Beauty: What It Is and Why It Matters)**

Absence of Beauty - Dehumanizing

To illustrate the psychological toll of banality and disorder, Miravalle cites a fictional example from C.S.

Lewis. Lewis imagines a prisoner whose torture consists of being confined to a room where every detail is subtly disordered.

> **"The room was ill-proportioned, not grotesquely so, but sufficiently to produce dislike...Sitting staring about him he next noticed the door. . . .The point of the arch was not in the centre: the whole thing was lop-sided. Once again, the error was not gross. The thing was near enough to the true to deceive you for a moment and to go on teasing the mind even after the deception had been unmasked. . . . Then he noticed the spots on the ceiling. . . . They would be hard to count, they were so irregularly placed…Or weren't they? . . . They suggested some kind of pattern. Their peculiar ugliness consisted in the very fact that they kept on suggesting it and then frustrating the expectation thus aroused." (C.S. Lewis, That Hideous Strength)**

In frustrating the desire for beauty, the room stimulates persistent irritation that, over months of exposure, gradually erodes the prisoner's sanity. Lewis's example dramatizes a truth that Miravalle believes modern society has forgotten: just as the deprivation of food weakens the body, the deprivation of beauty destroys the soul. A sustained assault on beauty is an assault on the human person.

> **"[Lewis's tale] is a process of dehumanization, through the systematic assault on order and the deprivation of beauty. Remember, if the goal is to assault beauty rather than promote it, such a goal entails a war on the human person, who was made for beauty and not ugliness." (Beauty: What It Is and Why It Matters)**

Be Careful What You Consume

Because beauty is a fundamental human need and a cult of ugliness has spread throughout the world, we must be careful about what we consume and where we direct our attention. We should make a conscious effort to surround ourselves with beauty - be it great works of art, music, architecture, philosophy, literature, or the natural world. For the more beauty we allow into our lives, the more beautiful and virtuous we become, the more pleasure we experience, and the more resistant we become to the ugliness of the modern world.

> **"Beauty is the secret. Beauty is that which delights when seen. To delight constantly, you must train yourself — discipline yourself — to see beauty everywhere. Part of that discipline means taking time out to appreciate things that are obviously beautiful. That's why we've talked about the importance of entering into nature, contemplating good art, immersing yourself in good music, and enjoying good stories…Beauty will require a lot of sacrifices. But the alternative is banality and boredom, punctuated by guilty pleasures in the disordered. We can do better than that." (Beauty: What It Is and Why It Matters)**