

## Unweaving the Rainbow

Welcome to this session of One Life. Today we are looking at the issues surrounding truth and beauty – does knowing how things work and how they came to be reduce or enhance the beauty of them?

The title for this session is taken from the Richard Dawkins book of the same name in which Professor Dawkins argues that science presents a worldview that is beautiful and wondrous. Today we are going to be asking the question that the book attempts to answer – is there poetry written into the natural world?

### First impressions

Lets take the view (whether right or wrong) that there is no ultimate creator – that the universe came around by whatever cause from the big bang and it was essentially this process and this process alone that shaped the universe as we know it.

Given that everything from sunsets to landscape to the variety of wildlife came to be not by the hand of some master craftsman but by what we would probably term *natural* processes, does this affect its aesthetic qualities? Is it less beautiful? Is it more beautiful? Is it beautiful at all?

*Do you consider the “natural” world beautiful?*

### What is beauty?

It's probably worth considering what we even consider beauty is anyway. Lets look at the dictionary definition of beauty.

“the quality present in a thing or person that gives intense pleasure or deep satisfaction to the mind, whether arising from sensory manifestations (as shape, color, sound, etc.), a meaningful design or pattern, or something else (as a personality in which high spiritual qualities are manifest).”

Is beauty a thought process? An experience? An emotion? Is it tangible or intangible? Does beauty vary from person to person? (In other words, is it subjective or objective?). That is to say, is beauty purely in the eye of the beholder or are there some things or qualities that are always beautiful?

*What do you think beauty is?*

### **What affects beauty?**

Consider this scenario. A new painting by Leonardo Da Vinci is discovered in the basement of a very old house in a small town in Northern Italy. While it's irrelevant to the scenario the house has a tiled roof and no garden, it faces straight out into the street. The photo is taken to a major art auctioneer in New York and sells for many millions of dollars.

It is purchased by the National Gallery in London who hang the painting as the centrepiece of their new exhibition in the centre of the gallery. People flock from all over the country and indeed all over the world to see it and all who gaze upon it marvel at the intense and mesmerizing beauty.

Then it is discovered to be a fake. It is in fact a creation by a higher skilled painter of comparable talent to Mr. Da Vinci at least in terms of being able to draw the physical strokes of paint onto a canvas.

The painting's value is destroyed, it is taken down from its spot as the centrepiece in the National Gallery and the people stop flocking to see it.

But what has changed? The painting is still a magnificent creation that still contains all of its aesthetic qualities. Has it reduced in beauty though? Should it rightly be seen as less beautiful? Perhaps it should even be seen as more beautiful? Should such a discovery such as it being a fake affect its beauty?

*How and why do you think its beauty chances (if at all)?*

### **Is science beautiful?**

There seems to be a revision in recent times between science and arts. We hand out degrees as either a bachelor of science or a bachelor of arts. We divide our discourse between the two; science has no place in commenting on beautiful works of art and describing as an accurate and simple theory that is discovered as poetry seems strange. But should there be such a division?

This division is arguably a project a modern society. Relating back to the previous scenario Leonardo Da Vinci was not only an

amazing artist but was also a brilliant scientist coming up with ideas far, far beyond his time.

Can science be used to judge art? Is art purely a question for the senses (and beyond that are senses something that science can never comprehend?) or is the quality of an art work in fact open to being thought of critically? Can we judge it based on standards and innovation rather than purely its affect on the viewer?

*Can science be used to judge art and beauty?*

Conversely, could art be applied to science. Could it be that as WordPress creator Matt Mullenweg said, “code is poetry.” Is there a special elegance that can be appreciated to a mathematical solution that is beautifully simple?

*Can science be beautiful?*

### **Do we under appreciate the natural world?**

Professor Richard Dawkins of Oxford University (and indeed author of the book that lends his name to this session) suggests that we become dulled to the beauty of things that are common place to us.

For example, it could be argued that our very being here is a blessing we often miss. The probability of everything happening that led to this movement for example you being the sperm that swam fastest, your parents having met, their parents having met is very small indeed.

Every day we walk past many examples of the natural world. We wouldn't bat an eyelid at spider (well, perhaps some of us would but presuming we're not scared of them). Yet they are incredible creators, well adapted to their environment, have huge long legs and can spin webs using substances produced by their own body. It's amazing when you think about it – but we don't.

*Do you think we under appreciate the natural world? Or is it simply not that amazing?*

This could also be applied to the *unnatural world* if you so wish to call it so. A more accurate definition would be the part of the natural world created by man. Again though, our amazing

achievements seem to often slip by unnoticed. For example the operations per second computers can now do the [small] size of mobile phones, the [large] size of planes and skyscrapers.

*Do we under appreciate our own achievements or does the man-made qualities of them remove their beauty?*

### **Stage magic**

Consider this scenario. Take a magician; let's call him Jim the Magician. He doesn't need a name for any reason in this scenario but it felt appropriate to give him one. He performs some rather amazing stage magic such as pulling a rabbit out of a girl's ear, sawing her in half and making her disappear.

The audience watch this and presuming she re-appears intact the audience gasp in amazement (rather than running in fear and to call the police). But what are the audience really gasping at? The magic? The fact that Jim has been able to pull off this illusion? Is the sheer illusion that is intriguing us or is it that we are trying to figure out how he did it (and most likely failing) that truly amazes us?

*What do you think it is that is actually amazing us here?*

### **Conclusion**

Beauty is another topic which the greatest philosophers have been arguing about throughout history though perhaps given its nature we can come up with some answers for the current zeitgeist.

*Does the truth behind something affect its beauty?*