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In the modern Western world, the link between beauty and sustainability remains underappreciated. If the dominant preoccupation of our culture has been science, our most marginal concern may be aesthetics — so much so that we often think of the two as antithetical. Science has embraced the idea that reality is value-neutral. It has cultivated an epistemological method of detached knowing. Aesthetics, by contrast, is a minefield of value. It demands engagement, subjectivity, and personality.

If aesthetics has been undervalued in the modern world, beauty — what has been called “the value of values” — has fared far worse. As Ernest Partridge notes, “The ‘beauty’ of nature, a concept saturated with subjectivism and evaluation, has never cut much scientific ice” (“Reconstructing Ecology,” in *Ecological Integrity*, ed. David Pimentel et al., Island Press, 2000: 79). The insignificance of beauty has so often been accepted as a given that when we actually experience beauty in the natural world we are inclined to suppress it, explain it away, or treat our experience as nothing more than a private eccentricity. Though beauty is a deep part of our emotional lives, westerners rarely treat it as a fundamental value, elemental to the structure and order of reality. We regard it instead as a personal opinion “saturated with subjectivism.”

For the past two hundred years, the modern West has abandoned beauty. We have allowed it to remain in the background of almost every human endeavor. Instead we have championed economics as our ultimate value. When it comes to discussions of value, beauty is a diversion from the real eye-popper — the exquisite allure of money. A void left empty by the absence of beauty has been filled by relentless acquisitiveness. Until beauty returns again to the

foreground of our cultural life, I do not think that we will see a successful shift to an ecological paradigm.

Pankalia: Life Suffused with Beauty

For much of Western history, beauty was considered to be the fundamental value underlying the order of the universe. It is possible to sum up nearly two thousand years of thought about beauty with a single word: pankalia. The word is a composite of the Greek for “all” — pan — and “beauty” — kalos. Early Greek philosophers identified beauty as an essential quality of life. The whole structure of life, nature included, was understood as suffused with beauty. Medieval Christian thinkers reinforced this idea. Nature, they claimed, was beautiful because it was the work of God, the source of beauty. The planetary spheres were thought to participate in a symphony of beautiful sound, making music throughout the cosmos as they rotated around a static earth.

For pagan Greeks and Christian theologians alike, heaven and earth, form and matter could be understood only with reference to beauty. “If life is worth living,” said Plato, “it is in order that man may behold beauty.” Sixteen hundred years later, Saint Thomas Aquinas claimed that “There is nothing that does not participate in the beautiful.” For another four hundred years, virtually all influential thinkers in the West continued to understand the universe as beautiful — and to champion beauty as a fundamental value.

An immense change in consciousness has taken place in the modern world. We now know that a shockingly complicated set of chemical and electrical processes exists beyond the visible world, but we no longer imagine it as an elaborate cosmic chorus. We have a constant humming in our ears — but it is no celestial harmony, just the byproduct of the computers, printers, fax machines, light fixtures, and heating and cooling systems that perfuse our living spaces.

Beauty has ceased to have cosmic implications. When the romantic poet John Keats wrote, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” he was out of step with his times. In the modern period, truth and beauty have been torn apart. Truth is claimed by science as an objective value. Beauty has been sidelined, accused of being merely subjective. Though some scientists continue to reflect on the beauty they experience in their work or speak of “elegance” as an intuitive measure of the veracity of their discoveries, the scientific method itself rules out the explicit search for beauty as part of the quest for knowledge.

The Decline of Beauty and the Death of Nature

The decline of beauty in the modern world is directly linked to what Carolyn Merchant has called the “death” of nature. Both were casualties of the mechanism and materialism that define modern science and philosophy. In adopting a materialist metaphysics, modernists stripped the natural world of all value except its value as a useable resource for human purposes. On a philosophical level, the value of beauty became irrelevant. On an empirical level, the intrinsic value of nature — a value once linked to beauty — was dismissed.

To believe that reality is composed mostly of lifeless material and to picture it as a machine is to conceive of an entirely new world order. The change was immense: a shift from a world that is alive to a world that is dead and empty of value. It is a transition of such magnitude that it is hard to conjure up a useful analogy. Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* might help us imagine a world where logic is redefined and a cat’s grin can persist long after the rest of the cat has vanished. Or we might liken the disorientation to a Dali landscape of liquid objects, strangely deformed by their loss of depth.

Such an enormous transition did not take hold all at once. Early in the modern era, leading intellectuals continued to believe in God and qualified their materialist assumptions accordingly, regarding the earth as divinely created and therefore invested with value. But eventually the materialist conception of the world became the lens through which those with power scanned the horizon. Now we consider it fantastical to imagine the world as filled with feeling. So convinced are we that the world runs according to laws of nature cast in a mechanical mold that imagining the world as something other than a machine seems, for many of us, about as nonsensical as playing croquet with the Queen of Hearts.

In the modern world, beauty was spirited off to the island of art. Yet even there, beauty has been treated with suspicion and even disdain. Philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto coined the word “kalliphobia” — fear of beauty — to name the aversion to beauty that characterizes contemporary art (“Kalliphobia in Contemporary Art,” *Art Journal* 63:2, 24–35). Examining how beauty lost its importance within the art world, Danto points to the Dadaist movement during the First World War. In protest against the appalling waste and suffering of the war, Dadaists refused to create anything of beauty. They launched a “war against war,” using beauty as their weapon. By withholding beauty, artists aimed to punish a culture of destruction for its own sordidness. Art became “a moral mirror,” reflecting our moral decay. For the Dadaists, beauty was more powerful in its absence than its presence.

In the years since, the gap between art and beauty has become canyon-sized. For many

contemporary artists, beauty has become associated with conservative, stifling, domestic value. The less knotted modifier “interesting” has taken its place, expressing no obligation to goodness, truth, or beauty. Indeed, in the last hundred years, “interesting” has become the primary value in the art world. As Susan Sontag once quipped, “Of a photograph of a sunset, a beautiful sunset, anyone with minimal standards of verbal sophistication might well prefer to say, ‘Yes, the photograph is interesting’” (“An Argument about Beauty,” *Daedalus* 134:4, 210). The substitution of interest for beauty is a peculiarly modern feat.

In the modern West, we commonly make two claims about beauty. We assume that “beauty is *only* in the eye of the beholder” — a completely subjective and relative judgment. At the same time, we claim that even these subjective judgments are hardly worth knowing, because “beauty is only skin deep.” The beholder ought to be paying attention to more important things.

If beauty were *only* in the eye of the beholder, it would indeed be frivolous to focus on beauty in a time of extraordinary planetary crisis and difficult to claim a substantial role for beauty in our efforts to sustain the world. But these are judgments rooted in the metaphysics of modernity—a metaphysics that denies intrinsic value to the natural world because it maintains that the natural world is simply a machine. As we struggle with the devastating ecological legacy of this perception of nature, we must consider anew the role of beauty as a value belonging to life. Returning beauty to the world, not simply as “our experience” but as “a part of the structure of life,” undergirds an ecological worldview and furthers our efforts to develop an ecological civilization.

Toward a Jewish Theology of Beauty

In articulating a Jewish ecotheology, I argue that a Judaism that connects itself intentionally with the natural world will need to shape a theological tradition that speaks as much about beauty as it does about truth and goodness. In my work within the Jewish tradition, I emphasize the theological significance of *hiddur mitzvah*, a traditional practice meant to “make special” the observance of commandments. *Hiddur mitzvah* involves beautifying ritual objects and practices, embellishing them, and enhancing them as much as possible. The practice of *hiddur mitzvah* is meant to augment a person’s experience of fulfilling the commandments, thus using the visual and aural arts to heighten the practitioner’s appreciation of sacred time and space. By beautifying the commandments, one strives also to “beautify” God.

Hiddur mitzvah — understood as a basic human response to divine creativity, to the beauty of the created order, and to the divine–human partnership — ought to become a theological

imperative. An expanded version of the notion of *hiddur mitzvah* as the practice of recognizing and participating in the beauty of life can serve as a beginning point for the development of a Jewish theology of beauty. A renewed attention to beauty draws our attention to the natural world, accentuating our awareness of and appreciation for the world. Beauty is a lure to relationality. Through beauty, we are willing to move beyond ourselves — conjoining our lives with the lives of other beings. We are drawn toward the beautiful, compelled without coercion. We wish to participate in it, feel it, and increase it. Heightened sensitivity, care, and compassion all flow from an appreciation of beauty. “Making beautiful” is a central strand in the process of redemption. As a theological principle, it enjoins us to become holy by preserving, enjoying, and increasing the beauty of the created world.