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THE BEAUTY – FIRST WAY OF KNOWING:  
SOME GENERAL OBSERVATIONS ON THE ROLE OF THE AESTHETIC  
IN ACCURATE COGNITION AND IN THE PRACTICE  
OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

**Abstract.** Human cognition functions best when it traces a path across the three Socratic transcendentals in the unfolding sequence of Beauty, then Goodness, then Truth. I therefore describe the ideal approach to knowledge as “Beauty-First.” By analogizing the epistemological progression underlying the classical Trivium, the Eastern Orthodox *Philokalia*, and the method that made science truly modern, and then noting that this structure seems to be corroborated by the neuroscience of Iain McGilchrist, we seem to confirm the hypothesis that Beauty, Goodness, and Truth must be appropriated in this sequence in a concentric unfolding of human attention.

**Keywords:** *Trivium*, beauty, beauty-first, *Philokalia*, epistemology, Iain McGilchrist, brain hemispheres, natural philosophy, science and beauty

Coherent human knowing requires an unfolding sequence of operations; this sequence can be meaningfully characterized as “the Beauty-First Way”<sup>2</sup>. That is, our investigations of the world and our attempts to come to grips with reality will attain the most complete comprehension, and will prove themselves most salutary for human flourishing, when they trace an arc which philosophers will recognize as an unfolding of attention on

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<sup>2</sup> For my book-length exploration of the hypothesis that cognition is a “Beauty-First” enterprise, see my *The Ethics of Beauty* (Missouri: St. Nicholas Press, 2019).



Beauty, Goodness, and Truth, in that specific order. Or, to cast the matter in the negative, I am arguing that if we do *not* honor the threefold order of Beauty, Goodness, and Truth in our attempts to understand the world, then we will find ourselves out of sync with the basic operations of knowing as they have been passed down for thousands of years.

It is important right up front to stress that this sequential progression across the Socratic transcendentals involves a concentric flowering rather than a pure “succeeding.” The path to understanding can be more completely described as an attention to Beauty; then, an attentive practice of the Goodness found within that Beauty; and finally, a patient fidelity to Beautiful Goodness until it ramifies into an acquisition of Truth. At each stage, our attention is building upon its prior operations.

The Beauty-First Way, in other words, is a threefold path. Once we’ve seen this path for what it is, we will quickly find that, in some form or another, it is clearly visible within the classical approach to education, within science since the Age of Reason, and within the approach to mystical knowing described by eastern monasticism in its central collection of texts, *The Philokalia*. Moreover, this threefold path of attention seems to have been clearly confirmed by the study of hemispheric brain function formulated in our own day by Ian McGilchrist.

Although in my own writings, I sometimes emphasize the importance of the Beauty-First Way by contrasting it with what I term “truth-first” approaches to rationality, in fact, I nowhere call for a denigration of truth, nor for the privileging of feeling over logic. Rather, what I claim to discern is that whenever human beings accurately comprehend the world, they perform the unfolding of a continuum of cognition whereby reality *is* apprehended accurately at each stage (and is therefore “truthful”), but nevertheless according to different modes. The Beauty-First way is concerned with Truth in the sense of “faithful attention to reality” from the very start, in other words. But given the concentric unfolding of human cognition, it would be just as accurate to say that the Beauty-First way is concerned with Beauty in the sense of the harmonious wholeness of things, to the very end. And because this concentric flowering of intellection appears to be a kind of fractal, with the threefold progression operating within each of its distinct steps as well as between them, it is best termed as a “Beauty-First” way, since the non-linear shape of knowing begins with an openness to a world understood as Beautiful.

It is in this way that Beauty inspires our phenomenological discovery, interpretation, and understanding of reality; Beauty is literally the “gateway” – in practice and, I argue, unavoidably – for a coherent connection to reality. In particular, as we shall see, Beauty inspires each step of the classical Trivium as well as each of its analogies, by powering the eros that helps the human person to begin to know that which is not the self.

### **A Definition of Beauty**

In general, I try to avoid defining “Beauty” at the outset, trusting instead that its fuller shape will emerge more clearly through a discussion of the role it plays in a number of examples across analogous structures of knowing. However, the classical consensus that “the Beautiful is the radiance of the Good” speaks to Beauty’s generous character of abundance and is useful and accurate. For me, synonyms for Beauty are concepts like theophany, surprise, and information. Beauty is that which evokes in us a sense of wonder or awakens eros within us. Indeed, anything that excites wonder in us will, in my system, function as the Beautiful, at least in part.

### **The *Trivium* as a Threefold Path**

In classical education the threefold Beauty-First path was known as the Trivium of Grammar, Dialectic (sometimes, “Logic,” although strictly speaking Dialectic was understood to be a combination of Logic and Argument), and Rhetoric. I hope that general familiarity with the Trivium among readers will therefore help me to illustrate what I mean by a path to a knowledge in the three modes of, Beauty, Goodness, and Truth.<sup>3</sup>

At the outset of classical education, the young thinker studies Grammar in order to learn to appreciate the quirky givenness of the world across such realms as language, history, the arts, the sciences, and so on. The

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<sup>3</sup> See Dorothy Sayers, “The Lost Tools of Learning” (1948), for a short but pithy summation of what sort of rationality the young brain is capable of and drawn to across the early lifespan. In general, my remarks in this section are tied to her own insights.

student at this stage is to become acutely sensitive to pattern, and to learn to delight in the way that patterns repeat, diverge, surprise, multiply, and either confirm or frustrate our expectations of their behavior. This attention to pattern renders the student a disciple of reality in a very fundamental sense; what is, deserves to be known in the precise way *that* it is. Moreover, when the instructor has a pure heart, the student of Grammar unconsciously comes to see the beauty of pattern as an invitation to accept that the “given” world around him is in fact an actual Gift.

Beauty reigns at this first level of education, for the *Grammar* which the student is trained to appreciate must, if the education is to count, strike the learner as surprising, elegant, deeply ordered, and, in its way, altogether deeply comely. Students at this stage fall in love with the world, and understand that their at-homeness in the world is inseparable from the act of appreciation of the world; where the things of God are concerned, this appreciation should, of course, be trained to rise to the level of adoration.

As Grammar then unfolds into Dialectic, the student ascends from the level of appreciation and/or discernment, to the level of logic and argument. A different kind of criticism is learned here, as the student progresses from the status of visionary to the vocation of engineer. Whereas the student of Grammar could critique the world according to its obedience to Law, and to delight in both the obedience to and the seeming defiance of various kinds of Law, at the stage of Dialectic, the student learns to critique function. By learning to construct a line of reasoning and then to pit this construct against other chains of rational unfolding, whether they have been constructed by others or himself, the student becomes a kind of referee in the great struggle to make sense.

It is important to see that Dialectic, despite its heavy reliance on Logic, does not in itself attain to the end stage of what is possible in Truth. Rather, Dialectic forms a kind of ante-chamber to Truth, in that Dialectic’s proper concern is not so much accuracy (this was handled at the Grammar stage) or honesty (the concern of Rhetoric) but efficacy and objectivity. The logical constructions we formulate, as well as the arguments or explanations we attempt, require us to assemble a durable, effective architecture of reasoning: How does the argument or explanation “hold up” to the pressure of facts and/or counterarguments? To what extent does the account or proof account for the fullness of what has been observed

at the Grammar stage? In this sense, Dialectic concerns Goodness and not Truth in its ultimate expression. What we ask of this stage of reasoning is Utility: How good a job does the explanation do of accounting for the facts? How effectively can it withstand the attacks of other arguments and explanations?

Grammar and Dialectic are followed by Rhetoric, because the journey across the Transcendentals signifies that the student's engagement with the world is progressing from the individual to the communal. That is to say, the love for the Beautiful can be intensely idiosyncratic, even if rapture with Beauty takes us radically outside ourselves. The love for the Good involves a practice of empathy as we take the risk of formulating our reasons in ways that others can evaluate or even reject, but still it can be done to some measure "in private".

But it is in this final next stage where our grasp of the truth becomes ineluctably interpersonal, social, and human. And in fact, present also at this Rhetorical stage is a renewed openness to God. Rhetoric, in other words, is a stage at which we grapple towards the Truth *together* – together with each other, with past and future generations, and with God. For example, at the first apostolic council in Acts, the Twelve reasoned according to Dialectic, but aimed for a conclusion at the level of Rhetoric: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..." (Acts 15:28).

That is, the love for Truth will bring us to a higher level of community. At the Rhetorical stage the student learns to take the fruits of Dialectic into a conversation whose breadth cannot easily be limited. Rhetoric itself is an inherently interpersonal art, and so at this stage of education the student actively seeks a range of interlocutors and discussion partners. Moreover, in order for Rhetoric to *earn* its equivalence to Truth, those discussion partners will have to be sought in both the future and the past, as well as in the present.

Other kinds of breadth are also practiced at the Rhetorical stage of the Trivium. First, we express the fruits of logic and argumentation in ways that allow others to test our underlying assumptions; this can be painful and requires a depth of humility. Second, as we ascend to the Rhetorical stage, we discover either that, a) the most stringent logic must still come to grips with aspects of reality in which the simpler binaries, such as the law of noncontradiction, at least temporarily and at least for

all practical purposes, are transcended; and b) that so much of what we are called to reason about involves matters which cannot be known with certainty, such as the future outcome of collective action in the light of the unfolding of natural processes or counter actions by others.

In other words, after Dialectic, the fruits of our consideration must be taken into a sharp conversation and checked against the long experience of the human race, against common sense, and against the specifically human requirements of the soul. Conversation with others often reveals levels of assumption or bias of which we were previously unaware. Moreover, as Aristotle himself pointed out in his *On Rhetoric*, at this stage of reasoning we must learn to handle outcomes which can only be discerned in advance through probabilistic inference.

Finally, at the stage of Rhetoric, we add to the task of discerning reality the even more fraught task of *making* reality; our words will inspire collective action that can overcome probabilities and uncertainties, and create new grounds for reflection, new realities. And in this sense, also, Rhetorical work provides a more faithful correspondence to reality than Dialectic can.

### Modern Science

The explosion of scientific prowess in Western Europe after the sixteenth century came only once scientists had learned to adhere scrupulously to the same threefold path of unfolding cognition that we just traced within the Trivium. Careful observation at a scale never before attempted in recorded human history followed both the mapping of far flung continents and the steady improvement of technical means of measurement. The Grammar of the world, in other words, was discernible in a more thorough way than ever before. Meanwhile, the Enlightenment's growing faith in the intelligibility of the universe accompanied a passion for getting to the bottom of things. The art of Dialectic, in other words, flowered brilliantly.

But despite the importance of these growths in appreciation of Beautiful pattern and in exercise of Good (effective) analysis, the crucial advantage of the new science lay rather in the Rhetorical, or Truth, phase. A new approach to transcending Dialectic and reaching a truly

Rhetorical level of cognition only came as early modern scientists discovered at last how best to take their formulations into a deeper conversation with other scientists and with the very natural world they studied. The gates to Rhetoric were flung open for natural philosophy, that is to say, through the ritualized employment of that pivotal concept, the falsifiable hypothesis.

Requiring that the fruits of Dialectic be formulated in a way that is falsifiable signifies the stepping forth of the scientist from his lonely laboratory into the wider community of scientists – and, more importantly, the wider community of Being itself. The “conversation” called for at the Rhetorical stage of Science takes two forms; first, verification by other researchers and second, verification by reality itself. By insisting on formulating the fruits of Dialectic in the form of the falsifiable hypothesis, modern science insisted that logic and argument, even when formulated by the greatest or most venerable minds, could no longer be mistaken for the Truth; no, we now understand the fruits of Dialectic to have been merely the best we could do at the stage of Goodness, or utility.

If we are to arrive at Truth, we must engage in Rhetoric – in a wide-ranging conversation, that is, with the messy, the probabilistic, the chaotic, the surprising, and the non-linear. All these factors and elements must be allowed to have their say if we are to attain a truly comprehensive account of reality.

By forcing Logic and Argument to express even their most sound and powerful proofs in ways open to falsification, the Enlightenment placed Truth in its proper position as an analogue not to Logic and Argument, but to Rhetoric. It was finally understood that the experimental data gained in the light of the falsifiable hypothesis must be allowed to enter the conversation on an equal basis. For example, in the history of science, Einstein’s special and general theories of relativity are unsurpassed in their logical coherence. And yet, with the invention of high-speed jet travel and atomic clocks, scientists immediately looked to test and if possible falsify his predictions; as we know, Einstein’s prediction that the flow of time is slowed by velocity was verified. Still, the hypothesis had to be tested.

That is, natural philosophy now knows that Truth is to be looked for at the Rhetorical, rather than at the Dialectical, stage of cognition.

### Spiritual Knowing in the *Philokalia*

As the Age of Reason generated – and of course was generated by – a science newly committed to the final step of the Beauty-First Way, the monastics of the Orthodox Christian world marshaled their own writings in a new compendium<sup>4</sup>. *The Philokalia* laid out a tradition tracing back to the second century A.D., within which the Trivium of Grammar, Logic, Rhetoric had come to be represented by the concepts of Purification, Illumination, and Deification.

While the labels were different, the threefold path to knowing was analogous, although of course adapted to the realm of mystical experience. *Purification* denoted the cleansing of the heart from gluttony, malice, and pride; since the heart was thought to be an organ of apprehension, cleansing from these passions would result in a more refined capacity for cognition of the Beautiful and the Grammar of the spiritual world. This is thus the first stage of cognition. *Illumination* meant the practice of empathy through a rigorous training of the reason and the will, which would thus lead to an integrated apprehension of the Good through actual practice. The logic and argument at the Illumination stage concern the structures of action and praxis entailed in the vision of the Beautiful. Finally, *Deification* signified the Rhetorical stage, where the actions and thoughts of the spiritual striver would enter into a deeper conversation with the communion of saints and with the Holy Spirit. Here, even more clearly than in the other analogues, knowledge of the Truth would be inseparable from a being known by Truth.

Thus, we have the following chart of those analogues whereby the threefold path, or Beauty-First Way, is now known to us:

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<sup>4</sup> I owe to Fr. Maximos Constatas the insight that the timing of *The Philokalia*, with that collection's emphasis on spiritual and uncreated light, was a deliberate response to the powerful draw of the Enlightenment. The monastic fathers of Mount Athos and the Aegean could see how the new science had become a force drawing the anti-religious away from the higher illumination offered by Christ, and countered with their older and more important path to empirical knowledge. See Fr. Maximos's "St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain and the Palamite Revival of the Eighteenth Century," soon to be published as a chapter in Andrew Louth, *The Oxford Handbook of Orthodox Theology*, but available now via academia.edu.



Beauty	Grammar	Observation	Purification
Goodness	Logic	Theory	Illumination
Truth	Rhetoric	Confirmed Hypothesis	Deification

### Brain Hemispheres

It is helpful to note very briefly the extent to which this threefold path resembles the most up to date account of human brain function. While a more in-depth description is impossible here, the work of neuroscientist Iain McGilchrist describes a similar three-fold progression of attention (see McGilchrist 2019). Cognition begins when the right hemisphere establishes patterns and context; the left hemisphere then performs an analytical dissection of elements found within that context; and finally, the right hemisphere again operates, taking up the results of analytical reasoning into a new and trans-rationalist generation of wholeness and contextual awareness.

Clearly enough, what the ancients operationalized in the Trivium, what the moderns formulated in the scientific method, and what the mystics of *The Philokalia* framed in mystical practice, are the entailments of structures encoded in the biology of the brain itself. This accounts for the success and the persistence of those three enduring approaches to the task of knowing – the Trivium; *The Philokalia*; and modern science – for they trained the human person to follow the natural function of the human brain itself.

But let us return to the philosophical and theological entailments of the threefold way, leaving the discussion of its biological substratum to a later article.

### Christianity and Love

Meditation on *The Philokalia* and on the Orthodox Christian tradition which is its setting, has led me to the conclusion that for Christians, the Beauty, Goodness, Truth sequence is meant to be understood as an invitation to a trivium of love.

The first love, *eros* for Beauty, offers an awakening from diseased forms of self-love. Here, we must discuss the unique power of wonder in the face of the Beautiful to start the journey of engagement with the world.

The second love, *agape* for the Good and for Goodness, equates to a quickening of our love for other persons. Finally, the third love, *philia*, which is attained through endurance within the ups and downs encountered in expressing the first two loves, offers the quiet confirmation of a friendship with the person or thing or phenomenon studied. The attainment of *philia* coincides with a new integration, and moreover with a becoming beautiful by the knower. This festival of loves, inseparable from a symphony of sacrifice shaped first as fasting, then as almsgiving, and finally as prayer, demarcates the seasons of our life and the ritual character of the Christian's existence.

And so, in arguing that the three transcendentals must be approached according to a sacred order, I am also arguing for the goodness of philosophy, which is itself born in wonder, pursued in analysis, and which through friendship finds the strength to return again to wholeness, to delight, and thus to attain unto Truth.

## Conclusions

Today, philosophy is once again asked to contribute to the guidance not only of the individual, but of the larger social whole, and to lead a desperately sought renewal and repentance at every scale of human existence, including also the family, the neighborhood, and the global community. Calls from across the political spectrum insist that philosophy should lead to justice, however, justice might be conceived.

In this atmosphere of heightened importance for the philosophic enterprise, it is important to be reminded that philosophy will forever be bound up with the trivium of loves, which is a kind of festival of love and a symphony of sacrifice, for only by this symphonic sacrificial program does reality disclose itself to the human knower.

If we are unfortunate enough to consider ourselves nihilists, let us have the common sense to hold our tongue, and instead to hold the floor for those who have not yet given up hope. If we are theists, even more

so might we consider the limitations placed on the utility of speech in the face of mystery. But if we are true philosophers, then let us join both the followers and the teachers of the threefold Beauty-First Way across the span of European and Middle Eastern history since the classical period.

It is sometimes said, even by philosophers themselves, that philosophy is no longer true to its name, that it is no longer a path followed by lovers of wisdom. But this is not true. It is just that so many of us have lost the cultural memory of what wisdom looks like and feels like. Wisdom comes through the threefold Beauty-First Way, which confides not only the memory of the past, but the memory of a common human structure of beautiful, effective, and life-giving cognition.

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All links were verified by the editors and found to be functioning before the publication of this text in 2024.

## DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## FUNDING

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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