

Book Review

On the Origin of Beauty: Ecophilosophy in the Light of Traditional Wisdom

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by John Griffin

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“Beauty is the splendor of the Truth.” – Plato

A striking phenomenon with regard to any mention of *beauty* is how oblivious contemporaries are to the truth of its origin *in divinis*. Yet it is not the physical eye that this reality remains opaque to but the “eye of the heart” or the Intellect which has become emaciated in the present age. Since time immemorial traditional civilizations and societies have intuited the sacred significance of beauty and perceived it as a direct manifestation of the spiritual world. This is why sacred science found at the heart of all of the wisdom traditions knew and understood that the natural world and all of its forms found on Earth corresponded to celestial archetypes. It is no longer debated that modern science has hit a dead-end for its destructive effects now apparent to all. And if we wait to observe how the reductionistic theoretical trajectory of modern science and its experiment culminates—there will be no you or I, nor environment waiting for its final triumph—the destruction of all that we know, the world itself will be achieved.

This volume contains a thought-provoking “Foreword” by Satish Kumar (b. 1936), current editor of *Resurgence* magazine, founder and Director of Programmes of the Schumacher College, who unhesitatingly recognizes the frequently overlooked spiritual implications of the ecological crisis, which is indispensable to any possible renewal. The book is divided into five fields of inquiry each part containing two chapters.

Part One: Wilderness

The book begins with a personal anecdote of the author’s early childhood recollections of encountering nature. In the summer of 1972 the author and two other siblings travelled with their father to see Lake Pedder in the heart of the Tasmanian wilderness before it was destroyed by a man-made flood in order to provide an impoundment for hydro-electricity. This singular event, which has remained with the author for some forty years, grounds the entire work, a veritable touchstone to the sacred—“the overwhelming presence of the spiritual within the natural world” (p. 24). The technological hubris that led to the demise of Lake Pedder is not an isolated phenomenon. Quite the contrary, it has become a common byproduct of living in the

contemporary world, which allows readers to identify with the loss of their own or analogous “Lake Pedder”.

The second section provides an important overview of *A Sandy County Almanac* (1949) by Aldo Leopold, a respected pioneer of environmental thought whose ideas have provided an enduring resonance with ecophilosophy.

Part Two: Ecophilosophy

This section contains an overview of the emerging field of ecophilosophy which distinguishes itself from deep ecology and ecopsychology, suggesting that it is—“the last great Western philosophical response to an understanding of the human position *vis-à-vis* the world” (p. 47). Some suggest that the indigenous ways of relating to the environment, especially certain examples of ecological destruction, are equal to modern examples of environmental degradation. Yet these were an exception and not a rule.

[A]lthough historical examples of “unecological” behavior can be found in all cultures (whether of primal peoples or more developed civilizations), destruction that is at once large-scale, is not done in ignorance of the consequences but often with full knowledge of them, and lacks any restraining wisdom, is a phenomenon only of recent centuries (p. 49).

Human conduct or behavior in the premodern epoch was always rooted in the underlying metaphysical principles of a spiritual tradition. There was no such thing as “secular ethics” or “secular morality”, in the same way that nothing was perceived as separate from the sacred. Another important distinction regarding ecophilosophy is that the understanding of philosophy or the “love of wisdom” is taken from the ancient or classical interpretations referring to those who contemplate the cosmic order, its beauty and strive abide in this transcendent reality. However, such is not the case with modern philosophy which is relativistic and nihilistic and denies the transcendent order altogether.

The second section presents a synopsis of “deep ecology” (contrasted with “shallow ecology”) and “transpersonal ecology”, by way of highlighting the limitations as they do not fully incorporate the transcendent. With this said, they both identify with an expanded sense of “self” or “potentiality”, yet these designations are limited to the psycho-physical and do not pertain to the spiritual domain. Griffin explores the origins of the environmental movement, which brings much clarification to the subject. “[I]t cannot be seriously denied that almost from the beginning in Christianity there were corruptions of the original teaching that come about due to its impact with temporal powers. Nor can it be denied that this ‘weakness’ provided an opening for the development of a secular science” (p. 85).

Part Three: Through A Glass Darkly

In the chapter aptly titled “Reductionism” the author outlines the core distinction between modern science and sacred science. The first relies on reason (*ratio*) which is incomplete unto itself and the second relies on the Intellect (*Intellectus* in Latin, *Nous* in Greek, *Rūh* in Arabic

and *Buddhi* in Sanskrit) which is a transcendent faculty within the human individual. We are reminded that: “Rational consciousness is not perceptive; rather it interprets sensory data” (p. 96). The Intellect is

The supra-sensory, transcendent, essential, or vertical dimension to reality was not open to investigation using analytical reason, but was known by means of the “faculty” of perception, originating prior to reason, that partook of the nature of this transcendence—the *nous* (Intellect) (p. 104).

While the idea of unmediated apprehension of reality sounds anachronistic to contemporary minds, it is this unitive means of perceiving that is unanimous within the sapiential traditions. With the disowning of traditional metaphysics, modern science erects a new metaphysics establishing in turn its own cosmology, ontology, empiricism and epistemology that are no longer connected to the spiritual domain.

The chapter titled “The Crisis of Modern Science” further elaborates on what has led to the entropic outlook that is destroying the ecosystem. Griffin’s provides an interesting synopsis of quantum theory and explores the notion that it has more in common with the mystical dimension than with modern science or its reductionistic elements. A synthesis between Eastern thought and modern science has been attempted, yet it was not to the benefit of modern science: “Quantum physics has in fact revealed an obstacle to the continuation of the methods of reductive science” (p. 129). Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933) has wonderfully summarized the attempt to synthesis Eastern wisdom with quantum theory and why such efforts cannot bear fruit:

The Tao of Physics does not really speak of Hindu cosmology or Chinese physics, but only mentions certain comparisons between modern physics and Hindu and Taoist metaphysical ideas...there are many profound correlations and concordances to be found between certain aspects of biology, astronomy and quantum mechanics on one hand and oriental doctrines of nature, of the cosmos, on the other.... But what has occurred for the most part is not...[a] profound comparison...but its parody, a kind of popularized version of a religious knowledge of nature (p. 129).

Griffin makes a valuable point which is often ignored: “It is the tragic assumption that the old truth is to be judged in the light of the new, and the terrible injustice of often propagating a view—quite untenable—that science deals with *all* of reality” (p. 136).¹

1. It is worth adding the following quote by Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) in the light of the above point: “[A] totalitarian rationalism that eliminates both Revelation and Intellect, and at the same time a totalitarian materialism that ignores the metaphysical relativity...of matter and of the world...does not know that the supra-sensible, situated as it is beyond space and time, is the concrete principle of the world, and that it is consequently also at the origin of that contingent and changeable coagulation we call ‘matter’ A science that is called ‘exact’ is in fact an ‘intelligence without wisdom’, just as post-scholastic philosophy is inversely a ‘wisdom without intelligence’”. (Quoted in John Griffin, “The Crisis of Modern Science,” in *On the Origin of Beauty: Ecophilosophy in the Light of Traditional Wisdom* [Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2011], p. 138); the original quote can be found in Frithjof Schuon, “Man in the

Part Four: The Vertical Dimension

The two chapters contained in this section are first “Decent” and second “Ascent”. Griffin shares with the reader the challenging task of situating modern science in its rightful place. Rather than taking us forward into what is deeper or higher it is doing the contrary: “To see modern science in terms of a ‘decent’ of consciousness is, of course, to exactly reverse the conventional image” (p. 152).

He informs the reader that while quantum mechanics or “new science” has expanded the vision of modern science allowing for a glimpse at the vertical or the spiritual domain, it does so by explicitly framing the limitations of the scientific paradigm itself. While modern science can measure and predict the physical forms of the manifest world, it cannot do so with the unmanifest world, what is beyond or underlies the physical order. The central problem with modern science, beside its truncated vision that discredits the supra-sensible domain, is that it appropriates what is outside its designation. The author refers extensively to the work of Philip Sherrard (1922-1995), who wonderfully presents the quandary that modern science faces in light of integral metaphysics: “Nothing can be known except according to the mode of the knower” (p. 149). No matter how broad of an outlook modern science adopts it is inevitably caught in a dualistic framework that it cannot go beyond as consciousness is not a thing or an object that can be empirically studied: “The highest mode of consciousness, or consciousness in itself, is that in which there is no dualism between knower and what is to be known, observer and what is to be observed, consciousnesses and that of which consciousnesses is conscious” (p. 150).

Part Five: The Nature of Nature

From the standpoint of integral metaphysics, the world is sacred as it participates in the nature of the Divine. That nature itself is a *theophany*, starkly contrasts with the modern and postmodern outlook which views nature as an object, a thing, separate and disconnected from everything else. Modern science’s attempt to appropriate the whole of Reality demonstrates its infancy and naiveté, in contrast with sacred science which is rooted in the timeless truths: “After nearly 400 years of scientific analysis, it has remained impossible to explain what life is in terms of materialism” (p. 235). The traditional and primordial people universally acknowledged the primacy of the spirit, as it was the transpersonal that not only unified all of reality, but provided guidance in all matters of existence. Any attempt to study what the human being is or what the environment is void of the sacred, will always fall short and will inevitably be a distortion. The primordial peoples knew that nature and all existence was symbolic and by knowing this symbolic language one could participate in the sacred.

At the heart of any discussion on integral ecology is sacred science and without this common ground we are limited to the horizontal causality of the manifest world, whereas sacred science is informed by the vertical dimension of the supra-sensible that includes the horizontal order. If we are not blinded by the paradigm of modern science, we can see further into the remarkable

Universe,” in *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, trans. Lord Northbourne [Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1984], p. 117.

beauty and grandeur of creation. In restoring the proper place of ecology and philosophy (the “love of wisdom”) we need to turn to sacred science and its wisdom traditions.

On the Origin of Beauty grapples with the hard questions as to how we got into this nightmarish scenario that diagnostically very much presents like—suicidal ideation—threatening the complete decimation of the ecology and all of life forms which inhabit it. Yet this book radically differs from others as it provides the compulsory understanding that underscores what brought it about, which is no minor task as this is inseparable from identifying the way out. What is necessary is a “paradigm shift” within modern science, yet not a revision or a makeover of the same thought process that brought about the current crisis. We urgently need a revival of sacred science that is situated at the heart of the perennial philosophy, which holds Beauty and Truth indivisible and the Intellect as the transpersonal faculty within the human being that directly apprehends this Reality. There can be no remedy for the ecological crisis or any of the contemporary ills for that matter, without the knowledge of the underlying causes and this book addresses them.