

## BEYOND CONFIRMATION: EXPANDING BEAUTY IN POLANYI'S EPISTEMOLOGY

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Presented at the Polanyi Society Annual Meeting  
Online, November 20, 2020

In a cultural milieu that has been shaped by common epistemological frameworks in which knowledge is viewed primarily as information, much of a person's everyday interactions with reality often remains under-utilized when it comes to understanding how such empirical "data" genuinely contribute to knowledge of the real. The modern ideal of knowledge as explicit and objectively defensible discounts everyday, personal encounters with reality that arguably play an even more fundamental role in all knowing.<sup>1</sup> Those familiar with Michael Polanyi's work will immediately recognize in these opening words the very frameworks that he challenges. Immediately it becomes clear that a Polanyian epistemology offers numerous tools to fill such gaps, namely the affirmation of tacit, personal knowledge. However, a notable aspect of these modern epistemological frameworks that often remains overlooked, even in Polanyi's response, is a frequent tendency to neglect the epistemological significance of beauty.<sup>2</sup> I shall refer to this as the "beauty gap" in epistemology.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Polanyi prefaces *Personal Knowledge* with "rejecting the ideal of scientific detachment," which "falsifies our whole outlook far beyond the domain of science." He desires "to establish an alternative ideal of knowledge" (*Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958], vii). Esther Lightcap Meek uses the term "defective epistemic default" to describe the latent perspectives inherited from the Western philosophical tradition (*Loving to Know: Introducing Covenant Epistemology* [Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011], 7, 67). She asserts a need for "epistemological therapy," conceiving modernist commitments to certainty, objectivity, ocular metaphors, and substantialism as problematic (ibid, 3–30).

<sup>2</sup> Given the historic connection of beauty and truth as two of the transcendentals of being, it is surprising that beauty does not find a place in key epistemology volumes. See, e.g., Ernest Sosa and Jaegwon Kim, eds., *Epistemology: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), Paul K. Moser, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Epistemology* (Oxford University Press, 2002), Sven Bernecker and Duncan Pritchard, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Epistemology* (London: Routledge, 2011), and Robert Audi, *Epistemology* (Third ed., London: Routledge, 2011).

Admittedly, Polanyi engages beauty—particularly “intellectual beauty”—more than most who write about knowledge; he renders the beauty gap in epistemology a bit less gaping. However, although the topic of beauty is present in Polanyi’s work, his treatment of beauty leaves questions unanswered, proverbial boulders unturned. The particular gap present in Polanyi’s work concerning beauty is whether or not beauty may be said to “mediate” knowledge. Since Polanyi’s from-to structure of knowing is central to his work at large, it only seems fitting to ask whether or not that very structure may apply to beauty itself; that is, whether or not a beautiful thing can subsidiarily, or tacitly, impart knowledge.

In this paper, I aim to show that Polanyi’s epistemology lacks explicit development of an important aspect of beauty’s contribution to knowledge formation—as *mediator*—which, nevertheless, would fit well within his framework. I will accomplish this first by assessing how Polanyi *does* treat beauty, second by establishing the grounds for beauty to serve as a mediator—as well as its fittingness within a Polanyian epistemology—and third by examining this concept in a case study.

Before diving in, a word on beauty is in order. Though any working definition is admittedly wrought with gaps and implicit questions, for the sake of common ground and increased understanding, providing one is better than not. For the purposes of this paper, it is sufficient to state that beauty, in the most basic sense, is *that which, being perceived, rightly pleases or ought to please, with respect to what it is*. Note that this preliminary definition includes subjectivity, “being perceived . . . pleases,” as well as objectivity, “that which . . . rightly . . . ought to please.” However, this is not meant to allow subjective judgments that are actually misjudgments (e.g., a pedophile’s draw to child pornography), hence the word “rightly.”

I have in mind here the work of Elaine Scarry,<sup>3</sup> who emphasizes the human tendency to misjudge beauty. It is also possible, then, to misjudge something as *not* beautiful when, in fact, it *is*, hence the “ought” (e.g., Scarry describes the discovery of her own misjudgment of the beauty of palm trees). The last bit, “with respect to what it is,” allows space for variety along the spectrum of beauty. Rather than drawing a line between the ordinary and extraordinary, this definition leaves room for beautiful occurrences of the “everyday” as well as what one might call “ravishing” or “sublime” instances of beauty. Also note that perception includes more than visual perception. Something may be perceived as beautiful through any of the senses. Though “please(s)” is admittedly tame in light of the extent to which beauty may be both displayed and experienced, it is sufficient for our purposes here to communicate positive sensations, especially because my intent is to include both ordinary and extraordinary examples of beauty.

### **Polanyi On Beauty**

Across his writings, Polanyi treats beauty in two primary ways: 1) as *confirmation* of reality, and 2) as *motivation* for further pursuit of contact with reality.<sup>4</sup> I will treat each in turn below.

Before looking at these two ways that beauty is present in Polanyi’s work, it is vital to show that Polanyi affirms that beauty is a valid part of human knowledge overall. In *Study of Man*, he states,

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<sup>3</sup> Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that although these two concepts may blur at the edges, such distinctions can be made. Moreover, the purpose doing so is to emphasize how beauty *is* treated in order more clearly to identify the gap (i.e., how beauty is *not* treated, but *could* be). Additionally, as much as we may dislike superimposing categories on systems of thought that do not offer the categories up for themselves, I see this present exercise as helpful in order to point out where expansion of thought is possible. Though Polanyi may not have thought in such terms, clues present in his texts have led me to discover implicit patterns: one of confirmation, one of motivation, and a “larger pattern” that Polanyian epistemology seems to have space for beauty as “mediator.”

Passions seek satisfaction and intellectual passions seek intellectual joys. The most general term for the source of this joy is beauty. The mind is attracted by beautiful problems, promising beautiful solutions; it is fascinated by the clues to a beautiful discovery and pursues untiringly the prospects of a beautiful invention. In fact, we hear beauty more often mentioned today by scientists and engineers than by critics of art and literature. . . .

. . . I have moved deliberately from facts to values and from science to the arts, in order to surprise you with the result; namely, that our powers of understanding control equally both these domains. This continuity was actually foreshadowed from the moment when I acknowledged intellectual passion as a proper motive of comprehension.<sup>5</sup>

This affirmation—along with other core aspects of Polanyi’s epistemology, namely tacit knowledge—shall serve as the foundation on which the rest of this paper will be built.

### Beauty as Confirmation<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the most saturated portion of Polanyi’s work treating the topic of beauty is Part 6 of *Personal Knowledge (PK)*: “Intellectual Passions.” Here he considers that which drives and confirms intellectual pursuit—beauty being one of these factors. Most of the occurrences of beauty as confirmation follow a similar thread: beauty confirms contact with reality. As far as the sciences go, Polanyi affirms that “the intellectual beauty of a theory is a token of its contact with reality.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, he calls beauty a “token of reality.”<sup>8</sup> Yet Polanyi’s affirmation of beauty’s ability to confirm is not limited to the sciences alone. He references, e.g., works of art for comparison: “A scientific theory which calls attention to its own beauty, and partly relies on it for claiming to represent empirical reality, is akin to a work of art which calls attention to its own

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Polanyi, *The Study of Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 37–38.

<sup>6</sup> Due to the limits of space, I will focus here, and in the next subsection, on providing representative examples, rather than a thorough survey of each occurrence of beauty.

<sup>7</sup> *PK*, 145.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

beauty as a token of artistic reality.”<sup>9</sup> Beauty as confirmation also appears in the sense that it impresses upon humanity the importance of upholding certain truths because it *confirms the reality* of those truths. Take, for example, his consideration of the theory of relativity:

A theory like that of relativity continues to attract the interest of ever new students and laymen by intimations of its beauty yet hidden to their understanding: a beauty which is rediscovered every time a new mind apprehends the theory. And it is still for the sake of this remote and inaccessible beauty, and not for its few useful formulae . . . , that relativity continues to be valued as an intellectual triumph and accepted as a great truth. All true appreciation of science by the public continues to depend upon the appreciation of such beauty—even though sensed only at second hand . . . .<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, this dependence of the public upon beauty is a dependence largely upon the confirmation that it provides that one has made an arresting contact with truth—with reality—and this cannot be cast aside. Beauty even seems to serve as confirmation by upholding us in our understanding of reality. As part and parcel of the intellectual passions that drive scientific inquiry and discovery, Polanyi avers that beauty’s lack would cause us to “cease to understand mathematics.” Indeed, Polanyi claims that without this passion of intellectual beauty, “Mathematics would become pointless and would lose itself in a welter of insignificant tautologies.”<sup>11</sup> In an overarching sense, then, beauty for Polanyi is a confirmation that reality is before us, that reality is the way it is, and that we ought to regard it as such.

### Beauty as Motivation

Though motivation as a theme is less obvious in the texts themselves than confirmation, it is one that nonetheless arises from the pattern of Polanyi’s treatment of beauty. Motivation

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 192.

incites, it drives, it pushes; there is a sense in which beauty, for Polanyi, calls or impels the scientist to continue on in her study. Polanyi considers beauty as central to discovery in the sciences. He says, “[W]ithout a scale of interest and plausibility based on a vision of reality, nothing can be discovered that is of value to science; and only our grasp of scientific beauty, responding to the evidence of our senses, can evoke this vision.”<sup>12</sup> This is admittedly a tame example of motivation, but the idea that beauty makes scientific discovery possible seems to imply a sort of inspiration or movement toward action. The vision of reality—the interest and plausibility—provided by beauty serves as a motivation to engage science in pursuit of discovery. Perhaps, then, we may consider interest as a kind or subset of motivation; interest draws us, it motivates us toward thought and action. With regard to mathematics, Polanyi claims, “mathematics cannot be defined without acknowledging its most obvious feature: namely, that it is interesting. Nowhere is intellectual beauty so deeply felt and fastidiously appreciated in its various grades and qualities as in mathematics.”<sup>13</sup> Contextually, here Polanyi is grounding the value and importance of mathematics outside of mere utility. Yes, mathematics is useful; it serves many vital functions in daily life and accompanies nearly (if not) all processes, whether explicitly or implicitly. But that is not all. New heights have been reached, new paths pioneered, not simply because mathematics is useful; ground has been gained because the beauty of the realities discovered motivate the knower to forge ahead, to pursue the unknown. Pleasure and delight also may be considered a subset of motivation, for it is by such sensations that we are drawn—motivated—to engage reality. Polanyi likens the abstract arts to mathematics, claiming, “Both . . . are appreciated for the beauty of a set of complex relations embodied in them. . . .

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 188.

[T]hey both speak to us.” And further, “Like mathematics, music articulates a vast range of rational relationships *for the mere pleasure* of understanding them.”<sup>14</sup> While in confirmation beauty accompanies contact with or discovery of reality, in motivation beauty incites the pursuit of the real or carries us further along on that pursuit.

#### “Beauty as . . .”: An Additional Note

A final word is required regarding additional uses of beauty. I will not pretend to be so naïve as to think that every reference to beauty in Polanyi’s work fits neatly within either of these two categories. For instance, Polanyi seems to consider intellectual beauty as a sort of *justification* or *validation* of a thing’s value. Though similar to facets of confirmation and motivation, nuances in his description merit a distinct mention.<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere, similar to the concept of motivation, Polanyi describes beauty in a way not unlike a midwife, assisting with the birth of a new way of seeing the world.<sup>16</sup> Though yet others may be present, these are sufficient to show that Polanyi’s use of beauty is not strictly limited to the two categories above. However, such variety is not problematic for the case I am making here because such additional uses are generally circumstantial rather than recurring. I chose to focus on beauty as confirmation and motivation because these are the two themes that rose to the surface most frequently and seemed to bear the most weight; thus, they characterize the bulk of how Polanyi engages beauty.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 193, emphasis mine.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., *PK*, 135: “The function which I attribute here to scientific passion is that of distinguishing between demonstrable facts which are of scientific interest, and those which are not . . . . I want to show that this appreciation depends ultimately on a sense of intellectual beauty; that it is an emotional response which can never be dispassionately defined . . . .”

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., *PK*, 144: “The new beauty inaugurated the modern view of a mathematically defined reality.”

## Expanding Polanyian Epistemology to Include Beauty as Mediator

What I find lacking is a treatment of whether or not beauty may be considered a viable *mediator* of knowledge. In other words, can it be the thing through which discovery occurs, a point of focus that becomes subsidiary, enabling a from-to integration from beautiful thing to discovery, to knowledge? After reviewing how Polanyi *does* engage beauty, I will offer a proposal of beauty as mediator in the section to follow.

Here a caveat is in order. Polanyi does include a statement in *PK* that sounds like it could be an affirmation of beauty's ability to serve as mediator of knowledge.<sup>17</sup> Yet, in examining the context, it appears that this is simply another way of expressing the concept of beauty as *confirmation* of having made contact with reality through discovery. Though the words themselves seem to point to beauty as mediator, this particular theme, if indeed present, is not developed here explicitly, nor is it considered elsewhere in Polanyi's work as confirmation and motivation are. Therefore, the concept of beauty as mediator, if it is something Polanyi would have affirmed during his life, at the very least remained un(der)developed in his work.<sup>18</sup>

As confirmation, beauty becomes relegated to a sort of quality that is possessed; e.g., a true formula or theory will have a beauty to it, an order and elegance that confirms its truth. As motivation for further pursuit, beauty draws and excites, say, the scientist on his journey. Past discoveries have brought with them the excitement and joy of intellectual beauty, and the hope of experiencing such sensations again—in addition to curiosity with the intellectual beauty of an idea, of a set of clues, perhaps—drives him on in continued study. But for us to understand how

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<sup>17</sup> "I believe that by now three things have been established beyond reasonable doubt: **the power of intellectual beauty to reveal truth about nature**; the vital importance of distinguishing this beauty from merely formal attractiveness; and the delicacy of the test between them, so difficult that it may baffle the most penetrating scientific minds." *PK*, 149, emphasis mine.

<sup>18</sup> Polanyi's engagement with metaphor and works of art, particularly in *Meaning*, will be addressed below.

beauty can serve as a mediator, we must speak in a way that involves beauty more intimately in the from-to structure of tacit knowing. For Polanyi, all knowing is either tacit or rooted in the tacit. Moreover, the nature of beauty or beautiful things *simply is* to defy explicit description (at least explicit description with ease). Thus, if beauty is involved in knowing as a mediator, it makes sense to assume that it will be working in a more tacit—rather than explicit—manner, aiding in or enabling the process of integrating subsidiary clues to knowledge of the real. Certainly, as Polanyi has shown in his work, we can turn to the subsidiary which is working tacitly to form our knowledge—thus focusing on it and treating it “explicitly”—but this does not negate the fact that such integration is happening primarily in a tacit manner. In essence, what I am claiming in stating that beauty can be construed as a *mediator* is that *beauty*<sup>19</sup> *may serve as the subsidiary through which one may attend to some other focus, namely knowledge—or discovery, or meaning—in general.*

In this section I would like to ascend a ladder. There are two particular “rungs” that must be treated individually here in order to connect knowing to beauty as *mediator*, and a third “rung” will comprise much of the next section. The first is what I call the perception–knowledge connection, and the second is the beauty–knowledge connection. The next section will treat the third, the beauty–*knowledge of God* connection, with theological epistemology serving as a case study for how beauty may serve as a mediator of knowledge. By looking at the first two individually, it will become clear that Polanyian epistemology has room for a conception of beauty as mediator of knowledge.

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<sup>19</sup> Here the term “beauty” as a noun includes the term’s adjectival use with other nouns such as “beautiful things,” “beautiful items,” and “beautiful experiences,” which are terms used below.

## Perception–Knowledge Connection

While Polanyi dedicates much space to developing and explaining his conception of knowledge as personal, tacit, indwelled, etc., he appears to take for granted that perception is the foundation of knowledge formation. Though he does dedicate portions of his work to perception,<sup>20</sup> he seems to assume that knowledge is based on perception without any indication of a felt need to justify that assumption. Throughout his *magnum opus* in particular, he considers examples of studies conducted with animals as well as observations made of human learning that operate on the assumption that perception *just is* fundamental in these processes of coming to know. Thus, for the purposes of this paper, I will join Polanyi in assuming the foundational nature of perception for knowledge formation. However, I will say a few words here to fill out this connection a bit before moving on to the second rung of our ladder.

We each have our own “inner world” so to speak, in which we consider things and mull them over, conceptualize, evaluate, etc. But, could we do any of that without something to consider, which was first experienced through perception? This comes down to basic epistemology, in terms of how we even know what we know—what our sources for knowledge are. Every human being who has ever existed has experienced things external to herself. Even the unborn baby has experiences within his mother’s womb. And then of course anyone born into the world has external experiences every waking moment of one’s life. In this sense, we cannot be detached from external experience. The world is full of subsidiary information that we tacitly take in. Our brains process this in ways of which we (most of us) are largely unaware. It appears that perception, whether subsidiary or focal, is at least *a* primary if not *the* primary source of

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<sup>20</sup> Notably, e.g., ch. 4 in *Meaning*.

knowledge.<sup>21</sup> Our perceptions, our experiences, form the building blocks from which we draw meaning and understanding. We perceive patterns, we experience realities, our minds synthesize such input and information, drawing conclusions and “storing” resulting “data.” This mysterious process may be considered the process of knowledge formation.

### Knowledge–Beauty Connection

If perception in general is *a* or *the* basis for knowledge formation, what about perception of beauty? Moving up the ladder to the next rung—from knowledge’s connection to perception *in general* to knowledge’s connection to perception *of beauty*—matters become more complex. Perception of things that we can describe in “objective” (i.e., scientific, mathematical) terms are much easier to see as directly connected to knowledge formation. When a child playing in the bathtub experiences her bath toys buoy back up to the water’s surface, there are realities about physics and chemistry at work that her little brain is beginning to understand, even if she cannot articulate the details of a bath toy’s shape, material, or weight in relation to the water in which she plays. Moving the focus to beauty—which is generally considered in a more “subjective” light—causes the lines connecting perception to knowledge to begin to blur. What does the human person *learn* or *come to know* by perceiving a beautiful sunset? By hearing one of Beethoven’s symphonies? By tasting a fresh sourdough baguette smeared with pure, grass-fed butter? Certainly on one level, the perceiver of a beautiful thing can come to know realities about that particular thing or group of things comprising that which is beautiful: e.g., that sunsets change, ranging from various brilliant colors to more muted versions of the hues; that

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<sup>21</sup> Certainly, the question of the Cartesian *a priori* could be raised at this point. Arguably humans do have some sort of *a priori* knowledge, but the fact remains that each living being exists in some context and takes in sensory data. Such data is perceptual in some sense of the word and necessarily—in some way or another—becomes part of any knowledge formation.

instruments play different notes and that not all instruments play all the time—there is give and take, even a presence of dissonance as well as harmony, and much else besides; that contrast in food is desirable—creamy and rich pair delightfully with tangy, spongy, and crisp. This “first level” of knowledge considers perceivable realities about the beautiful things experienced themselves. But what about a “second level” of knowledge, of realities beyond the physical materials or abstract concepts that are still rooted directly in the specific, tangible items or experiences? For the sunset, one may come to know that beauty fades, that sadness may accompany a waning of beauty as much as delight accompanies its height; a symphony may inspire knowledge of cooperation or loving deference—only in taking turns can each group of instruments shine in its own way, also the realization of the appropriateness of certain dynamics or volumes at different times; for the buttered baguette, one may learn that the sum of ingredients is often greater than its individual parts (not simply bread and butter, but, even more profoundly, flour, water, yeast—“wild,” *sourdough* yeast, no less—and salt), thus the wonder of transformation that fermentation, time, and heat can bring. This second level of knowledge gained from beautiful things experienced is more abstract than that gained on the first level. The realities known are still rooted in the particulars to an extent—the particulars of each item or experience (sunset, symphony, baguette) shape the sort of abstract concepts drawn out—but they are not so rooted therein that the same truths could not have been gleaned, at least in some capacity, from a different experience, e.g., the sunset’s lessons from a bouquet of flowers: waning from fresh to wilted; the symphony’s from a ballet dance; the baguette’s from any numerous array of culinary delights, say, wine.

A question may arise at this point: is it really that these items are *beautiful* that enables them to mediate the knowledge they do? Why claim specifically that *beauty* mediates

knowledge? Given the examples used above, it seems to be the case that there *just are* certain things about each item or experience that could not be learned if the thing were plain or ugly. An evening sky that does not strike us as beautiful because of its brilliant colors cannot teach us about the sadness that accompanies waning beauty when there is no striking beauty to begin with. A more or less “ugly” cacophony of unsynchronized instrument sounds—the orchestra warming up for the performance—is without any vestige of loving deference. A plain, simple cracker made with only flour and water—not even salt or yeast, let alone an accompanying spread—has nothing to say about complementary relationships in cuisine. Even if some of the more abstract lessons could be learned from other particular beautiful things, it is arguably still another *beautiful* thing that would be necessary to impart such knowledge. Plain and ugly things simply have different effects upon us, and thus enable a different kind of learning or set of things to be learned. It is the particularities of the *beauty* of each of the above examples that enables the respective knowledge to be drawn.

To use Polanyian terminology, on both of the levels just described, knowledge is formed by moving *from* the beautiful thing *to* the specific or abstract realities learned. Beauty is not merely something that accompanies (confirms) a discovery or draws one into (motivates) study of the thing itself. Even though these could still be present simultaneously, beautiful things by nature of their beauty are capable of mediating knowledge. The viewer, the listener, the partaker is tacitly moving *from* experience of beauty *to* realizations. In this way, beauty may serve as a mediator of knowledge. How does this fit within a Polanyian framework? As we have already seen, beauty as mediator can fit into the from-to structure of tacit knowledge integration. Additionally, such a concept aligns with knowledge as personal since one’s experience of beauty

is deeply personal.<sup>22</sup> Indwelling may also be mentioned, as one can be said to interiorize encounters with beauty. It is common to interact with beauty in an emotional way, to “take in” a view or an ensemble of sounds, and with tasting or eating we *literally* interiorize beauty through consumption. Lastly, Polanyi’s concept of metaphor serves as a sort of “homecoming,” welcoming in this unforeseen expansion of his thought.

Though beauty is not in itself a metaphor *per se*, Polanyi’s treatment of the concept of metaphor is particularly helpful for understanding how beauty may mediate knowledge. Moreover, Polanyi’s development of the meaning of works of art—and particularly his treatment of metaphor—evidence the space in his framework for beauty to be expanded in this way. The key aspects that his treatment of metaphor lends to this expansion are: 1) it being a framework in which both subsidiary and focus have intrinsic interest, and 2) it including the concept of rapture, which places the knower as the new subsidiary in the from-to integration.<sup>23</sup> Let us look briefly at the former. The beautiful item or experience does not lose its meaning as a word does when attending through it to the meaning of the word; rather, that which is beautiful attains, in a sense, a new or additional level of meaning; it ascends a rung higher on the ladder, enabling knowledge of something distinct from—and yet somehow tied to—the beautiful thing itself. Taking on this third sense of meaning akin to metaphor,<sup>24</sup> the beautiful item does not itself become meaningless

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<sup>22</sup> In fact, language of “subjectivity” so permeates literature regarding art, aesthetics, and beauty, Polanyi’s framework makes him aptly suited to address the concerns of beauty in a context so heavily informed by modern/Enlightenment sensitivities.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch. *Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 78–79.

<sup>24</sup> Polanyi identified three types of meaning, in which the subsidiary (S) and focus (F) differ in their relationship to the knower. The first, *indication*, is comprised by a subsidiary that does *not* have intrinsic interest and a focus that *does*; e.g., attending through words (S) to meaning (F). In the second, *symbolization*, the focus does not have intrinsic interest, but the subsidiary does; e.g., the flag of a country: one attends through the meaning (S), while focusing directly on a piece of cloth. The third, which Polanyi dubs “metaphor,” allows that both (S) and (F) have intrinsic interest. *Meaning*, 69–74.

in the movement *from* beauty *to* knowledge or meaning. Yet, just as a metaphor may be “destroyed” by pulling it to bits or “explaining” it,<sup>25</sup> so can an experience of beauty be disintegrated (and thus deprived of its ability to mediate knowledge) if the beautiful thing is pulled to bits: like pulling apart a symphony’s performance to each individual note so as no longer to have a beautiful, cohesive, meaningful piece of music.

As a final note here, it is important to distinguish between beauty more generally and Polanyi’s treatment of “works of art” in particular. Though *Meaning* admittedly has much to contribute to this consideration, one ought not to limit what beauty may or may not be capable of doing simply based on what Polanyi develops in this work with respect to works of art. Not only are discussions of “art” itself rife with confusion and disagreement, but how “beauty” ought to be considered with regard to art is more confusing still. It is sufficient as well as necessary to affirm here that beauty, though it may include art, and as evident through my initial definition above, considers both *more* and *other* than art.

We have spoken here of the idea of “levels” of knowledge. What about a third level? Can one move from knowledge of concrete particulars (level one) and abstract realities (level two) to knowledge of the divine (level three[?])? As I move up one last rung on the ladder, I will provide a “case study” for beauty as mediator in the field of theological epistemology.

### **Case Study: Application to Theological Epistemology**

In *Knowing and Being*, “Sense-Giving and Sense-Reading,” Polanyi considers a triadic structure with the knower (A) attending through something (B) to something else (C).<sup>26</sup> The

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>26</sup> See Michael Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, ed. Marjorie Grene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 185–87.

thing through which we attend (B), which we know subsidiarily (and thus which we interiorize), takes on a particular meaning or helps us to integrate a certain meaning that we understand in (C). The main example Polanyi provides is a word (B) we use to name an object or concept (C). Can this structure be extrapolated to perceiving beauty and knowing God?<sup>27</sup> It would seem so. We can affirm (A) and (B): knowers (A) perceiving beautiful things (B). If (C) is God, and if we can assume that God exists and that God can be known, we have the makings for a case study.<sup>28</sup> I will assume here that God exists, that God can be known, and that generally *some* knowledge of God is possible by mediation through beauty. Additionally, rather than seeking to prove whether or not a third level of knowledge is possible in a metaphysical sense, I am simply extending the illustration used above by including an additional level above the first two already described. Indeed, it seems fitting that if level one considers particulars and level two abstract concepts, then the level above those appropriately concerns a divine being who presides over both lower levels.

Here on this third rung of the ladder, the beauty–knowledge of God connection, I will begin by briefly noting a bit about knowledge of God. Rather than offering proof for God’s knowability, this will help to situate the points below as they clarify the link between 1) perception itself and knowledge of God and 2) perception of beauty and knowledge of God. Both the Christian scriptures and Christian scholars affirm what theologians have called a general *sensus divinitatis*, or “sense of the divine,” which is available to, or perhaps present in, all

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<sup>27</sup> Here I consider the from-to structure of knowing that arises in perceptions of beauty to fit within the same type of meaning given to metaphor. See fn. 24 above.

<sup>28</sup> I recognize that at this point those wishing to deny the existence of God may desire to question this section’s inclusion, but I ask that such readers set these biases aside in order to consider the main point: beauty at work as mediator through a particular example that I, a personal knower, find compelling and am committed to within my own fiduciary framework.

humans. Acts 17 and Romans 1 are commonly cited passages for this concept, the former displaying Paul’s interaction with the Athenians who had built an altar “to an unknown God,” whom Paul explains to them in greater detail.<sup>29</sup> Romans 1 essentially states that God can be known from what is perceived in the world.<sup>30</sup> Well-known theologians recognizing this concept include John Calvin and Blaise Pascal, among others.<sup>31</sup>

Connecting the *sensus divinitatis* to beauty, philosopher Alvin Plantinga considers beauty not as something from which we develop a rational argument, but rather which directly mediates knowledge: “[U]pon the perception of the night sky or the mountain vista or the tiny flower, these beliefs [of God’s existence] just arise within us. They are *occasioned* by the circumstances; they are not conclusions from them.”<sup>32</sup> In his work linking theology to natural beauty, L. Clifton Edwards provides a link between Plantinga’s perspective and Polanyian concepts. He notes, “Beauty’s excess could consist in a tacit knowledge of transcendence—a knowledge that is given

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<sup>29</sup> Acts 17:22–23 (NIV): Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.” See also vv. 24–31.

<sup>30</sup> Romans 1:18–20 (NIV): “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, **who suppress the truth** by their wickedness, since **what may be known about God is plain to them**, because **God has made it plain to them**. For since the creation of the world **God’s invisible qualities**—his eternal power and divine nature—**have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made**, so that people are without excuse.” (emphasis mine)

<sup>31</sup> Calvin: “Men of sound judgment will always be sure that a sense of divinity which can never be effaced is engraved upon men’s minds. ... [T]his conviction namely, that there is some God, is naturally inborn in all, and is fixed deep within, as it were in the very marrow....” (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.3.3)

Pascal: “What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself.” Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, VII (425).

<sup>32</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 175. (emphasis his)

tacitly through perception though not shown explicitly.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, here at the beginning of a book developing what he calls a “creational theology of natural beauty,” Edwards upholds the ability of beauty to mediate tacit knowledge of God.

Taking things one step further, theologians who emphasize beauty commonly relate God himself and beauty quite intimately. Indeed, for eighteenth-century theologian Jonathan Edwards, who is often appealed to for his conclusions concerning God and beauty, “God is beautiful, indeed beauty itself, and the source and foundation of all beauty in the world.”<sup>34</sup> To consider God *as* beautiful, as beauty *itself*, and as the *source* of beauty renders an incredibly intimate link between God and beauty, and thus beauty and knowledge of God.

Returning to the examples given above, what might sunset, symphony, and buttered baguette mediate about God? Emphasizing the concept of *sensus divinitatis*, and thus beginning with general rather than more particular truths about God, such experiences might point first to the source of such beauties. Along such lines, the sunset mediates knowledge of the divine Creator or Painter; the symphony reveals the divine Orchestrator, Conductor, and Composer; the buttered baguette introduces the divine Gardener, Chef, and Provider—and for all these, the myriad realities that accompany such identities. Returning to L. Clifton Edwards’ words just above, these experiences tacitly mediate “knowledge of transcendence”—indeed, of a transcendent God who yet self-reveals in the immanent beauty of everyday life.

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<sup>33</sup> L. Clifton Edwards, *Creation’s Beauty as Revelation: Toward a Creational Theology of Natural Beauty* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014), xv.

<sup>34</sup> These are not Edwards’ explicit words, rather Sherry’s description of Edwards’ thought. Patrick Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty: An Introduction to Theological Aesthetics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 14.

We behold beauty in form.<sup>35</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, well-known for his seven-volume theological aesthetics, considers form as that through which splendor shines forth, through which we perceive beauty. Such forms reveal more than what the eyes see, the ears hear, or the tongue tastes just “on the surface.” There is a greater depth mediated:

The form as it appears to us is beautiful only because the delight that it arouses in us is founded upon the fact that, in it, the truth and goodness of the depths of reality itself are manifested and bestowed, and this manifestation and bestowal reveal themselves to us as being something infinitely and inexhaustibly valuable and fascinating. The appearance of the form, as revelation of the depths, is an indissoluble union of two things. It is the real presence of the depths, of the whole of reality, *and* it is a real pointing beyond itself to these depths. . . . [B]oth aspects are inseparable from one another, and together they constitute the fundamental configuration of Being. We “behold” the form; but, if we really behold it, it is not as a detached form, rather in its unity with the depths that make their appearance in it. We see form as the splendour, as the glory of Being.<sup>36</sup>

Theologian Alister McGrath agrees with—and cites—Balthasar, noting, beauty “has to be presented to the human senses in a manner that can be assimilated.” Moreover, “This immediately accentuates the theological significance of the concepts of creation and incarnation, in that both propose a correlation and connection between the character of God and the tangible, visible world.”<sup>37</sup> There appears to be general agreement among theologians that beauty is connected in some way to knowledge of God. Polanyi’s epistemology helpfully provides the resources to be able to speak more clearly about how the knower may receive such knowledge. With this last quote, including the incarnation, we take a large step from the *sensus divinitatis* to knowledge connected to particular realities within the Christian faith. While there is certainly a

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<sup>35</sup> Assuming a broad notion of “form” that may also be used to describe non-tangible instances of beauty such as beautiful smells and sounds, as well as tastes, which, though manifest in tangible objects and experienced perceptually, may still be considered as distinct from strict “physical form” as in a painting, sculpture, or landscape.

<sup>36</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 115–16.

<sup>37</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 264–65. Here McGrath cites Balthasar, *GL1*: 23–34 (fn. 16).

distinction between knowing such specific truths and receiving a general “sense of the divine,” both are indeed connected to and may in some sense be mediated by beauty, at least tacitly, and in a Polanyian fashion. Knower (A) perceives beauty (B) with the possibility of integrating such perceptions to knowledge of God (C) in some way. Indeed, the means of mediation and particulars we come to know will differ, but the bottom line is that such a reality is possible and does occur—beauty serves as a *mediator* of knowledge.

Thus, here we have only just begun to scratch the surface of how beauty is active as mediator with regard to theological epistemology, let alone epistemology more broadly, but such beginnings may serve as the firstfruits of anticipation of future manifestations.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper I have considered a “beauty gap” in Polanyi’s work. I have shown that although beauty is primarily present in his works as confirmation and motivation, there is room there for the addition of beauty as *mediator*. Though not evident in his work, this concept does fit within his epistemological framework, especially as it considers beauty as a subsidiary working tacitly in the from-to structure of integration—of meaning-making and knowledge formation. After briefly examining the connection of perception to knowledge, and then in more detail the connection of perception *of beauty* to knowledge, I provided a look at theological epistemology as an example of beauty at work as mediator of knowledge. While the considerations here may pave the way for additional study of Polanyi’s work and its appropriation, what remains most essentially is for us knowers to keep our eyes peeled, our ears open, and our other senses ready to receive what else beauty may have to teach us as we continue to make contact with reality.

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