

## The Unfashionableness of Beauty

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Some of you may be aware that this time last year I gave a talk on ‘Cosmic Vanity: What’s with wanting to be worshipped?’ Obviously, I didn’t get enough worship with that talk, and, so, I’m back this year with a talk on ‘The Unfashionableness of Beauty’.

(I hasten to add, for those of you who weren’t here last year, that the two talks, contrary to appearance, are, actually, completely unrelated – it was just that the joke was too good to pass by. And I knew Michael wouldn’t let it pass unnoticed, so thought I’d better get in first.)

If you type ‘beauty’ into google, you will be greeted by an array of entries, which all have one thing in common; they focus on the body, on human physical appearance. Beauty products, beauty tips, beauty bible, beauty salon and beauty pageant all feature. Google also helpfully suggests that you might like to carry out related searches using the search words ‘beautiful women’ or ‘beautiful girls’. Beauty, you might well say, is anything but unfashionable. The number of fashion magazines available today - purporting to tell you about nothing but beauty - is bewildering. We are beauty obsessed it seems. And yet, and yet...

Punch published a cartoon of a seventeenth century gentleman standing on the steps of St Paul’s Cathedral with his wife, gazing admiringly up at the building, saying, ‘Just think, my dear...if this is what man is capable of achieving in the seventeenth century, imagine what he’ll be capable of by the twentieth.’

Hmmm, yes... well, let’s just think.

Let’s look at St Andrew’s (in all its duck egg blue glory). Would we now build a structure with such wastage of space? What purpose does this vast expanse above our heads serve? What does it do? What function does it perform? Apart from, of course, surrounding us with a sense of soaring greatness, enveloping us in a quiet place where the frenetic, external busyness fades away, providing excellent acoustics for organ and orchestral music, and choral songs, and allowing light to flood this cavern (on a good day when the sun is out) – creating unusual and beautiful patterns of light streaming across the empty space. But we wouldn’t build buildings today with such wastage of space. This expanse is a relic from a bygone era.

How many of you are absolute in not listening to music whilst you are doing anything else, insisting that any music listened to must be focussed on alone; not shared with any other activity? This isn't a rule I'm particularly good at following, but it is one followed by those closest to me. If you were to follow this rule, would you find that the music you listened to was worthy of being listened to as anything other than background din? Would it contain sufficient skill in composition and in performance or sufficient interest and variety in its harmonies and melodies to merit such undivided attention? And if it wouldn't, what does that say about the standard and quality of that music? A music master was once challenged by his pupils as to why they never studied popular music. He responded by inviting them to bring in their favourite current hit, which would be the subject of class analysis in the next class. At the next class, the number one hit was chosen, and after a few minutes of isolating its bass line, listening to one note repeated over and over and over and over and over again, and comparing it with the bass line of a Bach piece, the class got the point. A recent Radio 4 programme attributed the richness of Tudor music and the language of the Shakespearean age to a greater capacity to hear musicality in the everyday life, without the constant background hum, against which we in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century battle continuously.

Moving on (ever more controversially), how many of you have collected quotable *bon mots* from the reams of internet blogs you can wade your way through on the world wide web? Have you found any pearls of wisdom put brilliantly which will be recited for generations hereafter? About which whole degrees will be studied? How many of the virtual streams of consciousness bombarding us can be compared with literary masterpieces of bygone centuries? Do reality television and listener-created radio programmes really widen our horizons, expand our visions, and transport us outside of our cultures? How many of them challenge us to increase the eloquence with which we express ourselves, with which we communicate one with another? And if they don't, should we settle for a life taken up, swamped even, with such low literary presence? Communication is, after all, an art form. At the very least, do our fellow human beings not merit greater care and more skilful crafting of the phrases we employ when we communicate with them?

Returning to physical beauty itself: How many pictures of fashionable beauty contain models scowling, frowning moodily, gazing morosely into the distance? Music videos are jammed full of portrayals of so called beauty that are aggressive, loud, and domineering. When exercising in the gym at 6.30 in the morning, I have to say that it's all a bit much, to have that as one's morning diet of visual imagery. Alleged beauty that is sulky, vengeful, angry, manipulative and, above all else, self obsessed. What does it do to us to have our minds dominated by a high proportion of such pictures? Why do the photographs and paintings of humanity of all ages enjoying one another's company, absorbed in life's interests and relishing life's pleasures not feature as prominently? Moreover, the beauty of visual silence - of visual stillness and simplicity - has left us. When do our eyes ever have a rest from

continual bombardment with image after image? One can't even go down an escalator into the underground without encountering an advertising bill board on every single step, often containing revolving images, just to increase – as if there wasn't already enough - the number of pictures being propelled across the public's vision.

That's all as may be, but isn't this just a question of taste? One man's meat is another man's poison, surely? Recently, a speaker on the Today Programme on Radio 4 caveated his words before he began, saying 'Well, I fear I'm going to sound like an old man now', to which Edward Stourton responded, 'That's alright, we spend most of our time on this programme doing that.'

Am I being an old lady? Should I take a job with Radio 4 straight away? Well, the point of this talk is to suggest that, whilst we might differ wildly on what we prefer in our personal tastes, there are some principles underlying what makes for beauty in our world, which perhaps are more constant than we think; there are some reasons why we need it - to flourish as human beings, and we are currently ignoring it.

So unfashionable is beauty, it is even unfashionable to say that beauty has become unfashionable. To say that sounds riskily and dangerously like one is claiming to have objective views about the subject, and that one is claiming that it is not all a matter of personal taste. It was not always like this. Ancient philosophers spent copious amounts of time discussing the objective nature of beauty. They presumed that beauty was not just reducible to individual preferences. For these thinkers, it was a matter of course that beauty must have some objective criteria and they spent large amounts of time discussing what those criteria might be. It was not all a case of 'whatever works best for you'. Some things were recognised as more beautiful because of something intrinsic to their very nature, not because of what a particular individual thought of them. That is not to say that these philosophers agreed on the objective criteria of beauty. Nevertheless, they were, at least, operating in a world where it was assumed that the criteria of beauty could be debated. In our world, our relativist approach has silenced that debate. Particularly, a relativism that says that it is more adult and sophisticated not to espouse any absolute views. Relativism, therefore, we could say, is one enemy of beauty.

But beauty has, also, been swamped by other aspects of 21<sup>st</sup> century life. Aspects which we have prized highly, but, perhaps, to our long term detriment. Convenience, speed, immediacy, cheapness, quantity over quality are all highly prized. The technological revolution has speeded up our world beyond all recognition, transforming it into an 'instant world'. 'If it's not instant, is it worth it?' is our mantra. The speed with which we can travel causes us to think of distances as an annoying barrier to omnipresence; a barrier which has almost been eliminated; omnipresence which has almost been rendered obtainable. Yet, we neglect the role of space in enabling us to flourish. I don't have to make my point at length for

those of you who travelled on the underground this morning. I returned from Norway this Summer, from a land where there is so much space, to be forcibly reminded of the effect of an absence of space in London on the mood of people and the atmosphere of the public. Paris, traditionally a city much associated with beauty, albeit a city, has a much greater consciousness of the importance of space and proportion, of boulevards opening up so that the eye can suddenly glimpse a long avenue lined with trees as far as the eye can see; so that monuments like the Arc de Triomphe are given a beautiful and fitting setting. Space is the first of the long list of things that we have underestimated.

The coverage of the switching on of the Hadron Collider in Cern struck me profoundly. The collider has taken, I gather, 15 years to construct. One overseer of the project spoke to the BBC from retirement, having taken retirement last year, such was the length of time that had elapsed during the Hadron project. Many scientists have devoted the majority of their working lives and careers to this project. The time horizon was striking in its unusualness. It made me realise how infrequently we allow such a time span to the projects we carry out. Lorenzo Ghiberti spent 21 years sculpting the North doors to the Baptistery of the Duomo in Florence, followed by another 28 years on the East doors. He died three years later at the age of 77. The doors were quite literally his life work. We would never allow an artist working on a public building such a period of time today. Yet, the doors are admired daily by countless visitors and locals alike. Michael Angelo described these gates as the gates of paradise, and he was not exaggerating, for they are exquisite. Time is the next of our list of things that have been underestimated.

In the long course of making the Duomo doors, over his entire life time, Lorenzo Ghiberti's workshop became an important training ground for many young artists, as they learnt from him whilst he crafted the doors. Ghiberti re-invented wax casting of bronze as used by the ancient Romans; a skill which had been largely lost. This made his workshop a significant place of training. Beauty takes skill. It takes training to develop skill. Skill is by no means immediate. Skill might require prolonged apprenticeship and experience in the field. We have the capacity for more skill than we realise. I was watching the choir of the Round Church, in the Temple recently, marvelling at the very young boys who had learnt to read complex music, follow skilled conducting and sing highly developed harmonies. In our recent past, we have not always promoted skill. It has, at least, on some occasions, been tarred with the brush of elitism, and squashed accordingly. What is important, it is said, is equal access. Well, yes, but it all depends what is meant by that. The slogan 'equal access' should never be used as a blanket for smothering the fact that some have taken the time to become more trained, more skilled or more knowledgeable in a certain area than others. They may, therefore, have a more noteworthy contribution to make. The age of blogs is upon us and skill in writing has been replaced by everyone having a say, no matter how little time, thought or training they put into what they write. Reality television replaces skilled theatre and drama. Man made materials are used with gay abandon but, judging, at least, by the

way in which they fail to age gracefully in our buildings, they lack some of the innate skill which appears to infuse the created world of natural materials. Skill is the third of the underestimated aspect of beauty.

The ancient philosophers thought of beauty in mathematical terms. It concerned proportion, measure, symmetry, harmony, in other words, the interrelationship of one part with many other parts to make a beautiful whole. Is it any wonder that beauty is on the decline in a world that prizes individualism supremely? In a world that has fragmented into isolationism? In a world that no longer thinks in terms of the importance of interrelationship. Relationship is a fourth aspect which is intrinsically linked into ideas of beauty. And relationship, also, takes time and skill.

Stephen Hawking, when interviewed about the Hadron Collider, stated frankly that he was not aware of any spin off from the Collider of practical use to the world at large. One might emerge, but that wasn't guaranteed. And no such spin off was envisaged currently. The scientists involved were pursuing the project for its own sake and no other. They were in pursuit of ideas, because of intellectual curiosity and a desire to explore the universe. Again, I was struck by the boldness with which Hawking could declare this. His frank statement is at odds with the usual approach in our world. We want to know immediately what the purpose and function of anything we do will be. Interestingly – and as an aside – an evolutionary mind set – and I'm not here commenting on the correctness of evolution – is one which seeks to explain all human traits in terms of the functions they serve; the means by which they will advance the species and enable the fittest to survive. Extreme functionality cuts corners on skill, and pressures time and space. Relationship does not thrive under a functional approach, and nor does beauty. As a matter of practice, if you have lived, as I have, all of your life assessing things on the basis of their functionality and the advancement which they will or will not serve, it's extremely hard to retrain. Waste is the word that springs to mind. Wasted time, wasted space. Yet, so much of beauty looks like lavish waste. And we are enriched by it.

I can listen to classical concert recordings on my iPod, playing away in the background, but is that any substitute for going to a live concert and seeing, first hand, the skill with which countless beautifully crafted instruments play together, lavishing them with all my attention, admiring the beauty of sound and sight in an undivided manner. It takes longer. It means I can't do any other things simultaneously. It feels non-functional. But, it is not just the production of beauty that takes time and requires a non-functional attitude. It is, also, the appreciation of beauty that requires such time and absence of functionality.

We need to regain an open desire both to create beauty and to appreciate it. We have been sold the lie that it is more adult and sophisticated not to do so. 'Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there

is anything worthy of praise, think of these things.' So said Paul in his letter to the church at Philippi. I am often struck by how unfashionable his words now are. And yet, how necessary they are for our human flourishing. To live well in this world, we need space, time, stillness, rest, in effect, beauty. Beauty requires skill, training, time, space, harmony, proportion, and interrelationship. It is not immediate, speedy, cheap, functional or even convenient. It is deeply unfashionable and we need its return.