

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

By John Griffin

Foreword by Satish Kumar

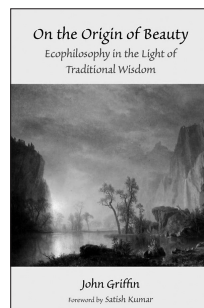
World Wisdom, Bloomington, 2011

Reviewed by M. Ali Lakhani

This book addresses “the environmental crisis” by delving into the metaphysical dimension that frames the issues of the environmental movement. At its core, it examines what we mean by beauty and its implications for our “right relationship” with nature.

The author, John Griffin, became concerned about the plight of the environment when, as a youth, he witnessed the destruction of a wilderness area known as Lake Pedder, in his native Tasmania. His concern influenced his academic pursuits in the field of Environmental Studies, which included a doctorate in Environmental Philosophy. This book, which focuses on ecophilosophy rather than environmental philosophy (the focus of the former is less anthropocentric, and more on the beauty of nature), is an adaptation of his dissertation, which won the Dean’s Prize for 2007.

Writing about his visit to Lake Pedder in 1972, prior to its destruction by flooding to facilitate a hydro-electric power generation “development”, Griffin describes the experience of the indelible beauty and “unfathomable grace” of nature, and draws from it a fundamental lesson: that there is no substitute for the *direct* experience of beauty. He notes



that the lack of this firsthand experience on the part of those who decided Lake Pedder's fate may have contributed to its destruction "for virtually none of the people responsible for the fate of the lake went to see it". The point is that by isolating ourselves from nature, we insulate ourselves from its beauty. By "objectifying" nature, rather than contemplatively appreciating its beauty, we cease to experience it as a living presence. When this sense of beauty is lost, it is easier to destroy it.

Griffin emphasizes the importance of the qualitative aesthetic experience of beauty over the attempts to reductively analyze the phenomenon of beauty—or what Aldo Leopold has termed "the physics of beauty":

...using reasoned analysis to isolate aspects of the phenomenological experience of beauty may give us much that is of interest, but it does not give us the experience. If we find beauty disappearing under such analyses, we may justly suspect the reasoning process itself to be in conflict with the aesthetic experience. ... We must look, as it were, through the elements of experience to what the experience indicates about perception itself. The ability to read the "language" of perception is made possible because beauty is the subject of the main text. In the contemplation of beauty, and not in its objectification, lies the means of refocusing our vision.

The aesthetic experience is not reducible to a concept. "When beauty has been contained in the brain, as it were, it is more likely that philosophy will be satisfied with conceptualizing it, determining the criteria by which beauty is to be assessed rather than seeking the origin of beauty elsewhere". A defect in some of the eco-sciences is that they adopt the scientific assumption that nature is ultimately reducible to its analytic criteria, but, as Griffin notes, "science has failed to measure beauty", and so its origins must be sought not in its measurable aspects but in transcendent experience. An enquiry into the origin of beauty is therefore a search for the deepest roots of perception. It is this search that leads Griffin to the *sophia perennis*, to its vision of beauty as *participative perception*.

In successive chapters of his book, Griffin surveys ecophilosophy in the light of tradition, tracing the descent of human consciousness through the influence of scientific reductionism into the "reign of quantity", and outlining the possibilities of its ascent to the primacy of the Spirit through a recovery of a sense of the sacred that is essential to the aesthetic experience.

One of the profound challenges facing any worldview such as that of scientific reductionism that seeks to explain the world as an object is

that it must necessarily exclude the subject from its examination—unless the subject itself is objectified so as to equate ontological consciousness with the organism that is the brain or with the measurable mind. Such an approach is untenable and disregards the poetic wisdom that “The Brain is just the weight of God” (Emily Dickinson).

Griffin notes that consciousness cannot be objectified or studied from the “outside”—because it is fundamentally experiential: “The knowledge of what consciousness is comes through the experience that consciousness provides. ...Consciousness cannot be studied as object. To *study* consciousness is not to know consciousness at all. ... Far from the scientific paradigm being able to define consciousness, the scientific paradigm is a reflection of a particular form of consciousness.”

He notes that “beauty cannot be tied to the realm of the measurable, but belongs to a realm that transcends quantification.” The reductive mindset results in the atomization of the world, in the Cartesian schism between subject and object, thereby deviating from the traditional view that “the self and the world are in reality part of the same essence.” Griffin traces the contours of the intellectual history of this descent of consciousness, from the materialistic philosophical and epistemological origins of modernism to its reductive methodologies that have resulted in the crisis of modern science. He quotes Philip Sherrard:

Having restricted the scope of scientific investigation to the rationally observable and purely quantitative aspects of what is changing and impermanent, and having adopted more or less exclusively a view of causality that takes into account merely efficient causes and ignores formal or spiritual causes, scientists are literally condemned to trying to explain things in terms of those meager interpretive possibilities which are all they can now envisage.

The corollary, as Griffin comments, is that “science is not in a position to confront an underlying qualitative essence simply because such a quality has been excluded from the world by the very methodology that science uses to study the world.” By treating the world and nature as a mechanism—as quanta which can be scientifically analyzed and manipulated—, science has divorced itself from its essentially qualitative nature. The result is the “dispelling of inwardness” (as Marilynne Robinson has observed in her book, *Absence of Mind*) and (as traditionalist writers such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Sherrard have noted) a radical rupture between man and nature.

Griffin observes that this rupture between the outer and inner worlds is most evident in the field of quantum physics where scientists are driven by paradoxes in quantum reality to postulate explanations of reality commonly found in metaphysics—such as David Bohm’s “implicate order”, a reality that is “an undivided whole without boundaries in time or space”.

As Sherrard states, “we can obtain no genuine knowledge of the physical world unless we first attain a knowledge of spiritual or metaphysical realities”. Traditional metaphysics teaches that man possesses an inner nature that is mirrored in the “signs” of the natural world. To comprehend this correspondence requires a contemplative approach in which reality is apprehended symbolically and participatively, in its “vertical dimension”, as sacred.

It is no coincidence that human beings have experienced a decline in intellectual vision and spiritual imagination in the wake of the ascent of materialistic science. Kathleen Raine has observed, “Of Plato’s three verities, the Good, the True and the Beautiful, none can be understood in terms of the materialist values of modern Western civilization, and beauty least of all.”

Griffin reminds his reader that “From a metaphysical standpoint, the world is sacred because it participates in the nature of God.” Any enquiry into the nature of things requires a profound awareness of consciousness, which cannot withdraw into the shell of rationality or egoic consciousness but must participatively emerge into the qualitative experience of nature itself—its “beauty”. The experience of beauty is therefore of the sacredness of things, of the qualitative appreciation that “everything that lives is holy” (William Blake).

Griffin writes,

The *perception* of beauty is like a secret revealed—it is both evidence for an essential reality and for the unfolding of consciousness. When the beauty that dwells at the heart of nature is seen to be the same beauty in our inmost heart, beauty is revealed as a winged messenger moving between two worlds, unveiling as it goes. It becomes both the best of guides and the very means by which we travel.

Griffin ends on a note of urgency:

The tragedy of the world today is not just that there are ever fewer opportunities to experience the transforming quality of nature, but progressively less inclination. The beauty of this world is fast disappearing and we cannot expect ever to create an equivalent.

Indeed, the consciousness that is heedless of its destruction has had beauty drained from it, and to be unable to register beauty is to be unable to produce it either. While the power of nature's inner beauty would once have been all that was necessary to instill a love for the world, it can no longer be relied upon. Now that the discursive, rational mode of consciousness has become pre-eminent, we are as sleepwalkers blundering towards our doom, mindlessly wielding the firebrand that must seal it.

While this may be the tragedy of the world today, it is essential to remind ourselves when reading this important contribution on the application of the traditional doctrine of beauty in the modern world, that the well-springs of beauty lie within ourselves—and that though the times may offer us apparently fewer opportunities to experience beauty within the natural world, the theophany is ever-renewing. In the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins, “There lives the dearest freshness deep down things”.