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Ryan West

Adam C. Pelser

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# PERCEIVING GOD THROUGH NATURAL BEAUTY

Ryan West and Adam C. Pelsler

In *Perceiving God*, William Alston briefly suggests the possibility of perceiving God indirectly through the perception of another object. Following recent work by C. Stephen Evans, we argue that Thomas Reid's notion of "natural signs" helpfully illuminates how people can perceive God indirectly through natural beauty. First, we explain how some natural signs enable what Alston labels "indirect perception." Second, we explore how certain emotions make it possible to see both beauty and the excellence of the minds behind beauty. Finally, we explain how aesthetic emotions can involve indirect perception of God via the natural sign of natural beauty.

To say that there is in reality no beauty in those objects in which all men perceive beauty, is to attribute to man fallacious senses. But we have no ground to think so disrespectfully of the Author of our being; the faculties he hath given us are not fallacious; nor is that beauty, which he hath so liberally diffused over all the works of his hands, a mere fancy in us, but a real excellence in his works, which express the perfection of their Divine Author.

—Thomas Reid<sup>1</sup>

In *Perceiving God*, William Alston argues that mystical experiences can involve direct (i.e., unmediated) perception of God, and can thereby justify certain theistic beliefs. Alston explicitly limits his discussion to cases of direct perception of God, but suggests that he doesn't see any reason to object in principle to the possibility of perceiving God indirectly—that is, through the perception of some other object, such as a beautiful scene in nature. He writes, "If God can appear to me as loving or powerful or glorious when I am not sensorily aware of a field of oats or the words of the Bible, why shouldn't He also appear to me as loving or powerful or glorious when that comes *through* my sense perception of the field of oats

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, ed. Derek R. Brookes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), VIII iv, 595. When citing this text (hereafter, *Intellectual Powers*) we use capitalized Roman numerals to denote essays and lower case Roman numerals to denote chapters; all page numbers refer to the Edinburgh edition.



or whatever?"<sup>2</sup> Our focus in this paper is the possibility of such indirect perception of God through perception of the beauty of nature.

Following recent work by C. Stephen Evans, we take it that Thomas Reid's notion of "natural signs" can help explain how God might be perceived indirectly through natural beauty.<sup>3</sup> Evans argues that certain widely accessible features of the world serve as "pointers" to God, pointers which can ground knowledge of God, but which are resistible to varying degrees.<sup>4</sup> Evans's work focuses on the natural signs associated with three families of theistic arguments—cosmological, teleological, and moral arguments—although he acknowledges that other natural signs might point to God as well.<sup>5</sup> In this paper, we develop the idea that natural beauty (i.e., the beauty of nature) can serve as a natural sign of God, thereby enabling indirect perception of God. First, we give an account of natural signs, drawing on Reid and Evans, and explain how natural signs can enable the kind of perception Alston labels "indirect." Second, we explore the important role of emotions in aesthetic perception by both examining how particular emotions can enable one to see things in beautiful objects (and in the minds behind those objects), and considering what such emotional perception reveals about the relationship between character and aesthetic taste. Third, we draw on the previous discussions to show how beauty can serve as widely accessible, though easily resisted, perceptual evidence—a natural sign—of God's existence and attributes.

### 1. Natural Signs and Indirect Perception

In order to argue that beauty can serve as a natural sign of God, we must clarify what we mean by a natural sign. We begin with Reid's account, and then explain how Evans adapts Reid's concept.

Most generally and succinctly, signs are pointers. In Reid's language, signs "suggest" the things they signify in the sense that they typically produce in the subject a conception of and, in some cases, a belief in or about the thing signified. There are two broad categories of signs: artificial and natural. Artificial signs are rooted in convention. Natural languages constitute the paradigm examples. When someone tells you a story about a dog, the word "dog" automatically triggers your conception *dog*. As evidenced by the variety of linguistic constructs that signify dogs, the English word "dog" does not elicit our *dog* conception by virtue of human nature, but via linguistic convention. By contrast, natural signs are rooted in our nature—or as Reid would put it, "our constitution."

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<sup>2</sup>William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 28; italics original.

<sup>3</sup>C. Stephen Evans, *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God: A New Look at Theistic Arguments* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 12–17.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 38, 149–150.

Natural signs feature most centrally in Reid's theory of perception.<sup>6</sup> In that context, he claims that sensations are the natural signs by which the objects of perception are perceived. As Reid explains, "Every different perception is conjoined with a sensation that is proper to it. The one is the sign, the other the thing signified."<sup>7</sup> Reid defines perception thus: "First, Some conception or notion of the object perceived. Secondly, A strong and irresistible conviction and belief of its present existence. And, thirdly, That this conviction and belief are immediate, and not the effect of reasoning."<sup>8</sup> So, when a person presses her hand against a hard object, the sensations in her hand trigger a concept of hardness and a belief in the existence of the hard object she's touching in an automatic (non-inferential) way. This is due not to convention, but to the fact that humans are hard-wired to form and employ a concept of hardness and to believe in the existence of a hard object immediately upon having the associated physical sensation. We agree with Reid that sensations function as natural signs insofar as they naturally and immediately give rise to perceptions of physical objects, but we disagree that perception essentially involves belief (i.e., seeing is not believing).<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, in what follows we will continue to speak of sensations (and other natural signs) giving rise to "conceptions and beliefs" since we think the perceptions which sensations directly occasion typically give rise to beliefs naturally and non-inferentially.

Sensations, then, are paradigmatic natural signs. They are *signs* inasmuch as they tend to give rise to conceptions of and beliefs about the reality of the objects of perception. They are *natural* inasmuch as they are grounded in human nature, not convention. Still, sensations are not the only kind of natural sign Reid recognizes. Perceived objects also can function as natural signs of other objects. For instance, this is how Reid grounds knowledge of other minds. He writes, "Other minds we perceive only through the medium of material objects, on which their signatures are impressed. It is through this medium that we perceive life, activity, wisdom, and every moral and intellectual quality in other beings."<sup>10</sup> By perceiving the facial, vocal, and bodily features of other humans, along

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<sup>6</sup>We can give only a sparse account of Reid's theory of perception. For primary texts, see Thomas Reid, *Intellectual Powers*, and *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (hereafter, *Inquiry*), ed. Derek R. Brookes (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997). For detailed analyses, see James Van Cleve, "Reid's Theory of Perception," in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid*, ed. Terence Cuneo and Rene Van Woudenberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 101–133; and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 96–162.

<sup>7</sup>Reid, *Intellectual Powers* II xvi, 199. For discussion of the relationship between perception and sensation in Reid, see Todd Buras, "The Function of Sensations in Reid," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 47:3 (2009), 339.

<sup>8</sup>Reid, *Intellectual Powers* II v, 96; italics original.

<sup>9</sup>See Adam C. Pelsler, "Belief in Reid's Theory of Perception," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 27: 4 (2010), 359–378.

<sup>10</sup>Reid, *Intellectual Powers* VIII iv, 602–603.

with the physical effects of their actions on the world, we indirectly perceive that those humans are conscious beings. In this way, the physical features of humans function as natural signs of consciousness.

Alston's discussion of indirect perception is instructive here. According to Alston, when we see a person's reflection in a mirror or their image on television, we perceive the person in the sense that the "person can be identified with an item in [our] visual field."<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, our perception is indirect since we see the person *through* the mirror or television. For Reid, sensations are natural signs that (typically) give rise to what Alston calls "direct" perception, since they occasion perceptions without any mediating perceptual objects (sensations themselves are not, typically, objects of perception). By contrast, when one perceptual object serves as a natural sign of another perceptual object, we have indirect perception.<sup>12</sup> Of course, as both Reid and Alston intimate concerning the perception of other minds—human minds for Reid, divine for Alston—indirect perception is possible even if the second (indirect) perceptual object is non-physical and, hence, perceptible only in a broad sense.<sup>13</sup> This will be important for our discussion of beauty as a natural sign of God, since we think beauty enables indirect perception of God, even though God is immaterial.

Finally, it is important to note that natural signs are fallible.<sup>14</sup> Sometimes the sensations or perceptions that serve as natural signs for us are misleading in the sense that we mistakenly take them to signify that which they don't signify. In other words, natural signs sometimes signify things for us that they would not if our perceptual faculty were functioning properly. Although Reid took natural signs to occasion perception (i.e., conception and belief) in an immediate, non-inferential, and largely irresistible way, he nevertheless believed that our perceptual faculty can

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<sup>11</sup>Alston, *Perceiving God*, 21.

<sup>12</sup>Alston notes a further distinction between indirect perception and what he calls "indirect perceptual recognition." As an example of the latter he cites "the case in which I take something as a sign or indication of X *but do not see X itself* (X does not appear anywhere in my visual field), as when I take a vapor trail across the sky as an indication that a jet plane has flown by" (Alston, *Perceiving God*, 21; italics added). It is not entirely clear what Alston means by "taking" one object as a sign of another without actually seeing the second object in or through the first. The language of "taking" might suggest an inferential process, but his plane example seems to rely on the distinction between simple seeing (or seeing as) and seeing that (i.e., when one sees the vapor trail, one does not strictly see the plane itself or see it as anything, but one can *see that* a plane has just flown by). On either reading, since indirect perceptual recognition seems to be even less direct and presentationally demanding than indirect perception, we suspect that if indirect perception of God is possible, so too is indirect perceptual recognition of God. We focus throughout on the more demanding case.

<sup>13</sup>We are not committing ourselves to the view that human minds are immaterial; but Reid thought they were and yet thought we could perceive them. For discussion of Reid's view of the soul, see Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro, *A Brief History of the Soul* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), chapter 4.

<sup>14</sup>See, e.g., Reid's discussions of the "fallacies of the senses" in *Inquiry VI* xxiii, 189, and *Intellectual Powers II* xxii, 241–252.

be improved by careful attention to the natural order of things and to our own psychological/epistemic operations. This is especially so with respect to “acquired perceptions,” which we develop by learning to perceive some feature of an object with one sense that must originally be discovered through another sense (as when we learn to perceive the three-dimensional shape of objects through vision, though the original discovery is tactile). He writes,

The errors we are led into in acquired perception are very rarely hurtful to us in the conduct of life; they are gradually corrected by a more enlarged experience and a more perfect knowledge of the laws of Nature: And the general laws of our constitution, by which we are sometimes led into them, are of the greatest utility.<sup>15</sup>

As Evans puts it, the disposition to form judgments on the basis of natural signs can be “strengthened, modified, or overridden by experience.”<sup>16</sup> We agree with Reid and Evans that while we are justified in trusting natural signs in most cases, we must watch out for deceptive natural signs, such as sticks that appear bent when partially submerged in water, optical illusions (e.g., the famous Müller-Lyer illusion), and objects we have learned to misperceive through faulty training.

Having sketched what Reidian natural signs are, we can now see how Evans adapts Reid’s concept for his notion of “theistic natural signs.” (Hereafter, we use the terms “theistic natural signs” and “natural signs of God” interchangeably.) The first thing to note is that Evans retains the central concept of a natural sign as “something that brings an object to our awareness and also produces a belief in the reality of that object.”<sup>17</sup> As such, theistic natural signs not only give rise to beliefs about God (beliefs which may be either true or false), but also make it possible to have *de re* awareness of God.<sup>18</sup> Thus, to use Alston’s language, theistic natural signs enable indirect perception of God—they enable us to perceive God through our perception of other objects. Evans suggests further that this twofold function of these signs must have been part of the reason God created the signs if they are going to qualify as bona fide natural signs.<sup>19</sup>

Secondly, as *natural* signs, theistic natural signs must be rooted in human nature. That is, there must be a widespread, built-in propensity among humans to take the signs *as* signs of God.<sup>20</sup> This propensity, though, will be “far from irresistible.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Evans suggests that theistic natural signs

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<sup>15</sup>Reid, *Intellectual Powers* II xxii, 248.

<sup>16</sup>Evans, *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God*, 34.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 35–36.

<sup>20</sup>For an account of how cognitive science suggests humans are “hard-wired” for religion, see *ibid.*, 38–42.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 37.

may be even more subject to modification and easier to resist than Reid seems to allow for most natural signs.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, theistic natural signs may be either mental or physical. One mental example may be the experience of guilt;<sup>23</sup> a physical example may be the complexity of the physical universe.<sup>24</sup>

In sum, then, we follow Evans in thinking of theistic natural signs as mental or physical pointers, grounded in human nature, which suggest the reality of that which they signify. As such, they give rise to both conceptions of and beliefs about the existence and attributes of God, and were created by God (in part) to serve this function.

Evans focuses on those signs he sees as being central to three families of theistic arguments: cosmological, teleological, and moral arguments. He briefly acknowledges that “the beauty or grandeur of a sunset over the ocean or a mountain vista” may serve as a theistic natural sign, but he does not develop this point.<sup>25</sup> We extend Evans’s argument by considering the way in which natural beauty might function as a natural sign of God. One reason for doing so is that Reid himself suggests that beauty functions in this way. Evans claims that he is applying Reid’s natural sign concept to a new area of inquiry and that Reid does not use that concept in his philosophy of religion.<sup>26</sup> This may be true, at least if Evans is thinking of those passages in Reid’s writings that explicitly address philosophy of religion.<sup>27</sup> But Reid does seem to acknowledge the reality of theistic natural signs, for in his treatment of beauty he claims that beauty can suggest the conception of certain divine attributes and belief in God’s existence:

Other minds we perceive only through the medium of material objects, on which their signatures are impressed. . . . The invisible Creator, the Fountain of all perfection, hath stamped upon all his works signatures of his divine wisdom, power, and benignity, which are visible to all men.<sup>28</sup>

We think Reid is correct that beauty can serve as a natural sign—and thus enable indirect perception—of God. In what follows we develop and defend our own neo-Reidian account of beauty as a theistic natural sign. Our account is neo-Reidian in the sense that it is inspired by Reid and draws on his concept of natural signs as well as various features of his analysis of beauty. We are, however, more interested in developing and defending a plausible account than we are in defending a particular interpretation of Reid’s view. So, while we draw on Reid, we will keep exegetical remarks to a minimum.

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 38.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 60.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 38.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 26–27.

<sup>27</sup>On Reid’s philosophy of religion, see Dale Tuggy, “Reid’s Philosophy of Religion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid*, 289–312.

<sup>28</sup>Reid, *Intellectual Powers* VIII iv, 602–603.



## 2. Emotional Perception of Beauty

Our account of beauty as a theistic natural sign begins with our epistemology of aesthetic emotions. We take it that an emotion is a kind of evaluative perception—a seeming state—that involves the presentation of some object or situation to our minds as being valuable or disvaluable in a particular way. We follow Robert Roberts in thinking that each emotion type has a characteristic “defining proposition” that includes evaluative concepts linked to the emotion type.<sup>29</sup> So, for example, in fear, the emotion’s object is presented to us as dangerous or “*fraught with aversive possibility*,”<sup>30</sup> and fear’s defining proposition is something like: “*X presents an aversive possibility of a significant degree of probability; may X or its aversive consequences be avoided*.”<sup>31</sup> In anger, the object appears to be morally culpable for a serious injustice. In compassion, we perceive the object of our compassion as a being of worth whose suffering ought to be remedied. Emotions, like sense perceptions, have conceptual content, and an important part of what it is to experience an emotion is to see—or, to use Roberts’s preferred term, to “construe”—the object of the emotion as possessing the evaluative property that it seems, in our emotional perception, to have.

As Linda Zagzebski has recently noted, we tend to trust our emotions much as we do our sense perceptions by judging (believing) that the world is as it seems in our emotional experiences.<sup>32</sup> She argues that while emotions are not always trustworthy, we sometimes behave rationally by trusting them. In a similar vein, Adam Pelsler argues that emotion is a basic source of epistemic justification; that is, at least some emotion-based beliefs are epistemically justified.<sup>33</sup> Roberts defends a similar thesis and argues that, in addition to providing epistemic justification for evaluative beliefs, emotions enable us to enjoy other epistemic goods, such as experiential acquaintance with value and the appreciation and understanding such acquaintance grounds.<sup>34</sup> We do not have space here to defend this epistemology of emotions or the perceptual account of emotions on which it is based. For in-depth discussion and defense, we refer the reader to the literature cited above. Our aim is simply to explicate and apply the view

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<sup>29</sup>Robert C. Roberts, *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>32</sup>Linda Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), chapter 4; see also Linda Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), chapter 2.

<sup>33</sup>Adam C. Pelsler, “Emotion, Evaluative Perception, and Epistemic Justification,” in *Emotion and Value*, ed. Sabine Roeser and Cain Todd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 107–123; see also Daniel M. Johnson and Adam C. Pelsler, “Foundational Beliefs and Persuading with Humor: Reflections Inspired by Reid and Kierkegaard,” *Faith and Philosophy* 31 (2014), 267–285.

<sup>34</sup>Robert C. Roberts, *Emotions in the Moral Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), chapters 3 and 4.



of emotions outlined here in order to illuminate the way in which beauty can serve as a theistic natural sign.

As evaluative perceptual states, emotions enable us to see or recognize, and thus to understand and appreciate, various kinds of value in the world, including moral, religious,<sup>35</sup> and aesthetic value. This is not to say that our emotions *create* such value (as the sentimentalists suggest), but rather that they enable us to *experience* and, hence, *discover* objective value that exists independently of our emotions. As axiological realists, we think beauty is an objective property, a kind of aesthetic value, which objects have or lack to varying degrees. We agree with Reid that “when a beautiful object is before us, we may distinguish the agreeable emotion it produces in us, from the quality of the object which causes that emotion.”<sup>36</sup> Unlike many of his contemporaries who claimed that “there is no beauty in any object whatsoever; it is only a sensation or feeling in the person that perceives it,”<sup>37</sup> Reid thinks we directly perceive the objective beauty of external objects. He explains,

*First*, When [beautiful things] are perceived, or even imagined, they produce a certain agreeable emotion or feeling in the mind; and *secondly*, This agreeable emotion is accompanied with an opinion or belief of their having some perfection or excellence belonging to them.<sup>38</sup>

Although Reid never explicitly identifies emotions as perceptions, we think the “agreeable emotions” we have in response to beautiful objects function as perceptions of their beauty, with the qualification, discussed above, that we reject Reid’s claim that perception essentially involves belief or judgment. Just as our senses enable us to perceive the physical properties of beautiful objects, such as size, shape, and color, our emotions enable us to perceive the beauty of the objects, an evaluative property that supervenes on the combination of physical properties.

Of course, beauty comes in many varieties, and people are often disposed to recognize certain kinds or instances of beauty more than others. The fact that some people are perceptually attuned to certain cases of beauty which others fail to appreciate is the grain of truth in the somewhat misleading saying that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” Beauty, like other objective excellences, is not in the eye of the beholder in the sense

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<sup>35</sup>See Adam C. Pelser and Robert C. Roberts, “Religious Value and Moral Psychology,” in *Handbook of Value: Perspectives from Economics, Neuroscience, Philosophy, Psychology, and Sociology*, ed. Tobias Brosch and David Sander (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2015), 375–394.

<sup>36</sup>Reid, *Intellectual Powers* VIII i, 573–574.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 574. Some argue that Reid mischaracterizes his contemporaries here. Theodore Gracyk, though, following Peter Kivy, shows that Reid has a “genuine opponent” in view. See Theodore Gracyk, “The Failure of Thomas Reid’s Aesthetics,” *The Monist* 70 (October 1987), 466.

<sup>38</sup>Reid, *Intellectual Powers* VIII iv, 592; italics original.

that it is a response-dependent property,<sup>39</sup> but rather in the sense that some people's "eyes" (i.e., emotional-perceptual faculties) are capable of seeing instances of real beauty to which others are blind. Likewise, some people's sensitivity to beauty has been malformed in such a way that they "see" beauty where there isn't any. We follow Reid in thinking that disagreement over what counts as beautiful does not undermine aesthetic objectivism (more on this below).

Reid identifies three kinds of beauty—novelty, grandeur, and beauty proper—but recognizes that this list may not be exhaustive.<sup>40</sup> We focus on the latter two.<sup>41</sup> In Reid's view, grandeur and beauty proper are differentiated on the basis of the kinds of emotions they arouse in us. Grand objects arouse in us emotions which are "awful, solemn and serious."<sup>42</sup> In the case of the most grand of all objects—God himself—the emotion in question is devotion. With lesser grand objects, emotions similar to devotion are aroused, which elevate the mind and inspire magnanimity. Two such devotion-like emotions are awe and admiration. By contrast with grandeur, Reid thinks that beauty proper arouses emotions of esteem, which we take to be a kind of low-level admiration, and love. As Reid puts it, we may "justly ascribe beauty to those qualities which are the natural objects of love and kind affection."<sup>43</sup> The foremost examples of beauty Reid cites are moral virtues, such as innocence and gentleness.<sup>44</sup> But he also recognizes the beauty of intellectual talents, the beauty expressed in the sound, color, form, and/or motion of inanimate matter, and many other forms of beauty.

If we take esteem to be a kind of low-level admiration, we might, following Reid, identify four emotion types that seem to be natural responses to grandeur and beauty proper: awe, admiration, devotion, and love or affection. In keeping with the perceptual account of emotions sketched above, we can fill out our account of aesthetic perception a bit by identifying the characteristic conceptual content (in Roberts's terminology, the "defining proposition") of each of these emotional perceptions of beauty. As we will see, these emotions are very closely related and constitute a family of emotions concerned with excellence or greatness.

Awe is a perception of some comparative greatness or excellence exemplified in the object of the emotion. Roberts suggests the following defining

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<sup>39</sup>For discussion of response-dependent properties, see John McDowell, "Value and Secondary Qualities," in *Foundations of Ethics*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau and Terence Cuneo (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 137–144; David Wiggins, "A Sensible Subjectivism," also in *Foundations of Ethics*, 145–156; and Shafer-Landau and Cuneo's "Introduction" to these articles in the same volume, 132–136.

<sup>40</sup>Reid, *Intellectual Powers* VIII ii, 579.

<sup>41</sup>We ignore novelty because it does not figure in our discussion below. For Reid's view of novelty, see *Intellectual Powers* VIII ii, 578–581.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid. VIII iii, 582.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid. VIII iv, 601.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid. Other moral virtues may be grand, such as magnanimity and fortitude.

proposition for at least one paradigmatic kind of awe: "*Greatness of kind Y is important and X exhibits a surpassing greatness of kind Y.*"<sup>45</sup> Beautiful grandeur is just one of the kinds of greatness that inspires awe. Others include vastness, intricacy, power, sublimity, and great human achievement.<sup>46</sup> Awe is not always a self-reflexive emotion, but sometimes in our awe we see the greatness or excellence of the object as being beyond our ability to comprehend or appreciate fully. When we perceive an object in this self-reflexive way, especially when that perception gives rise to a desire to understand the object and its greatness more completely or know it more intimately, the emotion is a special form of awe which we call wonder.<sup>47</sup> As Roberts explains, in order to experience awe or wonder, a person must exhibit a "readiness to perceive the value of greatness." It is this readiness that differentiates "people who look at the Winchester Cathedral and say 'So what? Another big building. Let's get lunch,' from people who gape at it in awe of the human achievement it represents."<sup>48</sup> Thus, the emotional difference makes an epistemic difference: the wonder-free folks have failed to appreciate the value of the Cathedral; the wonder-full have tasted and seen its awesomeness, via their emotion of awe/wonder.

Admiration is similar to awe in being a perception of some greatness or excellence. Reid, though, thinks admiration is conceptually linked to grandeur, for he claims that grandeur in an object amounts to "nothing else but such a degree of excellence, in one kind or another, as merits our admiration."<sup>49</sup> Yet for Reid it is not just the *degree* of excellence that matters, but also the *kind*. On his view, grandeur is essentially rooted in mind. If the universe were merely "a fortuitous jumble of atoms," Reid thinks it would lack grandeur.<sup>50</sup> The reason is that he thinks the grandeur of physical things is rooted in the grandeur of the mind behind them. As he puts it, "those who look for grandeur in mere matter, seek the living among the dead."<sup>51</sup> Reid may go too far in claiming that *all* grandeur is mind rooted.<sup>52</sup> But even if our admiration of grand objects sometimes lacks reference to any mind, a "mind behind the grandeur" can be, and often is, an aspect of the grammar of admiration. That is, in our admiration we often see beyond the grandeur of the objects themselves to the mind whose excellence is revealed or manifested in the grand object: "Wow! What kind of

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<sup>45</sup>Roberts, *Emotions*, 270.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>Cf. Paul Griffiths's discussion of wonder in *Intellectual Appetite: A Theological Grammar* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 126–127.

<sup>48</sup>Roberts, *Emotions*, 269.

<sup>49</sup>Reid, *Intellectual Powers* VIII iii, 582.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 586.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 591.

<sup>52</sup>Given the role Reid gives to ordinary language in making his case for the objectivity of beauty (see below), one might expect that he would not think *all* beauty is rooted in mind. See Roger D. Gallie, *Thomas Reid: Ethics, Aesthetics and the Anatomy of the Self* (Boston, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998), 172.

mind came up with *that?!'*" As such, admiration of the grandeur of objects often amounts to indirect perception of the excellence of the mind from which the grandeur originates. The defining proposition for admiration would be something like: "*Excellence of X kind is important, and Z has excellence of X kind, as evidenced in quality Y; it is fine for Z to have excellence X.*"<sup>53</sup> Reidian admiration includes the "mind behind" in the conceptual content of "X"—that is, X is conceived *as* a mind-rooted excellence. We think Reidian admiration is but one form admiration can take.

If this is so, then it would make sense for someone to admire, say, the Taj Mahal, without any reference to its creator. But it would be strange to feel *devotion* to the Taj Mahal itself. We think this is because devotion differs from admiration in being directly focused on the moral and/or spiritual excellence of its object. More precisely, devotion is a perception of something (typically someone) as being so surpassingly excellent as to merit honor, praise, and loyal obedience. We think this is akin to the emotion Roberts identifies as "reverence," which he analyzes in terms of the following defining proposition: "*Moral or spiritual excellence is of great importance and X possesses such excellence in a degree and quality far beyond any attributable to beings like me; let X be praised and honored.*"<sup>54</sup> In this light, devotion's grammar differs from admiration's in at least two ways: (1) the excellence perceived in devotion is narrower (admiration presents its object as excellent in some way; devotion, as excellent *in a moral or spiritual way*); and, since moral and spiritual excellences are *personal* excellences, (2) devotion is even more mind directed than admiration is. So, even if devotion to the Taj Mahal doesn't make much sense "grammatically," perhaps one could feel devotion to the mind behind the Taj Mahal, provided one sees the conception and construction of such a building as a matter of moral or spiritual excellence. (Whether such a view would be *reasonable* is a separate question.)<sup>55</sup>

Love, unlike awe, admiration, and devotion, is perhaps best thought of as an emotion-disposition, rather than an emotion itself. Still, we do experience certain emotions that can be described appropriately as "feelings of love." These are typically positive emotions in which we delight in the beloved and see her as essentially wonderful, precious, or beautiful.<sup>56</sup> Affection is perhaps the best name we have for such emotions. Just as grandeur inspires awe, admiration, and devotion, less comparatively grand (though not necessarily less beautiful) instances of beauty often inspire love/affection, especially when that beauty is manifest in a person.

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<sup>53</sup>This is adapted from Roberts, *Emotions*, 265. The final clause helps distinguish admiration from envy, which includes the perception of some excellence as bad.

<sup>54</sup>Roberts, *Emotions*, 268.

<sup>55</sup>Thus, in our usage, if, say, a Muslim feels devotion to the Qur'an, this is devotion only in a derivative sense: the Qur'an is being seen as an expression of *Allah's* spiritual/moral excellence. If Allah drops out of the construal, the emotion will be something like respect or admiration.

<sup>56</sup>Cf., Roberts, *Emotions*, 288.

Beauty's ability to inspire love is one of the central themes of Plato's *Symposium*. And the close connection between beauty and love is reflected in our everyday language: "lovely" is often a synonym for "beautiful." When our positive emotion is in response to a non-personal beauty that is less than grand, and does not take any personal creator of that beauty as its object, we might simply call the emotion "aesthetic delight."

As we discussed with awe, only the person with a concern for and perceptual sensitivity to the value of the relevant kinds of excellence will experience admiration, devotion, affection, and delight in response to the various kinds of beauty in the world. This concern and sensitivity need not be conscious; in many instances, the relevant emotions may bring to consciousness what was previously latent, revealing the subject's "hidden heart." But one will not experience these emotions without *some* concern and sensitivity. The upshot of this view is that at least some aspects of one's aesthetic taste are directly tied to one's character. While a poor musical ear or a lack of artistic ability are not failures of character, an utter lack of concern for and perceptual sensitivity to the value of the grandeur and beauty in the world can be.<sup>57</sup> Were a wealthy art collector to buy an original of one of Monet's *Water Lilies*, hang it on his bathroom wall, and wipe his hands on the canvas when he couldn't find a towel, it would seem appropriate to blame him not only for mistreating an important historical-cultural artifact, but also for failing to appreciate and respect the beauty of the piece. When a couple of Boy Scout leaders recently took it upon themselves to topple over an ancient rock formation in Utah's Goblin Valley State Park because it was precariously perched and presented a safety hazard to anyone who might walk underneath it, many people were morally outraged by their actions. Although most critics cited the public ownership of the park and the hundreds of millions of years it took to form that particular rock formation as reasons against destroying it, they might also have cited the value of the natural beauty of the park, to which each individual rock formation contributes, as a reason why visitors ought not to tamper with it. Cases like these reveal not only that the intentional destruction and mistreatment of beautiful objects is blameworthy, but also that the failure to perceive and appreciate the beauty of those objects through emotions such as awe, admiration, affection, or delight can reflect a lack of virtue.<sup>58</sup>

### 3. Beauty as a Theistic Natural Sign

Our aim in this final section is to show how beauty can serve as a theistic natural sign. To begin, recall the general features of theistic natural signs,

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<sup>57</sup>Exceptions include aesthetic insensitivities resulting from autism or brain damage.

<sup>58</sup>We think the lack of aesthetic appreciation exhibited in these examples may be a deficiency not only of aesthetic character, but of moral and intellectual character as well. But one could deny this controversial claim and still think these agents are normatively deficient *as persons*. For one take on the distinctions and relationships between personal, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic worth, see Jason Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind: On Intellectual Virtues and Virtue Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), chapters 6–7.

as Evans develops the concept. Such signs are mental or physical pointers which (1) give rise to both conceptions of and beliefs about God, (2) were created by God (in part) in order to serve this function, (3) are grounded in human nature, and (4) are widely accessible, yet easily resistible. We think natural beauty meets this description.

First, natural beauty clearly gives rise both to conceptions of and beliefs about God. Indeed, few features of the world do so more commonly. Reid explains that the grandeur of “the earth, the sea, the planetary system, the universe” are signs of God’s power, wisdom, and goodness.<sup>59</sup> That is, through various aesthetic emotions, people can perceive God in these instances of grandeur in an immediate, non-inferential way. In this way, natural grandeur points beyond itself to God’s grandeur, of which the grandeur of nature is a mere reflection.

The language of “reflection” is importantly suggestive here. Just as we can perceive another person indirectly by seeing her image in a mirror, so too can we perceive God indirectly through the grandeur of the natural world. Given that our aesthetic emotions often involve perception of the excellence of the “mind behind the beauty,” there is a very real sense in which God’s power, wisdom, and goodness can be manifested, expressed, and reflected in the grandeur of his creation. Thus, it is not the case that grandeur serves as evidence of God only when we take it to be such in an act of quick, spontaneous inference. God also can *appear* to us as powerful, wise, or good *through* our perception of the grandeur of nature. When this happens, we perceive God himself, albeit indirectly. Of course, those aesthetic emotions that do not involve perception of a mind behind the beauty cannot function as indirect perceptions of God. Nevertheless, emotional perceptions of natural beauty commonly involve conception of the artistic genius who created the beauty, even if not all do, and these can function as indirect perceptions of God.

It is important to recall here that Reid’s notion that certain features of the world suggest the reality of a mind behind them is not unique to God’s case. As we’ve seen, Reid thinks natural signs enable our recognition of *all* other minds. For instance, it is by way of such sensible signs as tone of voice and facial expressions that we naturally and immediately form the conception and belief that other humans are conscious. For Reid, grandeur can serve a similar function, giving rise to a conception of and belief in the Mind behind the grandeur we see.

The same sorts of considerations apply to some forms of natural beauty proper (i.e., non-grand beauty). For instance, Reid repeatedly notes that certain features of nature are perfectly fitted for the flourishing of humans and other creatures, and argues that this fittedness is a form of beauty that points beyond itself to the wisdom and goodness of the Creator.<sup>60</sup> In his explanation of his own spiritual journey to Christianity, G. K. Chesterton

<sup>59</sup>Reid, *Intellectual Powers* VIII iii, 586–587.

<sup>60</sup>See, e.g., Reid, *Intellectual Powers* VIII iv, 603, 604, 607, 608.



recounts that his experience of the goodness of the created order was also an (indirect) experience of the goodness of God, mediated by an emotion we have not yet discussed: gratitude.

The test of all human happiness is gratitude; and I felt grateful, though I hardly knew to whom. Children are grateful when Santa Claus puts in their stockings gifts of toys or sweets. Could I not be grateful to Santa Claus when he put in my stockings the gift of two miraculous legs? We thank people for birthday presents of cigars and slippers. Can I thank no one for the birthday present of birth?<sup>61</sup>

Chesterton's feelings of gratefulness for his own existence seemed to him to point to the existence of a great Giver of life. This is because the emotion of gratitude, like the other emotions we have been exploring, is more than a mere physiological feeling. To be sure, gratitude does have a characteristically positive feel or affect; but gratitude also presents us with information about the world. Gratitude is a complex perception of a situation as involving at least three things: a good gift, a benevolent giver, and oneself (or someone for whom one cares) as the beneficiary.<sup>62</sup> In other words, gratitude is a way of seeing or experiencing oneself as the recipient of a good gift from a generous benefactor. Even if one has a justified true belief that one has received such a gift, if one does not experience the emotion of gratitude, one has not fully appreciated the goodness of the gift or the giver. For gratitude just is the mental state in which we are impressed with the goodness of our having received this gift from this giver. By extension, when we experience gratitude for a gift only God could give, God's goodness is being impressed on our hearts—we are (indirectly) perceiving God under the aspect *benevolent giver*.<sup>63</sup>

These examples might suggest to the reader that we are equating natural beauty with something like fittedness for life, organized (or irreducible) complexity, or design. Evans and Alvin Plantinga have both recently highlighted the way in which the appearance of design might serve as a kind of non-inferential basis for theistic belief, so it might be wondered whether we are saying anything new.<sup>64</sup> In response to this worry, while we acknowledge that design in nature can be beautiful, we would point out that many of our experiences of beauty are not perceptions of anything like organized complexity or fittedness. Consider, for example, a colorful panorama of autumn leaves, or a field of oats gracefully dancing on the breeze. The beauty we perceive in such scenes is quite distinct from the

<sup>61</sup>G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics/Orthodoxy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000), 213.

<sup>62</sup>Cf. Robert C. Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), chapter 9.

<sup>63</sup>Cf. Robert C. Roberts, "Cosmic Gratitude," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 6:3 (Autumn 2014), 65–83, and Evans, *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God*, 149–150.

<sup>64</sup>See Evans, *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God*, chapter 4, and Plantinga's discussion of "design discourse" in chapter 8 of *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).



organized complexity and fittedness for life we might perceive in human DNA, though surely we can learn to see such design as beautiful, too.

The foregoing discussion is merely suggestive of the many ways beauty may give rise to emotional perceptions of God. Notice that both grandeur and beauty proper can enable indirect perception of God and not merely inferential belief in God. We think that Reid's suggestion about the role of emotions is instructive about how this works exactly, especially when taken together with the perceptual view of emotions sketched above. When we admire the beauty of a mountain vista or the grandeur of the solar system, the proximate object of our admiration is the beautiful feature of nature itself. But when we experience the kind of admiration that points beyond the proximate object to the excellent qualities of the mind behind the object, the ultimate object of our admiration is God himself. In our admiration, we non-inferentially see the wisdom, power, and goodness of the divine Artist as it is expressed and revealed in His creation.<sup>65</sup>

Here we disagree with C. S. Lewis, who rejects the possibility of directly experiencing or knowing God through an experience of nature.<sup>66</sup> Lewis argues that experiences of nature can inform the concepts that we apply to God, but denies that nature can put us in direct experiential contact with God. He suggests that whatever excellence nature exhibits cannot point to God because the glory of nature can be (and has been) misinterpreted as evidence in support of false philosophies and theologies. But this seems true of all evidence for God in the natural world, so it does not seem to be a particular problem for our account of the evidential role of natural beauty. Moreover, we do not think that the possibility of misperception or misinterpretation undermines a natural sign's ability to enable perception of that which it (properly) signifies. Still, Lewis is right to worry about the human tendency to idolize nature. It can be tempting, especially in the absence of theistic background beliefs, to treat natural beauty or grandeur as though it is the proper (ultimate or final) object of our emotions of devotion, but this can amount to a kind of nature worship. Since devotion is properly felt toward a mind, feeling devotion toward nature is to confuse the glory of nature for the glory of its Maker.<sup>67</sup>

In light of the way that beauty and grandeur often reflect the mind responsible for their creation, the perception of natural beauty can immediately and non-inferentially give rise to conceptions of and beliefs about God. But do we have reason to believe that, if God exists and created the world, God created natural beauty and grandeur, at least in part, to serve this function? We think so. First, although the biblical authors

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<sup>65</sup>One implication of this is that aesthetic admiration and moral admiration might not be entirely distinct emotion types.

<sup>66</sup>C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, 1988), 19–22.

<sup>67</sup>Incidentally, devotion's mind-directedness helps explain why the worship of "graven images" is such an insidious form of idolatry. By feeling devotion toward and worshipping the beauty and grandeur of idols of our own creation, we are, in effect, worshipping ourselves as their creators (i.e., the minds behind their beauty).

don't explicitly mention natural beauty and grandeur as modes of God's self-revelation, it is plausible to think that they are among the features of creation referred to generically as natural pointers to God (see, e.g., Psalm 19:1 and Romans 1:20). Furthermore, there is no good reason to deny that God would use beauty, along with every other created excellence, to point people to himself and to manifest his glory. Thus, natural beauty seems to be as good a candidate as any to meet this criterion of theistic natural signs.

Given that natural beauty gives rise to conceptions of and beliefs about God and was plausibly created by God in order to serve this function, we have good reason to think that the non-inferential move from beauty to God is grounded in human nature (contingent though it may be), not mere convention. To see this, we can test the hypothesis by assuming it for the sake of argument. If God exists, and created the beauty of the natural world, and did so, at least in part, in order to make himself known, it would make sense for God to constitute humans in such a way that we would naturally move from the sign of beauty to the God signified by that beauty. And, as Reid affirms in the epigraph above, we have no reason to think this is not the case. Moreover, as Evans argues, contemporary cognitive science appears to support the claim that humans in fact have such a God-recognizing faculty.<sup>68</sup> This, of course, doesn't prove that the faculty is reliable, or that God exists.<sup>69</sup> But the presence of such a faculty gives some confirmation to the thesis that beauty can function as a theistic natural sign, for the world turns out to be the way we would expect it to be if that hypothesis were true.

Of course, this account rests on the highly controversial claim that beauty is objective and, hence, there to be perceived in nature. Recognizing the prevalence of disagreements concerning what counts as beautiful and what beauty consists in, many (most?) people in our culture think beauty is subjective, merely existing in the eye of the beholder in the strong relativistic sense of that phrase. N. T. Wright thus cautions that

Any account of beauty, and especially one which suggests that beauty is a signpost pointing beyond itself, must take account, then, of the two things about it which we have described. On the one hand, we must acknowledge that beauty, whether within the natural order or within human creation, is sometimes so powerful that it evokes our very deepest feelings of awe, wonder, gratitude, and reverence. Almost all humans sense this some of the time at least, even though they disagree wildly about which things evoke which feelings and why. On the other hand, we must acknowledge that these disagreements and puzzles are enough to press some, without an obvious desire to be cynical or destructive, to say that beauty is all in the mind, or the imagination, or the genes.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup>Evans, *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God*, 38–42.

<sup>69</sup>Many atheists think the fact that we seem to be "hard-wired" to believe in God is evidence that such belief is irrational. For this claim, and Evans's response, see *ibid.*

<sup>70</sup>N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 43–44.

We think that our account of beauty and its role as a theistic natural sign can explain both the emotion-evoking power of beauty and the temptation to think of beauty as subjective. We have already discussed the former. As to the latter worry about aesthetic subjectivism, Reid offers a compelling reply. On Reid's view, the idea that beauty is objective is suggested by common sense and ordinary language.<sup>71</sup> When most people claim that a rainbow is beautiful, for instance, they are making a claim about the excellence of the rainbow itself, not merely about their rainbow-directed feelings.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, Reid notes that even aesthetic subjectivists still find themselves using objective language to express themselves.<sup>73</sup> In his view, "no reason can be given why all mankind should express themselves thus, but that they believe what they say."<sup>74</sup>

Reid acknowledges that taste varies widely across people and cultures. This variety, though, does not undercut the claim that beauty is objective. After all, one could apply the argument from disagreement to any category of thought, yet we rightly recognize that there is a standard of truth in other areas.<sup>75</sup> Reid sees no reason to apply the argument from disagreement to aesthetic judgments alone. It may be the case that judgments of taste vary more widely than other judgments, but Reid thinks the greater variety can be accounted for when we consider the force of custom, education, habit, casual associations, etc., as well as differences in constitution.<sup>76</sup> Thus, on Reid's view, varying tastes are not mere differences of opinion or preference; rather, one person may be right and the other wrong.<sup>77</sup> A person who delights in things that are actually beautiful is said to have a more just or perfect taste. By contrast, a person who relishes that which has no real excellence is said to have a depraved taste. As we explained above, a person's aesthetic taste and her character are not entirely distinct. Moreover, we agree with Reid that taste may be improved and that even the person of just taste is too dull to see all the beauty in the world.<sup>78</sup> Thus, we are not stuck with the sense of taste we currently have, but rather, through emotional-perceptual training, can increasingly learn to see beauty more rightly. In this way, our perception of beauty is sometimes an acquired perception. Just as an oncologist can improve in her ability to see cancer in a tissue sample, our ability to see beauty—and, we would add, the God behind beauty—is susceptible to education.

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<sup>71</sup>Reid, *Intellectual Powers* VIII i, 574.

<sup>72</sup>Cf. C. S. Lewis's discussion of the sublime waterfall in his essay "Men Without Chests," in *The Abolition of Man* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2001).

<sup>73</sup>Reid, *Intellectual Powers* VIII i, 577. For a discussion of this point, see Roger Pouivet, "Thomas Reid's Aesthetic Realism," *The Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 3:1 (2005): 35–45.

<sup>74</sup>Reid, *Intellectual Powers* VIII i, 577.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, 576–577.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup>*Ibid.*, 575–576.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.* VIII iv, 595.

Some are unpersuaded by Reid's case for the objectivity of beauty. According to Theodore Gracyk, Reid simply "assumes that some [of our aesthetic judgments] are [true] and offers a criterion for determining which are correct, without answering the skeptic who denies that 'beauty' names any real quality."<sup>79</sup> But such a complaint misses the mark. Reid does respond to the skeptic, though his response is not in the form of an independent "criterion for determining which objects are beautiful,"<sup>80</sup> or even a reasoned argument. On Reid's view, our belief in the objectivity of beauty is a first principle of common sense, a foundationally justified belief. As such, he seeks to persuade his readers of what he thinks they already know by using what elsewhere he calls "ridicule." On the persuasive role of ridicule, Reid states:

We may observe, that opinions which contradict first principles are distinguished from other errors by this; that they are not only false, but absurd: And, to discountenance absurdity, Nature hath given us a particular emotion, to wit, that of ridicule, which seems intended for this very purpose of putting out of countenance what is absurd, either in opinion or practice. This weapon, when properly applied, cuts with as keen an edge as argument. Nature hath furnished us with the first to expose absurdity; as with the last to refute error. Both are well fitted for their several offices, and are equally friendly to truth when properly used.<sup>81</sup>

Consider this example, just one of many in Reid's essay, "On Taste," in which he uses ridicule to make his point:

There is therefore a just and rational taste, and there is a depraved and corrupted taste. For it is too evident, that, by bad education, bad habits, and wrong associations, men may acquire a relish for nastiness, for rudeness, and ill breeding, and for many other deformities. To say that such a taste is not vitiated, is no less absurd than to say, that the sickly girl who delights in eating charcoal and tobacco-pipes, has as just and natural a taste as when she is in perfect health.<sup>82</sup>

Ultimately, such a statement functions like a *reductio ad absurdum* of the subjective view of beauty; that is, it is intended to evoke emotions that help the aesthetic skeptic to see the absurdity of his skepticism. (If Reid were a Robertsian about emotions, he might say *absurdity* is one of the terms in the "defining proposition" of the emotion ridicule evokes.) Such a response may lack the argumentative rigor Gracyk desires, but given Reid's (and our) epistemology, it is a perfectly reasonable response to the skeptic.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>79</sup>Gracyk, "The Failure of Thomas Reid's Aesthetics," 477.

<sup>80</sup>Gracyk demands such a criterion. See *ibid.*, 477–478.

<sup>81</sup>Reid, *Intellectual Powers* VI iv, 462.

<sup>82</sup>Reid, *Intellectual Powers* VIII i, 576.

<sup>83</sup>For an extended treatment of the role of ridicule in persuasion, see Johnson and Pelsler, "Foundational Beliefs."

In sum, then, beauty is objective. The beauty of external objects occasions in the perceiver an agreeable emotion that (typically) gives rise to the judgment that the object has some excellence. This view is embedded in common sense and ordinary language, and is not undercut by the fact that people's tastes differ widely. Such variety can be accounted for in a number of ways, and just goes to show that some people have a better sense of taste than others.

The foregoing discussion reveals how natural beauty meets Evans's final criterion by being both widely accessible and easily resistible. Reid's point about the variety of beauty supports the accessibility of the sign. As we've seen, beauty and grandeur can point to God, and both of these features are found in multifarious forms throughout nature. Thus, people of all cultures and all ages have access to such signs. In a sense, though, not all access is created equal. For, as we've noted, sensitivity to beauty—and to the God behind the beauty—is, in part, a matter of both character and background knowledge. Those with a properly oriented heart, or those who already know something about God, may be able to see more via theistic natural signs than others. As Alvin Plantinga notes,

[H]eighted affections enable us to see more of God's beauty and glory; being able to see more of God's beauty and glory and majesty in turn leads to heightened affection. There are certain things you won't know unless you love, have the right affections; there are certain affections you won't have without perceiving some of God's moral qualities.<sup>84</sup>

As a result, it may be easy for those without the requisite affections, or those who have not seen God elsewhere, to resist the natural sign embedded in natural beauty.<sup>85</sup>

The ease of such resistance is also evident in the popularity of deflationary accounts of beauty. The idea that beauty is simply in the eye of the beholder has a long history and continues in popularity today. With such an idea in one's background beliefs, explaining away the experience of beauty-as-a-theistic-natural-sign may be no difficulty at all.

This final point has some bearing on the question of how often beauty in fact grounds knowledge of God. In making his case that natural signs can ground such knowledge, Evans attempts a rapprochement between so-called Reformed epistemologists and evidentialists. With the Reformed epistemologists, Evans thinks natural signs can function as direct, non-inferential grounds for properly basic belief in God. With the evidentialists, Evans thinks natural signs, when recognized as natural signs, can function as a form of evidence, and may serve as the basis for evidentialist

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<sup>84</sup>Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 303–304.

<sup>85</sup>Even in cases where emotional perception of God requires background knowledge of God, the emotion has epistemic value. If one already knows, say, that God is good, *seeing* Him as good via one's emotions adds both an independent layer of warrant to one's belief, and a level of appreciation that might otherwise be missing.

arguments for God's existence.<sup>86</sup> Reid appears to think of beauty functioning primarily in the former (i.e., non-inferential) sense, and we are inclined to agree that this is the more plausible route by which beauty can ground knowledge of God. At the same time, though, the grandeur of nature may stand behind some versions of the cosmological argument, and the beauty found in the fittedness of nature to human flourishing may stand behind some versions of the teleological argument.<sup>87</sup> But given the rampant subjectivism about beauty in our culture, arguing for God's existence explicitly in terms of objective, mind-rooted beauty may prove rather difficult. Nonetheless, if the evidentialist wants to go that route, she may be wise to follow Reid's lead by seeking to disabuse people of their subjectivism by way of a prudent use of ridicule.<sup>88</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8). In a sense, we have suggested one way in which this claim from the Sermon on the Mount may be true: those with the appropriate concerns and perceptual sensitivities are fitted to respond to the beauty of nature with the proper emotions, and thereby may (indirectly) glimpse the divine Artist. In other words, natural beauty can serve as a natural sign of God. As with other theistic natural signs, the sign embedded in natural beauty is widely accessible, but also easily resisted. Thus, although perceptions of natural beauty may ground knowledge of God, they often fail to do so.<sup>89</sup>

*Baylor University  
United States Air Force Academy*

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<sup>86</sup>Evans, *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God*, 3–4.

<sup>87</sup>Evans labels the natural signs he sees as standing behind these arguments "cosmic wonder" and "beneficial order" respectively, though he does not cash out these signs in terms of beauty.

<sup>88</sup>On this theme, once again, see Johnson and Pelser, "Foundational Beliefs."

<sup>89</sup>We are grateful to Stephen Evans, Robert Roberts, Todd Buras, Robert Kruschwitz, David Lyle Jeffrey, Daniel Johnson, Karl Aho, and the editor and anonymous referees for this journal for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Thanks also to an audience at the 2014 meeting of the Baptist Association of Philosophy Teachers and to the participants in the philosophy of religion reading group at the US Air Force Academy for insightful and challenging discussions of the ideas presented here. The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the US Air Force, the US Department of Defense, or the US government.