

MAKING
SENSE
of the
WORLD

*How the Trinity Helps
to Explain Reality*

VERN S. POYTHRESS



P U B L I S H I N G

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To my wife, Diane

CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	ix
Foreword by John M. Frame	xi
 Part 1: A Summary of Biblical Teaching about the Beauty of God Displayed in the World	
1. Why Is There Beauty in the World?	3
2. Summarizing Aspects of the Bible's Teaching	21
3. Learning the Nature of the World through Genesis 1	31
 Part 2: Ways to Analyze the World	
4. The Word of God	45
5. The Knowledge of God	63
6. The Rule of God	71
7. Divine Manifestation	83
8. The Attributes of God	89
9. Summarizing Approaches to Beauty and Metaphysics	97
 Part 3: On Perspectives	
10. Introducing Perspectives	103
11. Triads of Perspectives: Summary	111
12. A World Structured by Perspectives	117

Part 4: Examples Confirming Multistructured Beauty

13. <i>Lex Christi</i> : A Useful Explanatory Perspective	127
14. Things, Events, and Relations	135
15. Perspectives on Fundamental Physics	141
Conclusion: Beauty, Yielding Multistructured Metaphysics	147
Appendix A: Alternative Philosophical Views of Reality	151
Appendix B: Aristotle, Kant, and Metaphysics	163
Appendix C: Abstractions and Attributes	169
Appendix D: Writings on Reality as Perspectival	175
Glossary	181
Bibliography	191
Index of Scripture	199
Index of Subjects and Names	203

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figures

1.1. Two Levels of Reality	9
1.2. Three Perspectives on a Grape	14
1.3. Themes of God's Lordship	15
2.1. The Trinity	24
2.2. The Triquetra	25
3.1. Unity and Diversity in the Created Order	34
3.2. Ordinary Language and Technical Scientific Classification	36
3.3. God's Rule and Human Rule	39
4.1. God's Speech as Trinitarian	48
4.2. Three Aspects in God's Lordship	52
4.3. Contrast, Variation, and Distribution	55
4.4. Particle, Wave, and Field	56
6.1. Trinitarian Action	73
6.2. Trinitarian Action according to Modes	74
6.3. A Grape as Planned, Crafted, and Worked	74
6.4. Stability, Change, and Relationship	78
6.5. Particle-Wave-Field Applied to an Apple Tree	80
9.1. Three Analogies for the Trinity	98

Tables

3.1. Kinds of Creatures	32
4.1. Speech Reflecting the Trinity	48
4.2. Add a Triad for Aspects of God's Lordship	53
4.3. Add a Triad for Aspects of a Unit	55

Illustrations

4.4. Add a Triad for Particle, Wave, and Field	57
6.1. Add Divine Action	75
6.2. Add Stability, Change, and Relationship	78
13.1. The Ten Commandments and Ten Attributes of God	129
14.1. Add Things, Events, and Relations	138

FOREWORD

Back in the 1970s, a group of us started talking about God by using a somewhat unusual vocabulary. We were students, friends, and eventually colleagues in theological study, many of us at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. It occurred to several of us, about the same time, that the biblical doctrine of the Trinity had some implications that the church had not yet fully recognized.

The doctrine of the Trinity is that God is one being (for it is clear in the Bible that there is only one God), but that He is also three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is not very clear in Scripture what it means to say that one of these is a *person*. But the term does indicate some differentiation within God, so that the three persons, though one God, can sustain different relationships, transactions, and communications with one another, somewhat similar to the relationships that human beings sustain to one another. In that, we see one way in which God purposed to make human beings to be like himself, to be his image.

So the world and the people in it not only are creatures of God, but also reflect God's Trinitarian nature. And this fact illumines not only the nature of people, but the nature of everything else in the world. Our world is a Trinitarian world.

We settled on various kinds of vocabulary to expound this way of looking at God and the world. Perhaps our most distinctive term was *perspective*. In one sense, each member of the Trinity presents a unique perspective on the one God: each divine person is a differentiation in God, thus making it possible for the three persons to sustain different relationships with one another. But since God is really and truly One,

indeed the being who is more One than anything else in the universe, each person is ultimately a way of looking at—a perspective on—the whole of God. That way of speaking is terribly mysterious. As I said, we don't know precisely what a divine person is, or precisely how it differs from the other persons and from the whole divine being. But the word *perspective* seems to capture how we can speak of something that is not the whole, but a *way of seeing* the whole.

There are dangers in speaking this way. One danger is to compromise the oneness of God, so that we see him as a collection of independent parts. Another danger is in compromising the complexity of God, so that we see his persons, his differentiations, as unreal, and God as the abstract “pure being” of Greek philosophy, rather than, as in Scripture, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

At Westminster in the 1970s, I was the instructor of the class in which such vocabulary was introduced. But Vern Poythress, one of the students in the class, who held a PhD in mathematics from Harvard,¹ was by far the most creative of us in applying these ideas to the doctrine of the Trinity, and from there to a wide range of theological, philosophical, and practical issues. I need to stress here that our group was not focused on theoretical questions. We were at seminary to study the Bible together. We were just Christian people who loved God and loved Jesus Christ and who sought to make him known through sharing the gospel of his grace.² Perspectivalism was important, not merely as a solution to philosophical issues such as the relation of the one and the many,³ but as a way of showing who

1. Vern was also a student of Kenneth L. Pike, the famous linguist who developed the tagmemic theory of communication.

2. Our group members were also students of Edmund P. Clowney, who showed us that the whole Bible was the gospel of Christ, and that therefore Christ could be found on every page of Scripture.

3. The students were also students of the famous apologist Cornelius Van Til, who sought to develop more consistently biblical ways of arguing Christian apologetics. One important theme of Van Til was the Trinity, which he often described as the eternal one-and-many. He deeply influenced the formulations that we perspectivalists were developing. Van Til was a philosopher as well as an apologist. But like the perspectivalists, he was primarily interested not in dialogue with philosophers but in preaching the gospel as Scripture gave it to us.

God was, three in one, and how nothing in the world made sense except as a creation of that Trinitarian God. So the Trinity is the foundation of evangelism, of preaching Christ.

The present volume, which summarizes the perspectival approach to gospel, Scripture, and God, is appropriately written by Vern Poythress. I have learned more about the Trinitarian nature of God from Vern than from any other source except Scripture itself. In this book, you will learn much about the Trinity as presented in Scripture, and you will learn the implications of its teaching for many areas of human life. You will learn how the doctrine of the Trinity can be seen everywhere—both in Scripture and in the God-created world. You will also see how the Trinity has been misunderstood, misapplied, and confused by thinkers who have missed, even distorted, the teaching of the Word. So Vern will explore the history of philosophy, to show how misunderstanding and sin can lead to error and worse.

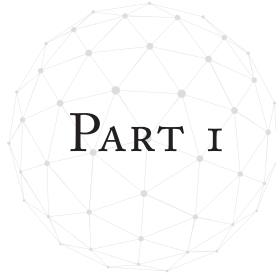
A remarkable thing about Vern's account is that he starts with *beauty*. Beauty has often been banished to the periphery of our Christian thought and experience. But the Bible calls us to worship the Lord in the *beauty* of holiness. And the Trinity is not, as I mentioned, merely a theoretical concept. It overwhelms the heart and soul. You may be better motivated to read this book if you see it as a road to a beauty that you have never before known. Vern teaches that when you see God as Trinity, through many perspectives, you will see a richness of being, of goodness, indeed of glory, that motivates the deepest kind of discipleship. There will be philosophical argument here, but only in the interest of bringing readers to a rich knowledge of God, and of equipping us to communicate this wonderful vision to the whole world.

This book is the definitive formulation of Vern's understandings of various ways in which the Trinitarian God is reflected in all creation and in human thought. Unsurprisingly, this formulation is full of threefold distinctions: particle, wave, and field; stability, change, and relationship; things, events, and relations; divine authority, control, and presence. Vern will contrast the biblical understandings of these triads with the ideas of secular philosophers who try to reduce all perspectives to one

monoperspectival reality, such as Aristotle, Plato, and Kant. He will show how perspectivalism illumines the natural sciences, such as physics. And the book deals with the *ought* as well as the *is*, for perspectivalism also illumines the field of ethics, also central to God's world. So God has given us Ten Commandments to govern all of life.

Perspectivalism, then, illumines every aspect of human life because it illumines every aspect of God's reality. So it is a philosophy of life, but far more than that. It shows us not only how the nuts and bolts of creation fit together, but also how and why we keep going wrong. And it shows us where God's precious forgiveness in Jesus can be found. I commend this book to you as perhaps the most illuminating exposition of the Trinity that you will ever find, and therefore as a vision of God's beauty.

John M. Frame
Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy Emeritus
Reformed Theological Seminary



A SUMMARY OF BIBLICAL
TEACHING ABOUT THE
BEAUTY OF GOD DISPLAYED
IN THE WORLD

1

WHY IS THERE BEAUTY IN THE WORLD?

Why is there beauty in the world? Why is a flower beautiful? Why is a hummingbird beautiful? Why is light beautiful? And what is beauty? People dispute about it. Herman Bavinck associates beauty with “harmony, proportion, unity in diversity, organization, glow, glory, shining, fullness, perfection revealed.”¹ All of them together make something beautiful—strangely attractive and splendid and wonderful.²

Is God beautiful? As we will see, the Bible indicates that beauty traces back to God. God is supremely beautiful. His beauty is reflected in the world he made and sustains. In this book we explore how. We find that in searching for the source for beauty, we encounter ultimate reality, the reality of God himself.

Some theologians, as far back as Augustine, have said that God is beautiful.³ Others have cautioned against ascribing beauty to God, wanting to avoid a confusion between God and things in the world that are

1. Herman Bavinck, “Of Beauty and Aesthetics,” in *Essays on Religion, Science and Society*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 245–60 [256], cited in Robert S. Covolo, “Herman Bavinck’s Theological Aesthetics: A Synchronic and Diachronic Analysis,” *Bavinck Review* 2 (2011): 43–58 [55].

2. See David A. Covington, *A Redemptive Theology of Art: Restoring Godly Aesthetics to Doctrine and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018).

3. Covolo, “Herman Bavinck’s Theological Aesthetics,” 44–45, 50.

beautiful. So which is it? God is distinct from every created thing; in addition, God's character is displayed in the things that he has made (Rom. 1:20). So the short answer is that created things that are beautiful reflect God but are not identical with God. Beauty in created things relates to God by "analogy, not identity."⁴

Beauty in the Tabernacle and the Priests, Reflecting God

Psalm 27:4 describes God as beautiful:

One thing have I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the *beauty* of the LORD
and to inquire in his temple.

According to this psalm, the beauty of the Lord is displayed in "the house of the LORD," "his temple." We know from other parts of the Bible that the temple is a kind of small-scale version of the big dwelling place of God, which is the whole universe (1 Kings 8:27).⁵ The whole universe also displays the beauty of its Maker (Pss. 19:1; 104:1–2).

In the same verse in Psalm 27, the psalmist notes that he *seeks* the presence of God; it is the "one thing" that he asks for:

One thing have I asked of the LORD,
that will I *seek after*:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life. (Ps. 27:4)

4. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 2:254.

5. Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999), 37–38; Vern S. Poythress, *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God's Appearing* (repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2022), 229–30, 167–71.

In seeking communion with God, the psalmist is also seeking the beauty of God. We naturally seek beauty as something attractive. So Psalm 84:1–2 declares:

How *lovely* is your dwelling place,
O LORD of hosts!
My soul *longs*, yes, faints
for the courts of the LORD.

Let us consider the tabernacle of Moses, which was the predecessor for Solomon’s temple. In Exodus 25–27, God instructs Moses about the building of the tabernacle. The tabernacle is supposed to be a tent dwelling with symbolic significance. It symbolizes that God dwells in the midst of his people Israel: “And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may *dwelt* in *their midst*” (Ex. 25:8). The tabernacle displays beauty because it represents the splendor of God, who is the great King of the universe.

This splendor anticipates and foreshadows the greater splendor that belongs to Christ as the climactic revelation of God: the Bible speaks of “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). The preceding context in 2 Corinthians 3 explains the analogy and contrast between the glory of God revealed in Moses’ time and the glory of the new covenant:

For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation [through Moses], the ministry of righteousness [given to Paul in the new covenant] must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory. (2 Cor. 3:9–11)

The Bible mentions the theme of beauty in other verses related to the tabernacle and God’s presence. Exodus 28:2 speaks explicitly about the beauty of the special garments of the high priest Aaron: “And you shall

make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for *glory* and for *beauty*.” Near the end of Exodus 28, similar words describe the garments of Aaron’s sons, who are priests: “For Aaron’s sons you shall make coats and sashes and caps. You shall make them for *glory* and *beauty*” (Ex. 28:40).

Beauty is paired with *glory*. They are overlapping themes. What is glorious is also beautiful. The same word *glory* describes God when he appears in splendor to the people of Israel:

And in the morning you shall see the *glory* of the LORD. (Ex. 16:7)

And behold, the *glory* of the LORD appeared in the cloud. (Ex. 16:10)

The *glory* of the LORD dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. Now the appearance of the *glory* of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. (Ex. 24:16–17)

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the *glory* of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the *glory* of the LORD filled the tabernacle. (Ex. 40:34–35)

The tabernacle itself is special precisely because of the presence of God in his glory:

There I will meet with the people of Israel, and it shall be sanctified by my *glory*. (Ex. 29:43)

In addition, *holiness* goes together with *beauty*. Holiness starts with God, who is supremely holy and supremely glorious. God is “holy, holy, holy” (Isa. 6:3), that is, supremely holy. God appoints the people of Israel as a whole to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6). They are supposed to reflect his holiness. Among the people, God appoints Aaron

and his sons to a special level of holiness, to be priests for the holy nation (28:1). The tabernacle itself is to be God's holy dwelling place in the midst of Israel: it is a "sanctuary," that is, a holy place (25:8). Psalm 29:2 calls on the people to "worship the LORD in the *beauty* of holiness" (KJV). God himself is the source of this holiness. The tabernacle, like the later temple of Solomon, is a place where the worshiper can "gaze upon the *beauty* of the LORD" (Ps. 27:4). Psalm 96:6 recognizes the same truth:

Splendor and majesty are before him;
strength and *beauty* are in his *sanctuary*.

One of the central garments for Aaron is the "ephod," which is made out of the same materials as the tabernacle tent (Ex. 28:6; 26:1). It indicates that Aaron himself is a kind of replica of the tabernacle.⁶ The plate on his forehead proclaims, "Holy to the LORD" (28:36–38). The jewels in Aaron's breastpiece are beautiful (vv. 17–20). The association of jewels with beauty and with the priesthood is evident from Isaiah 61:10, where the bridegroom and the bride adorn themselves for their wedding day:

A bridegroom decks himself like a *priest with a beautiful headdress*,
and . . . a bride adorns herself with her *jewels*.

God appears in jewel-like splendor to John in Revelation 4:3:

And he who sat there had the appearance of *jasper and carnelian*,
and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of
an *emerald*.

Revelation 4:1–11 introduces God as the Creator (v. 11) and Sustainer of all things. He is beautiful himself, with an appearance like jewels. He makes a world with beautiful things in it.

6. Kline, *Images of the Spirit*, 42–47.

And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is *pleasant to the sight* and good for food [in the garden of Eden]. (Gen. 2:9)

The name of the first [river] is the Pishon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Havilah, where there is *gold*. And the *gold* of that land is good; *bdellium* and *onyx* stone are there. (Gen. 2:11–12)

Ezekiel 31 compares Assyria to a beautiful cedar in Lebanon, about which it is said that “no tree in the garden of God was its equal in *beauty*” (v. 8). The verse shows that the garden of Eden was beautiful. The final garden city in Revelation 22:1–5 is also beautiful.

In sum, God is beautiful himself. He created a world reflecting his beauty. The tabernacle and the temple are symbolic reminders that display these truths.

When God created the world, it was “very good” (Gen. 1:31). It has since been marred by human sin (Rom. 8:19–20). But remnants of beauty still exist, reminding us of who made it.

We are naturally attracted to beauty. It has a fascination, and we wish that we could somehow be one with it or enter into it or enjoy it even more. This attraction is a subtle message reminding us of the attraction of God himself, and the satisfaction and joy that we can find only by knowing God and having communion with him (“that I may dwell in the house of the LORD,” Ps. 27:4). One of the most beautiful things about the world is simply that it reflects and displays the character of the God who made it.

God and Creation

We need to take into account the relation between God and the world. The God of the Bible is absolutely sovereign. He created everything outside himself. Thus, there are two levels to reality: God (the Creator) and creation (the things that God created). (See fig. 1.1.)

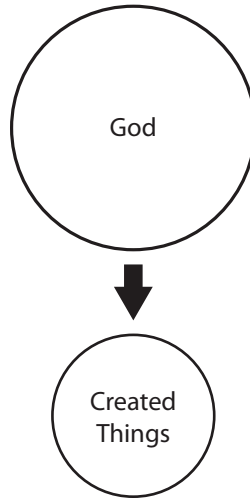


Fig. 1.1. Two Levels of Reality

The two levels are distinct. Creatures are not God, and God is not a creature. God's creation reveals his nature, so that human beings, even in their rebellion, do know God, as Romans 1:19–21 states:

For what can be *known about God is plain* to them [human beings, even the unrighteous], because God has *shown it* to them. For his *invisible attributes*, namely, his *eternal power and divine nature*, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although *they knew God*, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

When people refuse to acknowledge the true God, they look for substitutes, in the form of idols. Romans 1 continues:

Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for *images* resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the *creature* rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. (Rom. 1:22–25)

Beautiful things in the world reflect the beauty of God. But people can worship the beautiful things, *instead of* God. People who are fleeing from God detach beauty from its source in God. The ancient Egyptians considered the sun to be a god (Ra). Some men have a worshipful attitude toward a beautiful woman; some women have a worshipful attitude toward a handsome man.

Beauty, Harmony, and the Trinity

Beauty has a close relation to harmony. In music, the harmony in a chord can be beautiful. A tree or a human face that has a symmetry or harmony between its two sides often seems more beautiful than something with disharmony. But we should not oversimplify. In music, there can be both simple harmonies and complex harmonies. Both can have a beauty of their own. A musical piece may present a sequence in which a *disharmony* resolves into a harmony. God displays his beauty in both. Likewise, in the world that God made, there are simple beauties, such as the beauty of a single star in the night. There are complex beauties, such as the beauty of a landscape or a mountain vista.

Just as beauty has its ultimate source in God, so does harmony. God is in harmony with himself. He is consistent with himself. This harmony is marvelous, wonderful, and mysterious.

There is a related deep truth about God for us to consider. God is Trinitarian: he is one God and three persons. God is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each person is fully God. The Bible teaches this truth, not in one place, but in many verses, when we put them together. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament affirm that there is only one true God (e.g., Deut. 6:4; Isa. 46:9; Mark 12:29; 1 Cor. 8:4, 6). The New

Testament indicates that this God exists as three persons, each of which is distinct from the other two (e.g., John 1:1; 14:16, 23; 15:26).⁷

Each person in the Trinity is fully in *harmony* with the other two persons. Jesus says, “I always do the things that are pleasing to him [the Father]” (John 8:29). The persons of the Trinity love each other, and love is a supreme form of harmony: “The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand” (3:35). The harmony among the persons of the Trinity is the ultimate beauty. The world reflects this beauty on its own level, the level of the creature.

In this book we explore how God’s Trinitarian nature is reflected in various and fascinating ways in the structure and order of his creation. These reflections all display the beauty of God. David A. Covington explores how beauty itself belongs to a triad of perspectives: “beautiful glory,” “true glory,” and “powerful glory,” all related to the broad theme of God’s glory.⁸ This triad he sees as closely related to form (corresponding to beauty), content, and purpose.⁹

Just as the one God eternally exists as three persons, so creation, in all its dimensions, reflects a corresponding unity-in-diversity. Consider, for example, God’s knowledge and our knowledge. God’s knowledge of all things is unified because there is only one God, but there is also diversity in his knowledge—the diversity of the individual *perspectives* of each member of the Trinity (Matt. 11:27). Their perspectives are *distinct* but not separable, since each person is fully God and since the persons indwell one another (coinherence).¹⁰ Our human knowledge is similar but different. Our knowing involves using *multiple* perspectives to properly understand the objects of knowledge, but unlike God’s perspectives, ours are limited, not comprehensive. We know in part; he alone knows fully. Only the sovereign, omniscient God has the *master* perspective.

7. For a fuller exposition, see John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2000); Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), chap. 6.

8. Covington, *Redemptive Theology of Art*, 64.

9. Covington, 63.

10. *Coinherence* is one of several terms designating the fact that the persons of the Trinity dwell in each other (John 14:10–11; 17:21).

Because multiple *structures* are *inherent* in the world, we must use *multiple perspectives* to understand them. Thus, no one human perspective or analysis is ultimate. God has built in this multiplicity. The unity in one perspective is no more ultimate than the diversity expressed in several perspectives. Unity and diversity go together. They are in harmony. They reflect the beauty of God. Each points to the other, and neither is independent of the other. That is true in God. Subordinately, it is true in analyzing the world that God made. We can see beauty in the way in which we know: it is the beauty of harmony in multiple perspectives. This harmony seems all the more beautiful when we understand that it reflects the original beauty of God. Similarly, there is beauty in the world that God made. This beauty is displayed not only in individual objects, such as a single star, but in the way in which God has made the star and everything else with multiple perspectives and multiple aspects built into it.

For example, we can start with any attribute of God, such as his wisdom, and think about how it is displayed in the world. We are using the theme of wisdom as a perspective. We can notice that a single star is wisely made. We can notice that *we ourselves* are wisely made, with the capability of appreciating God's wisdom. We can also use God's power or his kindness or his goodness as a starting point for a perspective on the world. No one of our human perspectives has an exclusive claim to be a *master* perspective, which would give us the one, final, definitive analysis of reality.

We should address one concern right away. Does the idea of perspectives lead to relativism about truth? That is a common understanding of *perspectives* in our day. But it is the opposite of what we are saying. Rightly used, distinct perspectives are in harmony. For example, when we look at the same chair from different physical locations, each location provides a distinct perspective.¹¹ When we are in communion with God, human perspectives do give us access to the truth. The standard for truth is God himself, and his knowledge. Truth is not determined by what one of us would like to be true, but by God. Truth in God is absolute, not relative. Out of his fullness of knowledge, God gives knowledge to human beings.

11. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*, chap. 2.

So human perspectives, when rightly used, do not keep us away from truth but are the various means by which God gives us access to what he knows in his absoluteness. Moreover, multiple perspectives, properly understood, are in harmony, and the truth that we access through multiple perspectives is harmonious. That is beautiful. We experience the beauty of God when we experience the harmony of perspectives. That is the opposite result from relativism, according to which your “truth” may be the opposite of my “truth.” Because there is only one true God, the truths that he knows are in harmony. His truth is beautiful in its harmony.

Many of the multiple perspectives that we use to understand the world reflect the Trinity, the three-in-one harmony in God.¹² As we will see, everywhere we look in creation, we find reflections and signs of the Trinity. It is beautiful!

Analyzing a Grape

Let us illustrate with an example. We can use three perspectives to analyze something as common as a grape. At this point, we will use three perspectives first delineated by Kenneth L. Pike, using labels analogous to physics: the particle perspective, the wave perspective, and the field perspective.¹³ Each of the three perspectives focuses primarily on *one* aspect of the grape.

First, we can treat the grape as a *particle*, as a kind of distinct entity. It is a stable “thing” over time, contrasting with other grapes and with other kinds of fruit. Second, we can treat the grape as a *wave*. Just as a wave changes as it moves along, a grape changes over time. It may grow old or shriveled or have juice leak out onto a plate or a countertop. Third, we can treat the grape as a *field*, made up of relations. How does the grape look from this field perspective? The grape has relations to other objects around it in space, and relations to other varieties of grapes. There are also internal spatial relations

12. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*.

13. Kenneth L. Pike, *Linguistic Concepts: An Introduction to Tagmemics* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), chaps. 3–5; Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Philosophy: A God-Centered Approach to the Big Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 143–44.

between distinct parts of the grape. If the grape has seeds, the seeds have spatial relations to the other seeds in the same grape, and spatial relations to the flesh of the grape around the seeds, and relations to the skin of the grape.

Altogether, we have three distinct views or perspectives on the same grape: a particle perspective, a wave perspective, and a field perspective. Another way to state this is that we can see the grape as a static entity, as a developing entity, and as an entity related to other entities and to itself. (See fig. 1.2.)

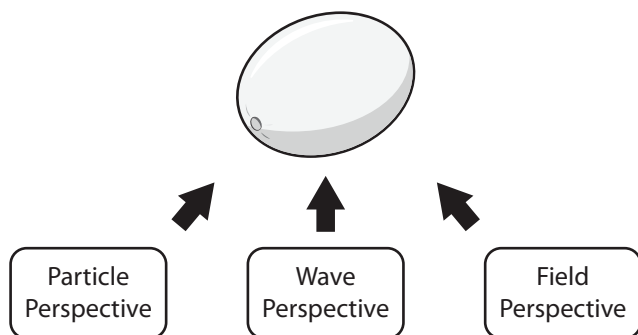


Fig. 1.2. Three Perspectives on a Grape

These three perspectives interlock and interpenetrate. Each perspective exists in conjunction with the other two; no perspective exists independently from the other two. For example, the wave perspective focuses on the developments and changes in the grape over time. But for that to be, the grape must have some stability through time. The particle perspective, which focuses on stability, is in the background. And when we consider the grape, we always do so within a larger context of relationships, including the relation between the grape and those who are observing. So the field perspective, which focuses on relationships, is there in the background.

If we take all three perspectives together, they reflect the Trinity. We will confirm this reflection later on. The same holds true not only for grapes, but for every other object that God has created in his world, whether dogs or galaxies or atoms or DNA inside the nucleus of a cell—all things in creation reflect and reveal their *Trinitarian* Creator.

The grape is what it is because it is part of God’s comprehensive plan for his creation. The Bible teaches that from eternity past, God has planned the whole course of history (e.g., Isa. 46:9–11) and that God “works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:11b) even down to the minutest events (Prov. 16:33). Jesus reminds us of the Father’s care in Matthew 10:29–31:

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

God takes care of each sparrow and each hair.

Likewise, God takes care of each grape. God planned that this grape should exist. His plan shows his *authority* over the grape. He brought it into existence, and he sustains it by his power, his *control*. God is everywhere *present* in the world (e.g., Jer. 23:24), without being limited by the world. Therefore, the grape, like everything else in creation, displays God’s authority, power, and presence (cf. Rom. 1:19–21)—three complementary divine attributes. God displays his lordship over the world, revealing his authority, his control, and his presence.

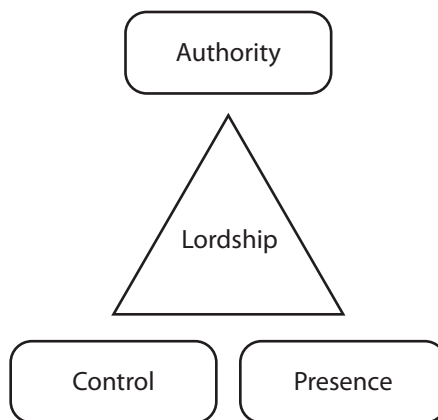


Fig. 1.3. Themes of God’s Lordship

As we will see, these three themes reflect the three persons in the Trinity. In this way, the grape displays on the level of the creature the magnificence and beauty of the Trinity, God in three persons. The source of creaturely beauty is found in God himself—God is beautiful, supremely beautiful. To find the source for beauty is also to find ultimate reality, the reality of God.

As we become increasingly aware of how magnificently God displays his character in creation, it should encourage each of us personally. It should also be an incentive to pray that others would come to see his character and to “worship the Father in spirit and truth” (John 4:23), through Jesus Christ, the “one mediator between God and men” (1 Tim. 2:5).

Various Philosophical Views of Ultimate Reality

A Trinitarian answer about beauty is also an answer about the nature of ultimate reality. God is the ultimate reality, and God is beautiful. This is a different answer from all other answers found in the history of Western philosophy. Philosophers have asked themselves what is the nature of ultimate reality, the deepest kind of structure in the world. This quest has also been a search for the source of the beauty and truth that we experience in the world.

Consider some examples. The Greek philosopher Thales (c. 624–546 B.C.) said, “All is water.” Thales was saying that the ultimate structure of reality was water. Water was the source and final explanation for everything else, including beauty and truth. The Greek philosopher Democritus (c. 460–370 B.C.) said that everything was composed of the tiniest bits of matter, *atoms*, which cannot be decomposed or destroyed. According to his picture, atoms were ultimate. Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) said that reality consisted in *substances*, that is, individual things such as dogs and oak trees, and that each substance was composed of form and matter together. These are all claims about the ultimate structure of reality. Ultimate reality is the last thing back, which is the source of the things we see, and is the source of beauty and truth. But if the last thing back is water, or atoms, why should there be beauty at all? Is it just a cosmic accident, or just a random reaction by human beings, not actually corresponding to anything out in the world?

Does the Bible have a distinctive answer to the question about ultimate reality and the origin of beauty? It is God who is the ultimate reality. It is God who is the source of beauty. And this God is three persons. He is the source for the whole created world. He is the source for beauty and truth and goodness.

Plato (c. 428–347 B.C.) thought that abstract *forms*, such as the form of the good, the form of justice, and the form of beauty, were foundational. Visible things in the world that exhibited goodness or justice or beauty derived from these forms, and reflected the forms. (But he had plural forms, not one personal triune God who was the source of all the world.)

Many modern people who embrace *materialist naturalism* have a view similar to Democritus and the old Greek atomists. According to their analysis, the ultimate structure of the world is in its smallest physical constituents—its atoms (or, in contemporary physics, the elementary particles).

Empiricists think that the world is composed not of substances but of sense experiences.

Pantheists think that everything is God.

There are other views as well. Which of these views is true?

The study of the ultimate structure of reality is closely related to what has been called *metaphysics*.¹⁴ The word *metaphysics* has been used in a number of ways in the history of philosophy. We do not need to get into a dispute about the meaning of the word. For our purposes, all we need to say is that in this book we are going to explore the question of the ultimate structure of reality. That is one of the questions that philosophers have addressed under the topic of metaphysics. At the same time, we are studying beauty. The beauty of the world is one display of the ultimate reality of God, who is beautiful.

14. See Peter van Inwagen and Meghan Sullivan, “Metaphysics,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/metaphysics/>. The older metaphysics of Aristotle proposed to study “being as such.” This study is now called *ontology*. *Metaphysics* is now a somewhat larger and more diffuse field (van Inwagen and Sullivan, § 1). For the most part, in this book we are focusing on the subdivision of metaphysics called *ontology* (akin to van Inwagen and Sullivan, § 2). But the boundaries between these subfields are somewhat fluid.

How would you go about studying the ultimate nature of reality? How could you confidently decide which of the philosophers' proposals is true? Even if you came upon some supposed "ultimate structure," how could you know that it was *ultimate*?¹⁵ We can also ask key questions about beauty. Is beauty "real"? Or is it just a human projection out into the world? Is "beauty in the eye of the beholder"? It is true that people differ from one another in what they find beautiful. But if there is no beauty "out there," it seems that it is merely a human invention, a happenstance. And that degrades both its significance and the fascination that we find in it.

The Distinctiveness of the Christian Faith

The Christian faith provides an answer that is different from any proposed by secular philosophers. Often, however, we fail to appreciate how different the Christian faith is from secular worldviews. Frequently over the centuries, Christianity has been corrupted by Christian attempts to adopt, adapt, and accommodate pagan philosophies, especially Plato's and Aristotle's. Some Christians have attempted to adopt Plato and Aristotle as whole systems, with some modifications, while others have attempted to adopt smaller pieces of their systems. More recently, Immanuel Kant and his successors have exerted an adverse influence on Christianity.

Adopting smaller pieces can seem attractive. Plato and Aristotle and many other philosophers in the Western tradition seem to offer helpful insights about the world. So the question becomes this: how might we adopt these positive insights without also including any errors or failings?¹⁶

15. See van Inwagen and Sullivan, § 5, for a discussion of current philosophical opinions about whether metaphysics is possible.

16. See also Poythress, *Redeeming Philosophy*; Vern S. Poythress, *The Mystery of the Trinity: A Trinitarian Approach to the Attributes of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2020); Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*; Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001); Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), esp. app. D.

Contrast with Systems in the History of Western Philosophy

It is helpful to contrast what the Bible teaches with what has been taught in various Western philosophical systems. Readers who are interested in a penetrating study of these contrasts are encouraged to consult John Frame's book *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology*.¹⁷ In addition, we have devoted Appendix A of this book to a survey of several of those philosophical systems. Our focus in the body of this book, however, is on a positive examination of the Bible and its implications for appreciating the beauty in the world. In this examination, we are also examining the ultimate structure of the world—metaphysics.

Key Terms

Aristotle	pantheist
beauty	particle perspective
creature	perspective
Democritus	Pike, Kenneth L.
diversity	priest
empiricist	relativism
field perspective	substance
form	tabernacle
glory	Thales
harmony	Trinity
holiness	ultimate reality
Kant, Immanuel	unity
materialist naturalism	unity-in-diversity
matter	wave perspective
metaphysics	

17. John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015).

Study Questions

1. What is beauty? Where does it come from? Why are we fascinated by it?
2. What does the Bible say about the relation of God to beauty?
3. What are the two levels of reality?
4. How do human beings know God?
5. How is beauty related to harmony?
6. What does harmony have to do with the Trinity?
7. Why are perspectives important?
8. What are the difficulties in trying to interact with the Western tradition of philosophy?

For Further Reading

Frame, John M. *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015. Pp. 8–11, 14–36, 46–85.

Poythress, Vern S. *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God's Appearing*. Reprint, Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2022. Chap. 21.

Prayer

Thank you, our Father and Creator, that you are beautiful. Enable us to gaze on your beauty in Christ, and to appreciate the beauty in the world that you made.