

The Mystery of Beauty

I opened a new tab and, as is often the case, the background (courtesy Momentum Dash) gave me pause. It's stunning. I couldn't navigate away without stopping to stare at the sparkling sun on the edge of a rock-arch and ponder for a few minutes.

And that's just a photo. Close your eyes and imagine you're there, in that high desert air, looking at the sun-shaped landscape in person. It's enough to give you chills.

But why?

What is beauty and why are we moved by it? Physical attraction to other humans is easy enough to explain with evolutionary biology and psychology. But what about beauty more generally? The experience of beauty in a landscape, even one inhospitable for humans, is universal. Why should we find our habitat inspiring even when it's doing nothing to further our survival? What utility is there in being moved by a flower, a tree, or a cloud formation? What is going on when we experience transcendence in those moments? And why do we crave them? Why and how do they seem to elevate us?

A reductionist naturalism seems insufficient to explain the experience of beauty. Maybe that's where the oldest spiritual ideas originated, as a way to make sense of what's behind those moments. The feeling of awe in the face of nature's beauty begs for an explanation.