



SCHOLÉ HOUSE

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Can Beauty Save the World? Really?

Part one: in Which the Brothers K Have an Argument and In Which Iain McGilchrist Has a Worry.

But first, a word from our sponsor:

You may know that Scholé House is sustained entirely through the generosity of individuals and a small number of churches. As we plan for the future of this flourishing Christian Study Center at Virginia Commonwealth University, we are thinking boldly and investing for the long term.

As our fiscal year draws to a close, however, we are seeking to raise \$25,000 by June 30 to meet current needs, including staff support, lectures, hospitality, rent, and ongoing operational expenses.

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There is a kiss that saves the world.

In the aftermath of a passionate theological debate, famously captured in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* through the parable of the *The Grand Inquisitor*, two brothers stand in tension. One rails against God; the other listens. The arguments will not be unfamiliar to most of us who live in this war-pocked world where children suffer unredeemed atrocities: Why does God allow so very much free will? It does not appear to have worked out well. Even Christ hung his head and wept when he saw Jerusalem.

At the climax of the parable, when the unnamed but thinly-veiled Christ is placed on trial for crimes against humanity, he offers no defense. When older brother, Ivan, finishes the story, he fiercely eyes his younger brother, Alyosha, who is studying to be a priest. Ivan demands an answer: what do you say to that, he cries. Crimes against children! Defend that if you can!



Alyosha does not argue. He does not construct a defense. He sits in silence, then simply rises and gently kisses his brother on the lips.

*This is your answer,
Alyosha? A kiss? Really?*

The first time I encountered this scene, I found it deeply unsatisfying — almost offensive. This is your answer, Alyosha? A kiss? Really? Faced with the crushing problem of evil, in the face of unspeakable suffering, especially that of innocents, and you have nothing to say?

The nothingness of silence. I wanted words. I wanted a structured argument — clear premises, logical progression, airtight conclusions. I couldn't understand how Alyosha, studying for the priesthood no less, couldn't come back with a five-point bullet argument about the problem of evil visited upon children. Instead, it seemed Alyosha had been outmatched by his very secular and profane brother. Worse, it felt as though God Himself had been outmatched.

But over time, I've come to suspect that Alyosha's response is not necessarily a failure of thought, but perhaps emblematic of a different kind of knowing. There are truths that language alone cannot carry.

This question, or ones like it, has people like Iain McGilchrist worried. McGilchrist, a neuroscientist and philosopher and former fellow at several Oxford colleges and John Hopkins, has written about how we perceive and interpret reality. In his 2009 book, *The Master and His Emissary*, and then his 2019 (mercifully much shorter 30-page) book, *Ways of Attending: How Our Divided Brain Constructs the World*, he argues that while both hemispheres of the brain participate in most tasks, they do so in fundamentally different ways. Radically, he argues that even as most individuals can be left- or right-brain dominated, so also can cultures. McGilchrist worries that the West has not just become over reliant on the left brain, but downright dismissive of right brain thinking and that this bias has left much of the West in an epistemological deficit. Half the information out there is inaccessible because we didn't like the highway that took you there.

The left hemisphere is analytical, precise, and focused on parts. It excels at breaking things down, categorizing, and constructing logical systems. The right hemisphere, by contrast, attends to context, relationship, and wholeness. It is attuned to metaphor, tone, nuance, imagination, and empathy. The left brain hears language and analyzes its content. The right brain perceives its meaning — its emotional resonance, its implications, its humanity.

These are not merely different ways of thinking; they are different ways of being in the world.

Crucially for our discussion, it is empathy — the ability to enter into another's experience — that depends on this right-hemisphere mode of attention.

Seen in this light, Alyosha's kiss begins to look less like an evasion and more like an answer given in a different register. It does not refute Ivan's argument; it transcends it. It speaks not to logic, but to relationship.

Once we notice this, we can see that Scripture itself speaks in many registers: in addition to rhetorical arguments and codes of behavior, it speaks by poem, prose, eyewitness interview, oral tradition and ecstatic vision. It often appeals to this same imaginative and empathetic capacity. The command to care for the stranger is grounded not in abstract principle, but in collective mental time travel: *remember* what it felt like to be strangers in Egypt? *Remember* when you were in someone else's country and didn't speak the language? How did that feel? The Golden Rule likewise requires imaginative projection — how would you want to be treated in a similar situation? Being able to make that mental transfer allows humans to determine emphasis and value from disparate parts outside of their immediate experience.

*Remember when you
were in someone else's
country and didn't
speak the language?
How did that feel?*

Jesus' harshest criticisms were directed at those who seemingly mastered the left-brained details but missed the whole. If you read the Woes of the Pharisees in Matthew 23, you come away with singed eyebrows. The Pharisees were meticulous in their observance: hyper attentive to every jot and tittle, yet they missed the forest for the trees. They failed to grasp the larger reality of love and mercy. They saw the parts clearly—but not the whole that the parts were meant to serve.

But how to do this?

But our attention quickly returns to the immediacy of our own lives: the price of gas or a broken refrigerator.

This tension between knowledge and understanding, between information and meaning, is also explored by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. In his Nobel Prize lecture, he argued that art—especially literature—has a unique capacity to unite humanity in ways that raw information cannot. He says that we humans can hear news reports about distant suffering—famine, war, disaster—and feel momentarily moved. But our attention quickly returns to the immediacy of our own lives: the price of gas or a broken refrigerator. This tyranny of the proximate overwhelms any greater scale over misery and devastation. Humans are broken themselves in this way, able to hold only a “palsied incomprehension of another’s distant grief.” We can’t help it.

But Art has the power to bridge this chasm, Solzhenitsyn argues. Through story, image, and form, art draws us into the experiences of others—with people we have never met, in places and situations we have never been, across generations we cannot otherwise reach. It creates sympathy where raw facts and statistics alone cannot.

So powerful is this capacity, Solzhenitsyn suggests, that even if the mighty trees of truth and goodness were cut down, beauty alone could preserve their weight and lead us back to them.

“Not everything can be named,” he writes. There are realities that lie beyond words, yet can still be known—glimpsed, if only for a moment—through beauty.

We see this not only in literature, but in other forms of art. Consider the Bosjes Chapel in South Africa, whose sweeping, wing-like architecture was inspired by one verse—the imagery of Psalm 36:7: “People take refuge in the shadow of your wings.” Here, theology is not argued but embodied. The building itself becomes a kind of prayer—something to be experienced rather than explained. (For more detail on meaning in church architecture, see the astonishing recent article in *Comment Magazine*, comment.org/the-architecture-of-prayer.)



So can beauty save the world?

Perhaps not in the sense of solving its problems through five bullet-point arguments or forming governmental policy. But without beauty, we cannot fully perceive the world or our fellow beings at all. Without awe, imagination, and empathy, we are left with fragments—accurate, perhaps, but ultimately incomplete.

Alyosha's kiss does not resolve the problem of suffering. It does something else: it restores relationship in the face of it. It affirms love where logic reaches its limit.

And maybe that is the point.

If the world is to be saved, it will not be by argument alone—but by the kind of seeing, feeling, and knowing that beauty makes possible. Jesus, as the embodiment of beauty of the trinity, came in a form that could be perceived by human senses. He spoke, but also acted: he walked, listened, told stories, broke bread, and washed feet and wept.

We will do well to do the same.

As always, I welcome your responses.

Missy for Scholé House



Our Mission:

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at VCU and the surrounding community,
Scholé House is a gathering place
for seeking goodness, truth and beauty
and for exploring
a Christian vision for human flourishing—
in order to renew our restless and splintered lives.

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