

True Paradox: How Christianity Makes Sense of Our Complex World

Available October 2014

\$15, 176 pages, paperback
978-0-8308-3676-5

The complexity of the contemporary world is sometimes seen as an embarrassment for Christianity. But law professor David Skeel makes a fresh case for how Christianity offers plausible explanations for the central puzzles of our existence and provides a comprehensive framework for understanding human life as we actually live it.

Christianity and Beauty

Mark Twain once said that a first-rate mind has the ability to hold two opposing ideas at the same time. Many of the best-known poems are based on something like this principle. When Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken" speaks of coming to a fork in the road and taking "the road less traveled," we immediately recognize that the narrator of the poem is engaged in two different journeys, one literal and the other metaphorical. When a character in a Shakespeare play talks about dying, it's often in the form of a pun linking death and sex.

In the middle of the twentieth century, a group of poets and literary critics whose movement became known as New Criticism insisted that all true poems have these qualities. According to the New Critics, a successful poem will explore ideas that seem deeply in conflict with one another, even to the point of being contradictory. In the most beautiful poems, the ideas are teased out and somehow knit together without losing the distinctiveness of each. In "Ode on a Grecian Urn," by early nineteenth-century English poet John Keats, a favorite of the New Critics, the figures frolicking on the urn will never die, but they will never complete their games. And Keats treats them as if they were real, while also reminding the reader that they are simply figures painted on an urn.

Although other tenets of New Criticism have been rightly criticized, and there are few tenured New Critics today, the observation that tension—and often paradox—is a key feature of beautiful art seems to be universally true. The tension may come from colors or shapes that pull in opposing directions rather than ideas, and there is more to beauty than tension alone; but brilliantly managed tension is a common theme that links together art that is perceived as beautiful.

The philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff defines the key features of art in a different but analogous fashion. According to Wolterstorff, there are three dimensions of aesthetic quality: unity, internal richness and intensity of fittingness. The unity of a poem or work of art is its proportion or symmetry (Leonardo da Vinci's famous drawing of a man was intended to show the symmetry of the parts of a man's body). By intensity of fittingness, Wolterstorff means qualities like delicacy, tenderness or gracefulness. Internal richness corresponds closely to the New Critics' love of paradox. The internal richness of a poem or work of art is its complexity and use of variation. Artists have this quality in mind when they say that the colors or imagery in a painting do or don't "move." The theme and variations in a musical composition contribute to its internal richness, as do the paradoxical features of a Keats poem.

Notice the similarities between the qualities I have just described and the emotions we experience in the presence of natural beauty. Although our reaction to a beautiful landscape is different in some respects from our appreciation of great art (you don't need an art history

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Krista Carnet, broadcast publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4013 or kkcarnet@ivpress.com
Alisse Wissman, print publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4059 or awissman@ivpress.com
Adrianna Wright, online publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4096 or awright@ivpress.com
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course to be awed by a sunset, for instance), beauty is accompanied by a sense of tension or paradox in each context.

At this point, I want to make and then defend a strong claim: Christianity provides a uniquely satisfying explanation of why we find these particular qualities so alluring. Even if you doubt that Christianity could possibly be true, I hope you will agree that it offers a surprisingly apt explanation of the features that make great art distinctive.

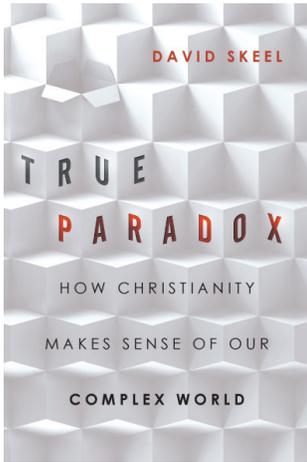
Christians believe that the sensations we associate with beauty reflect the deepest reality of our existence: that we are finite but made in the image of a transcendent God and that we long for him and yet have rebelled against him. As with our idea-making capacity, the only other religions or theories of reality that explain in similar terms what it means to be human are Judaism and Islam. All three can explain the wonder we feel in the presence of natural beauty.

But Christianity better explains the paradoxical qualities we associate with beauty more fully than the other monotheistic religions, because these same qualities lie at the very heart of Christianity. To show what I mean by this, we need to take a brief foray into Christian theology.

Christians believe that Jesus, who died so that we might be reconciled with God, was fully human and fully God. This seems impossible, and even Christians do not claim to fully understand what it means, but it is impossible in the same (or at least in a similar) way that the most spectacular art is impossible. If Jesus is indeed God, as Christians believe, this suggests that God somehow has both a “father” dimension and a “son” dimension. Christians believe that God has a “spirit” dimension as well, and thus that God is a “trinity.” These dimensions, or persons as they are usually called, are quite different. The Son is obedient to the Father, for instance, and the Spirit nearly always directs our attention to the Son, even though they all are a single God.

That was a lot of theology in a single paragraph. St. Augustine devoted an entire (quite beautiful) philosophical treatise to the mysteries of the Trinity. But the important point is that the creative tension among the three dimensions of God, and the paradox that God is both unity and diversity, is very similar to the qualities that we associate with a beautiful painting or concerto. Christians believe that this is not an accident and that it should not be a surprise that the beauty in a universe that was intended to be beautiful directly reflects the complexities of its creator. To paraphrase a point made by the theologian N. T. Wright in another context, great art reflects the Creator back to himself.

– Taken from chapter two, “Beauty and the Arts”



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“David Skeel’s unusually thought-provoking book offers on one level a careful response to literature from the New Atheists. On a deeper level it explains why trying to understand the complexities of Christian faith may leave those who make the effort lost in wonder, love and praise.”

— Mark Noll, Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History, University of Notre Dame

Embracing the Complexity of Christianity

Complexity is widely viewed as an embarrassment for Christianity. How can a faith whose origins date back thousands of years possibly speak to a world as complex as we now know the world to be? David Skeel was asked this question again and again by those who were intrigued by his faith but doubted the plausibility of Christianity.

True Paradox is David Skeel’s response to those who feel Christianity is irrelevant or simplistic, for those who assume a materialist explanation of the universe is the only one, for Christians who are concerned about these issues and for those who might just be willing to give Christianity a second look.

- What about those Christians who aren’t good or kind?
- How could the simplistic Sunday School Christianity I learned as a child answer all the questions I now have?
- What do we do with the intangible aspects of our faith? Do they matter or even exist?
- Aren’t Christianity’s standards impossible to meet in daily life?
- How does Christianity explain the role of beauty in our lives? How does this differ from materialism’s explanation?
- Is Christianity irrelevant to our world today?
- Where does our desire for equality and human dignity originate?
- What is heaven anyway? Do we have any evidence that heaven actually does exist?
- Why is there so much evil in the world? Why are there car accidents, tornadoes and wars?
- Why do justice systems always fail?

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“Brilliant Ivy League Scholar” Publishes New Book on the Complexities of Faith

David Skeel (JD, University of Virginia) is the S. Samuel Arsht Professor of Corporate Law at the University of Pennsylvania Law School. He is the author of *The New Financial Deal*, *Icarus in the Boardroom* and *Debt's Dominion*. Skeel has also written for such publications as the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Books & Culture* and *The Weekly Standard*.

Skeel received a BA in Zoology and English from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He went on to receive his JD from the University of Virginia School of Law.

Skeel has received the Harvey Levin award three times for outstanding teaching, the Robert A. Gorman award for excellence in upper level course teaching and the Lindback Award for distinguished teaching. He has been interviewed on *The News Hour*, *Nightline*, *Hardball with Chris Matthews* (MSNBC), National Public Radio and *Marketplace*.

In addition to teaching and writing, Skeel is a frequent speaker at Veritas Forums and is an elder at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. He blogs at trueparadox.com.

David Skeel, author of *True Paradox: How Christianity Makes Sense of Our Complex World*

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“David Skeel is widely respected for his scholarly writing that helps make sense of the laws governing bankruptcy and corporate finance in the United States. Now, stepping beyond his less well-known writing about law and religion, he has written a rich and challenging gem of a book about the meaning and majesty of Christianity in the twenty-first century. . . . you feel the power of his intellect and faith on every page.”

- **Lincoln Caplan**, visiting lecturer in law, Yale Law School

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