

A Beautiful Movie of a Postmodern Mind

By Brian Godawa

Summary: The Oscar winning film, *A Beautiful Mind*, is a postmodern parable of the modernist quest to discern truth and reality through rationality and intellect. It takes a decidedly romantic view of the nature of heart and mind in this epistemic dilemma, concluding that reality is known not through the mind, but through the heart.

Spoiler Warning: The plot twist of the movie A Beautiful Mind is revealed in this article.

No movie is created or presented within a vacuum. The kind of stories that are told in a society often reflect current cultural ideas and trends because writers are, to differing degrees, people of their times. As we look back over history, we see definite movements within the arts, such as literature, that seem to embody a cultural zeitgeist paralleling current thought forms of that culture. Voltaire, Rousseau and other 18th century writers expressed that era's Enlightenment rejection of the previous Middle Ages. Their poetry and storytelling displayed a distinct disdain for religion and revelation (i.e. Christianity) in favor of man's autonomous reasoning. But then poets and writers like Blake, Byron, Shelley and others reacted against the spiritual death that this scientific juggernaut wrought on the soul of man. These writers and others constituted the movement called romanticism. Romanticism was a rejection of Enlightenment reason and science as cold, impersonal and incapable of discovering meaning or value in life. With this redress came a corresponding change in emphasis upon the individual and personal, even irrational, experience. A change of reality from the head to the heart.

Losing Our Grip on Reality

Whereas the Enlightenment and its literature marks a paradigm change from a religious "premodern" to a secular "modern" society, romanticism and its storytelling has blossomed into a "postmodern" negation of modernist categories of truth and reality. Even though the premodern and modern stages of history could be considered hostile to one another, they still shared one commonality between them that is not shared with the postmodern paradigm of our current age: the belief in an objective reality. The premodern and the modern may have disagreed about the *nature* of objective reality, but they both believed that there *was* an objective reality and that it was incumbent upon people to discover that reality

and align themselves with it. But with the coming of romanticism came the elevation of subjective human experience over objective reality. And that elevation would ultimately give birth to the postmodern disavowal of all objective reality whatsoever.

Postmodernism questions the very notion of reality itself. It considers all worldviews to be grand fictions (“metanarratives”) constructed by social groups in order to exercise control over others (“masks of power”). By deconstructing such beliefs and worldviews into their constituent subjective prejudices and preferences, the postmodern hopes to dismantle the power and control of the modern worldview. After all, whoever defines reality rules and whoever rules the language wins. It would make sense then that the effect of such postmodern thinking on the arts, such as movies, would result in storytelling that also questions our notions of reality with this “hermeneutic of suspicion.” And that is exactly what we are seeing in current movies.

Celluloid Postmodernism

In my new book, *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films With Wisdom and Discernment*, I investigate examples of postmodernism in movies with more depth. But for this article I want to focus on one particular example because it is both popular and critically acclaimed. That movie is 2001 Oscar winner, *A Beautiful Mind*, brilliantly written by Akiva Goldsman, loosely based on Sylvia Nasar's 1998 biography of mathematician John Forbes Nash Jr., fabulously directed by Ron Howard, and starring the illustrious Russell Crowe as Nash and Jennifer Connelly in an Oscar winning performance as Alicia, his wife.

A Beautiful Mind is a powerful example of film reflecting current social trends in more ways than one. Psychiatrists have lauded it with praise for its accurate depiction of schizophrenic experience. They feel this story based on Nash's life has helped to raise awareness of a commonly misunderstood “mental illness,” schizophrenia, a particular condition that in fact has become, as Thomas Szasz has pointed out, the sacred symbol of psychiatry. But its relevance goes deeper than that. *A Beautiful Mind* is ultimately a postmodern fable about the nature of reality and meaning. And the schizophrenia in the story is a picture-perfect metaphor for this metaphysical search in a world where we cannot be certain of just what is real.

The story begins with a young John Nash entering Princeton University in 1947. It's a world of competition as young budding prodigies apply to the mathematics department and

compare themselves against one another hoping to be the next Einstein or Oppenheimer. Nash is the most self-assured, yet quirkiest of all. His odd ticks and anti-social character traits serve to illustrate that he is a man who is “more comfortable with integers than with individuals.” A man who, in his own words, doesn’t like people much, and people don’t much like him. Or as his high school teacher said, he was born with “two helpings of brain and only half a helping of heart.” And he is obsessed with the search for significance. He believes “mathematics will lead him to higher truth.” He says to his new roommate, “I cannot waste time with these classes and these books, memorizing the weak assumptions of lesser mortals. I need to look through to the governing dynamics. Find a truly original idea. That’s the only way I’ll ever distinguish myself. It’s the only way that I’ll ever...” “Matter?” finishes his roommate, Charles. To which John replies, “Yes.”

So Nash is not merely a genius, he is the incarnation of modernism: a man so obsessed with finding his importance and meaning in mathematical rationality as the foundation of reality that he suffers personal deficit. He loses touch with humanity, both his own and others’. His scientific tendency to “provide information quickly by being direct,” leads John into trouble in his dating relationships as he avoids small talk and immediately asks for sex. When John finally finds his romantic interest in Alicia, he embarks on a journey of discovery that leads to the theme of the movie: True meaning and reality can only be found in human love, not in human reason. The heart, not the mind is the judge of what is real.

The Search For Significance

When John proposes to Alicia, he wonders if there is some proof, “some kind of verifiable empirical data” that will “warrant their long term commitment” in marriage. He thinks everything, even human relationships, are understood through the cold hard lens of scientific “certainty.” But she challenges that certainty when she asks him how he knows for sure that the universe is infinite. He admits, “I don’t. I just believe it,” unwittingly revealing faith as the ultimate foundation of his reason. She responds that love is the same way. You can’t know for sure, you just believe.

Their love grows and they get married and even have a child. But unknown to Alicia, the pressure of John’s desire to be recognized for his genius, and the contradicting reality that he is accomplishing nothing of real importance, have compounded to create a Cold War conspiracy “of catastrophic proportions” in Nash’s own mind, complete with imaginary characters like superspy William Parcher (played competently by Ed Harris), as well as a

fictional roommate and his little niece. Nash creates a reality of meaning for himself where he is the hero of his own story who receives the respect and attention that the “real world” is not giving him. As Parcher tells John, “You are, quite simply, the best natural incredible code-breaker I have ever seen.” Inevitably this fantasy world of self-heroism results in self-deception. He is unable to recognize his own character flaws in order to remedy them. Charles, Nash’s other imaginary figment, tells Nash, “It’s not your problem. It’s their problem.” He reinforces Nash’s hubris by demanding Nash tell his professor friend, “Tell him you’re a genius! Tell him your work is critical!” And so Nash’s hallucinogenic pals end up being projections of his own unfulfilled quest for significance through recognition and originality.

Meaning and Value

A postmodern literary notion that has transformed into philosophical relativism is the idea that “there is no text,” no underlying meaning or reality apart from what we humans create in our own minds. Through language we *assign* meaning to what is otherwise without meaning. Like Nash, we only think we “find” meaning and intelligence behind arbitrary order to meet our self-generated need. At one point in the movie, Nash takes Alicia on a date and uses his unique gift of seeing patterns in randomness by looking up in the night sky and finding any shape in the stars that she could think of, be it umbrella or octopus. When she brings up the idea of luck, he tells her, “I don’t believe in luck. But I do believe in assigning value to things.” She echoes this idea back to him later in the film when she answers his question about the difficulty of getting through life, “Activities available. Just add meaning.” In this worldview, value is assigned by human invention, rather than discovered by human enlightenment. This is a direct repudiation of “metanarratives” like Christianity, where God creates reality with intrinsic value and we created beings discover it with humility, giving glory to God for that meaning.

Nash’s imaginary people and plots soon become self-destructive and he is apprehended by psychiatrist Dr. Rosen, who diagnoses his paranoid schizophrenia. “He has lost his grip on reality,” Rosen tells Alicia. “The only way I can help him is to show him the difference between what is real and what is in his mind.” Nash has assumed the reality of these fictional characters for so long, he is not sure who to believe, not sure how he knows reality from fantasy.

Nash takes drugs to suppress his psychiatric symptoms, but soon realizes that the drugs also suppress his mathematical gift, which apparently comes from the same source. His very ability to discern mathematical patterns that leads to his Nobel Prize is the same ability that allows him to discern patterns of conspiracy in popular periodicals where there is no conspiracy. When asked by someone if John ever “just knows something” intuitively, he replies, “Constantly.” His very rationality itself is based on intuition and faith. This postmodern worldview correlates rationality with irrationality as springing from the same ultimate source, man’s mind, thus shedding suspicion on the ability of reason to be an authority for discerning truth or reality anymore than unreason. In this schizophrenic metaphor rationality and irrationality become equals. Reality and illusion become one: the logical conclusion of modernism and the dilemma of postmodern man.

Nash tells the psychiatrist that he stopped his meds and can find a different solution to this “problem,” like any other problem he solves with his mind. The psychiatrist replies, “This isn’t math. You can’t come up with a formula to change your understanding of reality. Because that’s where the problem is – your mind.” Reason cannot solve the problem of a mind whose rationality is one with irrationality. In the postmodern mindset there is no ultimate discernible difference between truth and fiction, because both these notions of reality are constructs of the same human mind. To the postmodern, truth *is* fiction.

The breakdown of epistemic authority leads to the postmodern notion of uncertainty. The modernist worldview prides itself on “clear and distinct” ideas and empirical observation and verification. The modernist’s *raison d’être* is the search for proof or certainty. Yet when the façade of this certainty is stripped away, we see that the man behind the curtain is a rather weak and uncertain human being. If reason and irrationality come from the same source, then there is no ultimate certainty of anything. As Charles tells Nash, “Nothing’s ever for sure, John. That’s the only sure thing I know.”

Heart and Mind

Nash’s quest for certainty, meaning and significance leads him into the dead end of modernism. Nothing is certain. Intuition and faith proves to be the very foundation of our most trusted mathematical laws and logic. His trust in rationality and order turns out to be the same trust in irrationality and chaos. How then can Nash discover what is real? By trusting his heart instead of his head. At the point where Nash is having a second breakdown, Alicia stands by her man and counsels him, “You want to know what’s real?”

She touches her heart and says, “This is real. Maybe the part that knows the waking from the dream – maybe it’s in here [touching her heart].” This question of discerning the difference between dreams and waking life, is a staple of postmodern discussion in both philosophy and film.¹

Nash’s Nobel Prize speech at the end of the movie says it all:

“I have always believed in numbers. In the equations and logics that lead to reason. But after a lifetime of such pursuits, I ask the question, What truly is logic? Who decides reason? My quest has taken me through the mathematical, the metaphysical and the delusional and back. I have made the most important discovery of my career, the most important discovery of my life. It is only in the mysterious equation of love where there are logical reasons that can be found. I’m only here tonight because of you [his wife, Alicia]. You are my reason. You are all my reasons.”

As with any good redemptive story, John Nash’s goal, the thing he *wants* most is not the thing he *needs*. He had been looking for the meaning of life in the logic of the mind and reason, but found it rather in the “logic” of the heart and the love of another human being. This solution is a simple return to a rehashed romanticism which is a popular theme of many cinematic love stories, but in this particular masterpiece takes on added significance. The spiritual deadness of modernism is perfectly and semiotically embodied in an individual mathematician who goes from loving formulas to loving people, from reason to intuition, from the head to the heart.

Transforming the Mind

Ironically, this very problem of mental construction of reality is converted into the solution of the story. Alicia answers a friend’s question of how she makes it through the difficulties of her husband’s psychological disorder.

I force myself to see the man that I married. And he becomes that man. He’s transformed into someone I love. And I’m transformed into someone that loves him.

Here, the power of the mind is invoked to solve the problem of the mind. In a sense we construct the reality we desire by mentally imaging that reality. But such imaging also has a moral dimension to it, because we too are changed by changing our view or attitude. So in

the same way that Nash's unhealthy mind constructs unhealthy reality, so our healthy minds can also construct healthy reality.

The way that Nash ultimately has victory over his schizophrenia is not through denial or elimination of his delusionary side. His harmful hallucinations become powerless against him *when he stops feeding them*. He tells his fellow professor, "I still see things that are not there. But I choose not to see them. It's like a diet of the mind. I choose not to indulge in certain appetites." He chooses not to listen to the devil on his shoulder.

In the postmodern worldview, the individual ceases to have value or even identity outside of a linguistic community. There is no such thing as a "private language" or individual comprehension of reality. Identification with social groups achieve stability not merely through social contract, but through common experience shared in common language. Nash expresses this notion of collectivity succinctly when he asks his old friend for the opportunity to hang around the university:

Alicia and I believe in fitting in. Being part of a community might do me good. Familiar settings and people might help me elbow out these certain delusions that I have.

This thesis of community versus the individual is further demonstrated in Nash's own Equilibrium for which he wins the Nobel Prize. The film creatively captures this theme in the mind of Nash as he disputes Adam Smith's famous Enlightenment economic theorem that in competition, individual ambition serves the common good:

Adam Smith said the best result comes from everyone in the group doing what's best for himself, right? Incomplete. Incomplete. Because the best result will come from everyone in the group doing what's best for himself – and the group... Adam Smith was wrong.

A Christian Assessment

Postmodern analysis brings a long overdue exposé of the false assumptions inherent in our modern Enlightenment way of thinking. *A Beautiful Mind* incarnates just such a paradigm shift. While questioning our notions of reality, it does not deny reality altogether. And this makes the movie postmodern in a positive sense. As cultural analyst Gene Veith points out

in his introductory book, *Postmodern Times*, there is a difference between being postmodern in our relevancy and being a postmodernist.² The postmodern questions our notions of reality, which is wise, but postmodernism denies reality itself, which is self-refuting. Absolute ontological (reality) and epistemological (knowledge) relativism is untenable because we could not know that our perceptions of reality were in fact illusions without referring to an objective absolute standard of real versus illusory perceptions. The claim of illusion presupposes a knowledge of reality against which illusion is shown to be illusion.

There is much that a qualified postmodernism shares with Christianity in its critique of modernism. There is a positive heritage to questioning our *views* of reality. Much of our society's conception of reality *is* wrong and in need of overthrowing. And this is what Christianity has always been proposing to sinful man, who thinks so contrary to reality that he cannot even understand the true nature of things or his own place in the universe (Romans 8:7-8). In fact, the sinner must be regenerated by God Himself or he will never see the Kingdom of God (John 3:3). Like Nash's schizophrenic self-deception, the sinner suppresses the truth so thoroughly that he deceives himself into believing a lie about reality. Rather than seeing what is not there, he loses the ability to see what *is* there, namely, God (Romans 1:16-32). The apparent wisdom of this world (human reasoning), is ultimately shown to be foolishness and inadequate as an authority for discerning truth and reality (1 Corinthians 1:17-31).

The inadequacy of *A Beautiful Mind's* redemption lies in its romanticism of human love and the human heart as the ultimate source of knowledge and meaning. Whereas the movie points us to redemption in the heart as opposed to the mind, the Bible proclaims the heart as equally wicked and unworthy of trust as the unaided or wayward mind (Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 8:6-7). Scripture directs us away from the foolishness of autonomous human reason to the fear of the Lord as the beginning of both knowledge and wisdom (Proverbs 1:7, 29; Psalms 111:10; Colossians 2:2). According to Scripture *both* heart and mind must be subject to the Creator or suffer a schizophrenic-like break from truth and reality.

Nash's division of himself into the delusionary and the real is reminiscent of the Pauline description of the two selves residing within the Christian, the destructive old self and the constructive new self, fighting for control of his soul. The path of victory lies similarly in the need to

lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in *the likeness of* God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth. (Ephesians 2:22-24)

Spiritual victory in the New Testament is achieved in a way similar to Nash's concept of feeding reality and starving the delusion. The difference lies in the source of truth being found, not in man's deceitful heart and faulty love, but in God's certain Word and faithful love. The heart is transformed through reprogramming or renewing the mind with God's truth rather than with humanistic romanticism (Romans 12:2).

The Heart of Community

Lastly, the importance of community as a creative and stabilizing force in the life and meaning of the individual that is echoed in Nash's Equilibrium turns out to be not so original after all. For 2000 years, the Christian Church has taught and operated upon the New Testament concept of the individual in harmony with the whole through self-interest tempered by group accountability:

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others (Philippians 2:3-4).

Not only was Adam Smith incomplete in his theorem, but so was John Nash unoriginal in his. As members of Christ's metaphorical body, we each have individual value as separate parts, but are ultimately responsible to the whole, and in particular, the head, which is Christ (1 Corinthians 12:4-27). But rather than truth and reality being a fictional construction of a linguistic community as the postmodern would have us believe, truth is a person (Christ) and reality is *His* creation invested with objective value assigned according to *His* kind intention and purpose (Ephesians 1). The community of Christ becomes the means by which the human being can discover that intrinsic God-given value as well as his own value in the gifts and potential bestowed upon him by his Creator. It is only in the love of Christ that the mysterious equations of knowledge and wisdom are to be found (Colossians 2:2-3). *He* is all our reasons.

Brian Godawa is a screenwriter living in southern California. He wrote the script for the feature film *To End All Wars*, starring Kiefer Sutherland and Robert Carlyle. He is the author of the book *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films With Wisdom and Discernment* (Intervarsity Press), and speaks at various churches on *How To Watch Movies* and other movie topics. His website is www.godawa.com.

¹ Witness the many recent dream/reality movies such as *The Matrix*, *The Sixth Sense*, *Waking Life*, *The Others*, *Passion of Mind*, *Fight Club*, *Vanilla Sky*, *Mulholland Drive*, and others.

²Gene Edward Veith Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1994), pp. xii-xiii, 221-23.