

A Note on Truth, Goodness and Beauty

by

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THERE is no end to what could be said about truth, goodness and beauty in all their various aspects and relationships. The observations that follow are therefore limited to making only one point concerning them, namely, that truth, goodness and beauty are positive and eternal, whereas their contraries, error, evil and ugliness are negative and perishable. This point seems to be worth making because of the prevalence in the modern world of a tendency to attribute an equal status to the positive qualities and to their contraries, simply because they co-exist in this world; because all are facts of observation, all are regarded as being equally real and of equal standing. Such a view is implicit in many modern movements that base their philosophy on a so-called "realism"; most conspicuously perhaps in the arts and in psychology, in which the hideous and the degrading are often accorded a "significance" equal to that of the lovely and the elevating; less conspicuously but scarcely less effectively in our modern civilisation, dedicated as it is to economic progress. Deeds count for more than words, and, whatever motives we may profess, truth is sought in these days mainly in its modern scientific form as a foundation for a technology devoted to the promotion of economic progress, goodness is expected to follow automatically on an increase of material possessions, and beauty is relegated to the status of a luxury which must be ruthlessly sacrificed to economic advantage whenever the two seem to be mutually incompatible. Contrary tendencies are of course discernable, but it is undeniable that those just outlined are in practice predominant at the present time.

Truth, goodness and beauty are traditionally associated as together representing an ideal of perfection. Truth must come first because its absence invalidates anything and

everything. The word "truth" and the word "reality" are sometimes used as if they were more or less synonymous, but there is a distinction between them which it is helpful to preserve. Truth can be defined as the coincidence of a mental image with reality, while of reality itself all that can be said is that it is what it is whatever anyone may think it is. That is to say: reality plays the part of absolute with respect to a truth that is, humanly speaking, almost always in some degree relative. If we could say exactly in what reality consists it would not be the object of all legitimate search, as it is when we seek truth. Reality as such is ubiquitous and is therefore not definable distinctively—for to say that "it is what it is" is not a definition—nevertheless it is the rock on which are founded all truth, all experience and all possibility of logical thought. If we had found reality in its entirety there would be nothing left to look for; there would be no need to seek for truth, no room for differences of point of view or of opinion, no approximation, no doubt, no denial, no falsehood; there would no longer be any mystery in existence but only pure certitude. There is nevertheless one thing, one reality, that for everyone of us represents pure certitude, and that is the reality of our own existence; it is the only thing of which we are directly aware, while our awareness of everything else, even of our own distinguishable characteristics, is indirect and arises by way of the perception of the senses and the activity of the mind. Perception may be acute and mental activity may be penetrating, or they may not, but they are always relative; the underlying nature, the reality, of their objects is in no way affected by either; the object remains what it is, only the impression it makes on us is variable. Reality as such has no contrary, since total unreality is absolute nothingness. Total unreality cannot even be imagined, for a mental image is always concerned with something that manifests reality in some degree, however slightly and however temporarily. Therefore truth, which is conformity to reality, is positive in relation to its contrary, error, which, being nothing but a failure to conform to reality, is purely negative.

The reflection of reality in our minds which we call "truth" is always relative because of the limitations of its human receptacle, which cannot perceive nor contain more than a fragment of all that is. Our corporeal limitations we take for granted; not so, apparently,

our mental limitations. Truth being, humanly speaking, liable to imperfection—to say the least of it—has a contrary which we call "error". Error consists simply in the failure of a mental conception to coincide with reality, and, like truth, it exists only in our minds. The mind is like a mirror which reflects reality well or badly according to its own characteristics and condition. If a mirror is not a true plane it will reflect nothing without distortion; if it is tarnished it will reflect nothing clearly. It can, in principle, reflect anything whatever, save only one thing, and that is itself. That of course is why we cannot come to know what we are by observation or by any mental operation, however intense or refined.

We are liable to error, that is to say, to the formation of images that are imperfect reflections of reality. At the limit, those images and the ideas they give rise to can founder in an almost total negation of reality, which however can never become quite total because it would then have no relation to reality and so no existence whatever; nevertheless it can get as near to nothingness as anything can possibly be. In other words the more erroneous error becomes the nearer it is to extinction in nullity. Truth and error are therefore not equal and opposite; on the contrary, the relation between them corresponds to that between reality and illusion; truth corresponds to that which is and cannot not be, error tends towards that which has never been and can never be and can therefore never be wholly attained; truth is essential and eternal, error is accidental and ephemeral.

That being so, error can only be associated in principle with destruction and chaos which, whatever form they may take, cannot be called good or beautiful, if those words have any useful meaning. Goodness and beauty therefore cannot but be on the side of truth, and so of reality, and their contraries, evil and ugliness, on the side of error, and so of illusion. Truth is associated with the intellect, but the intellect is not all, there is also existence; goodness and beauty are existential rather than intellectual qualities, they are related to doing and being respectively rather than to thinking. They are two and not one because existence is manifested in the two modes just referred to as "doing" and "being": the former is energetic, vital or dynamic, the latter is stable, substantial or static.

Goodness is the perfection of the dynamic mode and beauty of the static. They are manifested either positively or negatively and in varying degrees and proportions in everything that exists, from the stars in their courses to man in his earthly pilgrimage, but never in absolute perfection, since nothing that exists is perfect in all respects. It has been said that beauty is the splendour of the true; it could also be said to be the peacefulness or the purity of the true. Similarly goodness could be said to be the power of the true, or its nobility or its virtue. These qualities are positive in relation to existence, just as truth is positive in relation to the intellect. Hence their traditional association. All three are on the side of reality, whereas their contraries, error, evil and ugliness, are negative and on the side of illusion. Man is intellect, action and contemplation; he must recognise and seek reality in its three principal manifested aspects; first in the intelligible, then in the existential in its two modes, the dynamic and the static; the true, the good and the beautiful.

It is not difficult to see that, unless truth is founded on a reality that is independent of the observer, the word itself means nothing, and that therefore truth is positive and error negative. The relation of goodness and beauty to reality is less self-evident because the subjective element in their constitution seems to be more prominent, so that individual opinions concerning what the two words really represent differ even more widely than they do in the case of truth.

That no doubt is why it is sometimes suggested that they are purely subjective and are little more than names given to particular human activities and sensations that are for one reason or another beneficial or pleasurable. Such ideas arise because the mind, stimulated by the senses, reflects the multiplicity and mutability of terrestrial objects rather than the enduring reality of the qualities which, by their presence or their absence, make those objects what they are. We tend to think mainly by comparing and contrasting one object with another, and to regard qualities as if they originated in the objects that manifest them in time and space, forgetting that the object is perishable while the qualities are timeless. For us the object is the reality and the qualities are the accidents. When this point of view becomes more or less exclusive it obscures the timeless reality

of the qualities which, by their presence or absence, make objects what they are and also us what we are. This treatment of the object as the reality and the quality as the accident constitutes precisely the materialistic point of view; its predominance is therefore of fairly recent origin. From that point of view the underlying reality of all things—not only their truth but also their goodness and their beauty—resides in their ponderable substance and not in the imponderable but changeless qualities they manifest; it is to be sought in the images reflected in the mirror of a mind which is not only limited in its capacity, but also in its quality; in the indirect experiences that arise out of observation and deduction, and not in the one direct experience, namely, the being's inward and indivisible consciousness of its own reality, which is its point of contact with the reality of other beings, and the one thing common to all. When reality, and therewith all positive qualities, is situated in relativity, everything becomes conditional, even what passes for truth; goodness becomes self-conscious and uncertain of itself, rather than being radiant and impregnable; beauty becomes equivocal and seductive, rather than being peaceable and purifying.

The point of view which has been largely supplanted by the materialistic is based, not primarily on an outwardly directed observation, but on an inward certainty--call it a conviction or a belief if you like—that reality, and therewith all positive qualities subsist in a timeless absolute of which all things temporal are but reflections. All the great religions and traditions, in their doctrines, in their rituals, through their saints and sages and in the faith of their followers testify to the overriding reality of a plane of perfection of which the plane of terrestrial existence is but a fugitive reflection or refraction in time and space. This implies that reality, and therefore possibility, is not limited by the conditions that govern our terrestrial existence. If a conception of the limitlessness of reality were impossible to us, we would not perceive the limitative nature of terrestrial conditions; but as things are, our ability to conceive of our own limitation proves that there is something in us that can reach out beyond our present state towards what is greater than ourselves, even though it be not directly accessible to our senses alone which are attuned exclusively to the conditions of terrestrial existence. Once that is admitted,

there is no longer any solid reason for questioning the realism of a vision of a plane of perfection on which truth, goodness and beauty are seen in all their purity, and are no longer known mainly by contrast with their contraries. The vision of perfection, experienced in the form of the beatific vision of a saint or less directly in the faith of a believer, either reflects reality or it does not. If it does not, it is the most pathetic of delusions; and it is moreover a delusion in which a vast majority of men have stagnated until now, when at last release has come through the rise of the materialistic point of view.

The plane of existence is the plane of contrasts, and on it error, evil and ugliness remain what they are. It is natural to us to try to avoid them in this world, and it is far from useless to do so; not however primarily because success in doing so makes life more agreeable, but because truth, goodness and beauty as they are manifested in this world are nearer to reality than their contraries. In their existential manifestations they do but prefigure their own intrinsic and principial nature; they are but shadows, reflections, signs, symbols or heralds of what they are really and eternally. It is not enough to seek them in their temporal manifestations alone, not only because to do so may cement our own attachment to a lower plane and thereby hinder assimilation to a higher, but also because it is not by itself an exercise of the function that alone makes man truly human. That function is to aspire here and now towards a celestial perfection that is more real than anything that can be found on the plane of contrasts on which terrestrial life is situated.

Thus, although it has always been generally admitted by right-minded people that truth, goodness and beauty are, to say the least of it, on the side of righteousness, it is not so generally admitted that truth is infinitely more than conformity to ascertained fact, nor that goodness is infinitely more than a mere abstention from evil or a neighbourliness that can make life in this world easier, nor yet that beauty is infinitely more than a subjective impression or a pleasurable accident or a luxury; still less is it admitted that all three are on the side of reality and that their contraries are on the side of illusion.

This generation seeks truth in the infinitely variable permutations and combinations

of an inexhaustible multitude of facts; it sees goodness mainly in terms of terrestrial welfare and of outwardly harmonious human relationships; small wonder therefore that so many of its works seem to tend towards the destruction of beauty, and even that this tendency should be specially apparent in the domain of a self-conscious art, dissociated from other activities and pursued for its own sake as a sort of luxury. But beauty is not a luxury; like truth and goodness it is an essential aspect of reality itself. Plato says of beauty:

He (the delivered soul) will see a Beauty eternal, not growing or decaying, not waxing or waning; nor will it be fair here and foul there, nor depending on time and circumstance or place, as if fair to some and foul to others; nor shall Beauty appear to him in the likeness of a face or hand, nor embodied in any form whatever... whether of heaven or of earth; but Beauty absolute, separate, simple and everlasting; which lending of its virtue to all beautiful things that we see born to decay, itself suffers neither diminution or any other change.

The reality which is the ultimate objective of all search, and in which truth, goodness and beauty are one, is too all-embracing to be identified with any object of the senses or with any system built up in the mind. It can only be sought by way of something that overrides and synthesizes the brute fact and its mental derivatives, without however necessarily invalidating them on their own plane. That "something" has been called a "thirst for the absolute" or, more familiarly to most of us, a "love of God", Only in so far as we may endeavour to satisfy that thirst or to perfect that love may we be enabled to see, directly and as it were with our own eyes, that truth, goodness and beauty are essentially real and eternal, positive and Divine, whereas error, evil and ugliness are correspondingly illusory and fugitive, negative and human, and that it is they, and they alone, that perish.

In the same way that the mind seeks variety in foods and other things, so does it want diversity in sadhana (Invocation, remembrance of God). It rebels against monotonous practices... To cease sadhana is a grave error. The practice must never be renounced under any circumstances. Bad thoughts will always be pressing to penetrate into the mental laboratory; if the aspirant suspends his sadhana his mind becomes the workshop of Satan.

Swami Sivananda.