One Virtue at a Time, Please


Alan Ryan

Any book with “Truth, Beauty, and Goodness” in the title will stir questions in the reader’s mind. Is the author about to defend Kant’s assertion that “beauty is truth, truth beauty; that is all you need to know?”

Clothing sight of Howard Gardner’s subtitle—“Educating for the Virtues in the Twenty-First Century”—will the reader not think of Plato, who spent much of his life wondering whether virtue can be taught? Part of the provocation for Plato was the career of the Athenian popular hero Alcibiades, who had been Socrates’ favorite student and the ward of Pericles. Alcibiades was dazzlingly clever and attractive, and a military leader of genius, but he was a libertine, and in due course he betrayed Athens to Sparta and to Athens, before fleeing to the Persian court, where the Spartans had him assassinated. If he could not lead a virtuous life with all the advantages of upbringing and natural talent, Plato asked, was there any reliable way of producing virtuous Athenian citizens? We hardly need to search far for medieval parallels.

It will do the reader no harm to bear Keats and Plato in mind, even though Gardner is not wholly on their side philosophically. He deems Keats’s claim that beauty is truth as well as Plato’s claim that the virtues form a unity. Nonetheless, Gardner is firmly on Keats’s side in wanting us, in our efforts to educate the young and ourselves, to take beauty seriously, to cultivate our aesthetic sensibilities, and to learn how to form intelligent judgments about works of art of all sorts. He is on Plato’s side in being pessimistic about relativism: he fears that “postmodern” thinking and the new digital media have undermined the belief that there is a truth about the world against which our assertions about it can, and must, be judged.

Postmodernism of the kind endorsed by some followers of Jacques Derrida, for example, seems to Gardner to sustain a good-natured, lazy relativism that allows us to say “that’s true for him, even if it’s not true for you”; and the ultimate challenge is the death of intellectual discipline. He is equally frightened by the ease of spreading any amount of misinformation on the Internet. Armed with time on his hands can edit photographs of historical events, persons, or works of art, and the editors of Wikipedia have found it almost impossible to keep out the misrepresentations that they have been asked by Howard Gardner fears that when so many sources of information are unreliable, we may lose all confidence that “reality” itself provides a check on what we think.

Howard Gardner may well be the best-known educational theorist in America. He has written on a great range of issues, but from a lay point of view perhaps his most important achievement came some twenty years ago when he put into circulation the concept of “multiple intelligences.” He identified seven dimensions of intelligence, including the spatial, musical, linguistic, and intra- and interpersonal, as well as the logical and mathematical, that feature so prominently in IQ tests. By doing so he helped counteract the destructive obsession with conventional measures of IQ fed by books such as The Bell Curve, and ill-judged remarks about intelligence by scientists like James Watson.

Beauty, Goodness and Goodness Reframed is an engaging mixture of philosophy, personal reflection, and exhortation. Interpretation is untechnical, the personal reflection is sympathetic, and it is hard to disagree with his insistence that we collectively need a clearer sense of how to balance the competing demands placed on all of us.

Gardner begins with an interesting juxtaposition. He has been reading Henry Adams’s essay “Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres: A Study in Thirteenth-Century Unity,” published in 1904, and David Shields’s book Reality Hunger: A Manifesto, published in 2010. The unity that Henry Adams longed for and thought the modern industrial world had lost was the “magnificent faith that the Chartres cathedral as physically expressed the words of God.” It was God’s word, Adams wrote, and the Chartres cathedral as physical expression of that faith.

Gardner writes:

That world was true—directed by the word of God. It was beautiful—a magnificent construction made by man in the image of God. And it was good—with the inspiring light of the Church, and the examples of Christ and of the saints, people could and would live a good life.

Reality Hunger, on the other hand, unnerve him. Its author, David Shields, a best-selling novelist, essayist, writer in residence at the University of Washington, and literary provocateur, describes it as a “manifesto.” Its theme is the obsolescence of the kind of coherent narrative to which the traditional novel is committed in a world where reality thrusts itself upon us in a fragmentary and chaotic fashion. We hunger for a direct experience of reality, which does much to explain the popularity of reality TV and the unstoppable torrent of memoirs, but we know that fiction, and that memoirs are at best selective and occasionally mendacious.

This is a familiar form of skepticism: for Shields, whatever we see or read is taken from a random selection, and therefore more or less a work of fiction. The line between truth and fiction is blurred or nonexistent. The argument is that the literary form which we choose to handle such a fragmented reality, Shields argues, is collage; we should embrace Picasso’s dictum that “art is theft,” and boldly appropriate whatever we need from wherever we can find it. True to that view, Reality Hunger consists of 618 numbered paragraphs, many of them quotations from other writers. The book was well received by reviewers, as it was in these pages, though reviewers usually insisted, as Tim Parks did here, that news of the defeat of the novel was greatly exaggerated.

What upsets Howard Gardner is not that Reality Hunger largely consists of quotations, but that only at the end of his book does the ascribed author Shields state what he has done and why—and then, reluctantly, at the advice of law-reductionism, evolutionary psychology. It tends to go hand in hand with, and is here criticized alongside, some forms of economic reductionism. We are asked by evolutionary psychologists to think that human beings have the beliefs they do—whether factual beliefs about the world, or aesthetic beliefs about what is beautiful—are pre-wired by natural selection. This is good—not because those beliefs correspond to something objective in the world, but because they have been built into the human brain and the human psyche as a result of their usefulness in preserving the species. To put their view crudely, these biologists hold that we believe what we believe, find beautiful what is beautiful, and act the destructive obsession with conventional measures of IQ fed by books such as The Bell Curve, and ill-judged remarks about intelligence by scientists like James Watson.

Reality Hunger is not disposed to reject either evolutionary theory or economics out of hand; indeed, he has written enthusiastically about Darwin. He simply says that we need to do what Shields2 offers us in the way economics predicts—but there are many when we do not. Our moral capacities allow us to “transcend the determinism alleged by theorists of the market and theorists of evolution.”

We may be, indeed we certainly are, well equipped by nature to evaluate evidence, and poorly equipped to evaluate other sorts of evidence, but the fact that we can work that out for ourselves will challenge and moderate some allegedly evolutionary tendencies that supposedly determine our behavior—shows that we are not entirely unforgiveable of error. We need to know what is true rather than false, and we should be able to examine critically the alleged results of evolutionary biology.

The heart of the book, however, is Gardner’s discussion of the “trio”—truth, beauty, and goodness—one virtue at a time. What is particularly interesting about that discussion is that for all his obvi- ous sympathy for Henry Adams’s nostalgia for the lost unity of the medieval worldview, he thinks that the virtues are many rather than one, that truth, beauty, and goodness should be understood very differently, and that inculcating them proceeds in a way different from, and possibly in conflict with, other educational traditions.

We begin with truth, perhaps the simplest of the “trio” to grasp, as are the reasons why some forms of relativism seem to us to be inadmissible. The reason that that discussion is that for all his obvi- ous sympathy for Henry Adams’s nostalgia for the lost unity of the medieval worldview, he thinks that the virtues are many rather than one, that truth, beauty, and goodness should be understood very differently, and that inculcating them proceeds in a way different from, and possibly in conflict with, other educational traditions.

We begin with truth, perhaps the simplest of the “trio” to grasp, as are the reasons why some forms of relativism seem to us to be inadmissible. The truth is the reality of the world do not get their credibility from being copies of the world. Language and belief do not “mirror” the world. You can put two copies of the world so that we can work that out for ourselves will challenge and moderate some allegedly evolutionary tendencies that supposedly determine our behavior—shows that we are not entirely unforgiveable of error. We need to know what is true rather than false, and we should be able to examine critically the alleged results of evolutionary biology.


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New York Review side by side to establish that each is practically identical to the other; you can't put your belief that there is a copy of The New York Review on the table alongside The New York Review itself.

The temptation to relativism does not primarily engage with low-level utterances, however. Gardner is familiar with the suggestion that there may exist—or do in fact exist—multiple different conceptual systems that sustains fullledged relativism. He explains: “The suggestion that we say ‘represents’ the world, but not by producing a copy of what it represents, can lead to the realization that there are a host of different ways of representing the world, and that choosing which to adopt is genuinely a matter of choice. There is, as Gardner recognizes, a thin line between giving proper weight to the historical variability of our theories about the natural world and collapsing into the view that we are all at liberty to believe whatever we like. He treads that thin line very deftly—arguing essentially that the virtue of truth depends on the fact that people exposed to the same evidence and with some fluency in the same vocabulary can and do converge in their beliefs. This is not unlike C. S. Peirce’s view that the truth is what we are fated to agree on.

Although the discussion of “the trio” begins with truth, I suspect that many readers will find the most interesting part of the book to be the discussion of beauty, rather than truth. Gardner’s argument is not philosophically complicated, but the discussion is enlivened by his willingness to invoke his own experience of art, not only the bent towards arts and contemporary music as well. "Truth, Beauty, and Goodness Reframed" began as three lectures at the Museum of Modern Art in 2008, and his wife Ellen Winner is herself an artist. He writes at some length about favorite paintings, managing for the intellectual and moral code. When he refers to works of art, Gardner makes such an idea sound plausible, at least for those who feel they must preserve the word “beauty”; but perhaps it shows something of a wider application. Some of us, these days, are more likely to call an explanation "ingenuous" than "true," and a piece of bad behavior "cruel" or "mendacious" than "bad." The search for originality suggests that everyday child-rearing practices and the idea of a museum is nothing new. Some of Blair’s colleagues. One can see why he might feel like this. In the end, perhaps the same principle when our victims are distant and anonymous and the payoff to ourselves immediate and real—an idea made all the more pertinent by the greedy behavior that helped produce the recent Wall Street crash.

In fairness, Gardner drafted his book before the national economic recession hardened. Perhaps for that reason he sometimes seems more disinterested by miscreant journalists than miscreant businessmen. Jayson Blair’s misdeeds at The New York Times are no news, and even a child-rearing book has had some sharp things to say about some of Blair’s colleagues. One can see why he might feel like this. In the end, perhaps he has his moral justification about their criminality emerges; but if the urge to tell the truth about what is happening is undermined, then the consequences of those truths are what we have to rely will be undermined too.

"Truth, Beauty, and Goodness Reframed" is an uneven work. It can hardly be any more than it is if it is a curious combination of book, article, essay, social criticism, art history, pedagogical theory, and moral exhortation. That it hangs together as well as it does is almost a triumph of the intellectual tone. One has no doubt that these are Howard Gardner’s genuine anxieties, research interests, and potential remedies for our intellectually and morally disbelieved state. Moreover, an extraordinary open-mindedness permeates his book: he is an anxious liberal, not a depressed academic conservative. He is an advocate of "pragmatic relativism" as he is to "feckless cultural relativism," and if this makes him hard to pin down, it also makes him easy to like.