

Truth. Beauty. Goodness. Three ‘crucial human virtues’ that Howard Gardner states are ‘perennial human concerns’ (p.123) dating back thousands of years, universal across societies, irrespective of schooling or not.

Yet so too are honor, glory, and love. The virtues Gardner selected are in and of themselves unimportant. Their importance lies in what they represent and the underlying principles of human experience they symbolize. In a ‘postmodern’ and digital age, buffeted by biological and economic explanations for all human behavior, the search for what these virtues entail, in society and education, is of principal importance.

First, *virtue*: such is a virtue, each is ‘positive.’ The *OED* states virtue is “behavior showing high moral standards; a quality considered good or desirable in a person.” Gardner, though, sees ‘truth, beauty, and goodness’s’ importance in two respects: one, they are not part of the human genome and must be learned; and two, they represent *ideals of human experience*:

“each...encompasses an abstract realm of experience – verbal propositions, aesthetic experiences and relations among human beings.” (p.13)

Postmodernism and the digital age have altered, and in some cases sought to disavow, our definition and search for these virtues.

Gardner’s arguments for educating in the virtues are twofold: first, to contest postmodern and digital age nihilism, relativism and ambiguity, where there are no ‘absolutes’ and individual ideas and opinions of ‘truth, beauty, and goodness’ predominate. At the same time, biology and economics have attempted to insert ‘predeterminism’ into our conceptions around these virtues, boiling everything down to genetic rationality and/or economic motive.

Gardner does not argue for absolutes, neither in universal definitions or interpretations, nor that everything is allowed and nothing can be defined. But denying by negating brings about a ‘moral no mans land’ or permanent ambiguity, where either nothing is real, or the only real thing is what I say it is.

There must be some sense of order. In Stuart Hall’s *Representation* (1997), culture – the basis for orderly society – consists of accepted practices and beliefs. Otherwise, there is anarchy, relativism and no social structure.

Second, while *Truth, Beauty and Goodness Reframed* (Gardner, 2011) is a reaction to societal trends, more importantly it reminds us *why we learn* and *what education is really for*. Otherwise, Gardner would be engaging in the same postmodernism negation. Educating in the virtues is educating in the skills that represent ‘education’ according to Cusick (2004):

“...(does not) exist apart from the person one is...(it) is the accumulated learning, habits of thought and expression, experience in and participation in common

endeavors. It is a way of thinking, looking at, and going about one's affairs in a consistent and intelligible manner.' (p. 122)

It is education beyond facts and details. In the pursuit of 'what is' truth, beauty, and goodness, we acquire investigative and analytical skills; develop open mindedness and judgment; and mature and grow in our own understanding. It is recognition that process is as important as result, and that skills developed will stay for life. Interpretations of truths, beauty, and goodness may change, but the principles underlying how these determinations are achieved will stay consistent.

There may not be one single 'truth,' but what is accepted as 'truth' is vetted thru accepted methodology, evolution, peer criticism, training, and acceptance. It differs from 'observation' or opinion. There is a process: 'truth seeking.' In the postmodern and digital age, with so many new sources of information, we must become better informed, more critical, and have skills to analyze and dissect.

Beauty requires exposure to range and diversity of various types of art. Discussion leads to refinement of thought, exposure to different ideas, and eventually a determination of one's own preferences. There is a process too:

"Only on the basis of detailed, contextualized knowledge of history, culture and individual human nature can we explain specific instances of the beautiful."
(p.75)

Determining 'goodness' comes about in a similar fashion. There is not a list of right and wrong; it is an understanding of how and why. We become exposed to role models, exemplars in literature and life, and engage in discussion, debate, and self-reflection before reaching conclusions. This 'self-directed learning' results in conclusions and beliefs that are more enduring.

While *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness* was a reaction to what Gardner saw in society, he is not ultimately pessimistic about the future. Focusing on education's purpose, and reminding educators *what education is for*, Gardner believes that society could be on the verge of another Enlightenment, and not just a 'Western' Enlightenment. To get there will be challenging, but if we remember *why we learn* then the debates, the explosion of information, will become vehicles for continued progress and interpretation of 'truth, beauty, and goodness.' However that is defined.