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## Goodness, Truth, and Beauty Redux

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*Scientific Revolution, Relativity and Reason*

Our institution has made definite progress over the last few years. We, of course, have further to grow, but we have managed to shake off some of our old bad habits. One of the ways we have matured is in our use of more accurate and descriptive language, philosophy, and terminology. For example, we have acquired and employed the concepts of piety, human flourishing, Christian humanism, and natural philosophy. And while these concepts have profited us much, maybe it is time to dust off one of our old favorites, to bring out treasures old and new.

When I first joined the faculty in 2003, I was attracted by what seemed the near constant pursuit of goodness, truth, and beauty: at faculty training every session was devoted to goodness, truth, and beauty (or so it seemed); during chapel talks, we regularly espoused visions of the good, the true, and the beautiful, and all their various arrangements; and as faculty, our syllabi paid deference to these exalted concepts, slipping the phrase into our course descriptions whenever possible. By the end of my second or third year, though, I had grown a bit jaded. It wasn't that I sought equal billing for the evil, deceptive, and ugly, but I was looking for answers to particular questions. Isaiah 53 portrays Christ as a man of sorrows, rejected by men, and having no beauty. No beauty? What if Christ wasn't so nice-looking? What if he wasn't beautiful? Well, we were not talking about physical beauty at Geneva (that made me feel better). So what did we mean by beauty? Is it symmetry, proportion, and harmony? Yes. Did Christ exhibit that? Not exactly. By the way, wasn't the fruit that Eve ate "pleasing to the eye?" Tell me again precisely how this triad became nearly as popular as faith, hope, and love? I waited for an answer and didn't give up hope. Finally, I started to run into the right people.

Alister McGrath, a former Oxford theologian with a spare Ph.D. in biophysics, had recently written a book entitled, *The Open Secret*. The title suggests that creation is an open secret pointing to God for those who have ears to hear and eyes to see. McGrath is eager for Christians to work with others of all stripes on common human projects. For example, if Christians want to stop hunger in Africa, we should consider partnering at some level with others who are similarly minded. He especially desires that Christian intellectuals, without sacrificing the distinctives of their faith, work with secular academics at universities across disciplines. Christians should be able to discuss their biblical beliefs openly, but work on projects with other economists, psychologists, or physicists who have similar basic assumptions. To enable such cooperation, he suggests reviving "the Platonic triad" of goodness, truth, and beauty as governing motifs that both Christians and others recognize as aspects of reality.

Aha! A clue—the Platonic triad. That sounds important. How did I miss it all these years? Moreover, McGrath’s focus sounds like just the kind of project that Geneva is up to: authentically living for Christ, yet trying to serve and learn alongside of others made in God’s image. McGrath mentioned that this triad was revived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and I was reminded of the closing lines to “Ode on a Grecian Urn” by John Keats. “Beauty is truth, truth beauty. That is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.” But the questions remained. Should we believe Keats the romantic or not?

This aroused my curiosity and led me to ask when precisely did Plato discuss this triad? The ancient Greeks used the phrase *kalos kagathos* to describe an ideal person who was noble (also translated beautiful) and good. But this language wouldn’t have been peculiar to Plato. I have a basic understanding of Plato, have read one of his dialogues in the original Attic Greek, and love the *Republic*. But while I knew that he discusses the themes of goodness, truth, and beauty, I did not remember his mentioning this triad specifically. McGrath, in fact, confirmed that he does not. In the *Republic* the dominant motif is the idea of the Good. The Good is such a strong focus for Plato that it functions as an analog to God in the *Republic*. Beauty for beauty’s sake is much less appreciated and he advocates an extreme censorship of art that would be tough even for the Chinese government to pull off. So maybe the Platonic triad refers not to Plato’s own teachings, but to the Platonic tradition as mediated through the middle ages. And this is where things began to converge for me; the pieces came together.

Of course I should have started with C.S. Lewis, because surely he would have told me that these were medieval categories. But I like to learn the hard way. I had recently read a book by Colin Gunton entitled *The One, the Three and the Many*. Gunton identified goodness, truth and beauty as transcendental categories of medieval Christian philosophy and he also, like McGrath, sought to recover their proper relationship to reality. Suddenly things were making sense. The pluralistic Greek and late Roman cultures were, much like America today, melting pots of different beliefs and religions. In contrast, the medievals were Christians who developed an entire culture and vision of reality based upon the rule of God and lordship of Christ as revealed in the Scriptures. While we may disagree with them on certain points, we will probably also agree with them more often than we think. My hope in the triad was returning. There were certainly faithful Christians throughout this period who served God with their entire hearts, souls, and minds. And, fortunately, it is largely the work of these thinkers that has survived.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> through 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, central to the study of all university students was the discipline of metaphysics—a discipline lost completely today. After the quadrivium, medieval students would study natural philosophy, moral philosophy, and metaphysics. Metaphysics is the study of what can be said of all reality. What can we know about everything that exists, including God? The early Greeks answered this question in a variety of ways. “All is water,” said Thales in an attempt to describe all of reality. Not impressed? While we can see how that is untrue, try coming up with a substitute. Try to invent an accurate statement about all reality that includes God, the angels, and all creation. “All is boundless,” said Anaximander. Well, what about discrete things like pool balls or your Uncle Bill? You can see how this is a challenge. Predicating a quality of all reality is actually pretty difficult. How about Parmenides’ suggestion, “All is one.” Now we’re getting somewhere—kind of. Everything that “is” can be said to exist as something, so the medievals accepted this transcendental while dismissing most of Parmenides’ conclusions. It is, in fact, largely Parmenides that flummoxed Plato and Aristotle, inspired their work, and eventually led to the five transcendental

categories, which the medievals identified and applied to all reality: namely, everything that exists participates 1) in being, 2) in unity, 3) in goodness, 4) in truth, and 5) in beauty. What does this mean? It is not the same as Keats' vision, by the way, which made truth and beauty interconvertible. Rather, for the medievals these categories were distinct, though displayed by all reality. These metaphysical transcendentals mean that God exists and has actually created all things (being), that particular things and creation itself have integrity (unity), and that God is weaving together a story that is good, true, and beautiful.

Wow, what a relief! I think we have finally made it onto biblical ground here. Genesis clearly teaches that God did make individual things with integrity *ex nihilo*, which covers the first (and some of the second) transcendental—things exist, there is being. And obviously God is one according to the Hebrew *shema* of Deuteronomy 6, “Hear oh Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” Romans 8:28 teaches that God works in all things for the good of those who love him and have been called according to his purpose. Since God is omniscient, there is a standard for absolute truth. Moreover, Jesus identifies himself as the truth embodied when in John 14 he describes himself as “the way and the truth and the life.” We also recognize that God in his splendour is the ultimate in beauty. “Worship the Lord in the beauty of his holiness,” reads 1 Chronicles 16:29. I was starting to realize that what I had always hoped about these categories as a youthful faculty member was true. We aren't their masters; rather, they are hints about God and his universe. As Paul says, “Now we see through a glass darkly, but then we shall know fully even as we are fully known.” While there is an absolute truth, an absolute standard of goodness, and one who is completely beautiful, we only see these transcendentals dimly but persistently reflected through all of reality because they are true of the God who made everything. We perceive them through the eyes of faith. But for our time here on earth, they are partially veiled to our physical eyes.

So what about Christ; can we now say that Christ is beautiful and our triad is secure? How would this comport with Isaiah 53, which says that Christ had no beauty? Hans Urs von Balthasar, in the mid-20th century, was one of the recent Christians before McGrath to suggest returning to the medieval transcendentals of goodness, truth, and beauty. He said, in particular, that we pay much too little attention to what we find lovely and beautiful while attending fastidiously to the questions of goodness and truth. He initiated a return to the concept of theological aesthetics, focusing on why we love the things we do and what we ought to love. From Balthasar's perspective on Christian aesthetics, Christ was definitely beautiful, but not by the standard of the physical beauty or worldly glory spoken of in Isaiah 53. Balthasar asserted that the epitome and ultimate standard of all beauty is not even the beatific vision, but rather Christ on the cross. What is foolishness to the Greeks is the glory of God revealed through the crucifixion of Christ, an act that has redeemed the entire church.

How satisfying! So while goodness, truth, and beauty as transcendentals don't necessarily provide answers, they definitely provoke questions. They cause us to ask how each particular thing that we encounter participates in God's story working for good, containing truth, and revealing God's beautiful glory and the beauty of his creation. Though I was not always certain, I suspected that goodness, truth, and beauty ought to be an essential part of our Geneva vocabulary. I just had trouble placing them. I was glad to find a long and noble Christian history with a christocentric focus. I am sure, therefore, that they will continue to play a formative role in a Geneva education, the lives of our students, and many more teacher trainings to come.