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COMMENTARY

Reframing Truth, Beauty, and Goodness

By Howard Gardner

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This summer, I attended my 50th high school reunion. My wife called my attention to the school's motto: *Verum, Pulchrum, Bonum*. I had no recollection that my school was devoted to "truth, beauty, goodness." Yet, 40 years after I graduated, I argued, in *The Disciplined Mind*, that the purpose of education, beyond acquisition of basic literacy, is to inculcate in students a sense of what is true and what is false; what is beautiful and what is boring or repugnant; what is good and what is evil. Our sense of truth comes from the scholarly disciplines—science, history, mathematics. Our sense of beauty comes from the arts and nature. Our sense of morality comes from reflection on the actions of human beings—historical figures, fictional characters, and contemporaries.

Satisfaction with this synthesis did not last. Critics pushed me on how (or who) decides what is true, beautiful, or good. Postmodernists questioned the legitimacy of these descriptors, while relativists employed them according to their whims. The critique from philosophy was complemented by a challenge from the digital media. As people surfed the Internet, joined social networks, participated in virtual realities, confidence waned with respect to the traditional virtues. How to determine truth, when any entry on Wikipedia can be changed? What happens to canons of beauty when one has access to literally millions of works, any of which can be morphed by the click of a mouse? How does one determine what's good in cyberspace, where long-held views of privacy, ownership, and trust seem anachronistic?

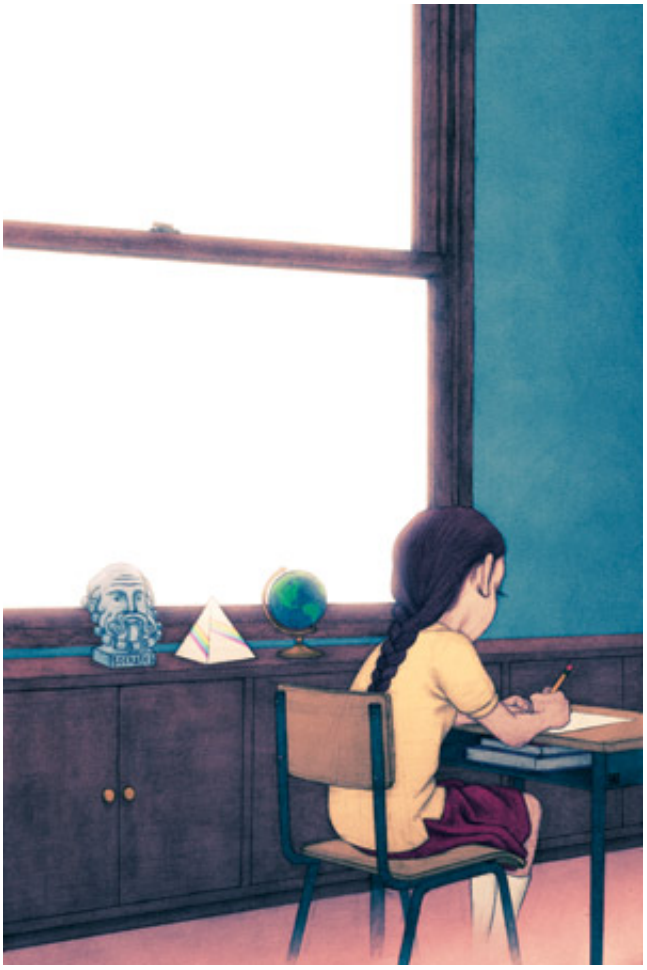
Reflecting on my educational philosophy, I confronted a dilemma.

Do I retrench, and defend the traditional views of the virtues against all comers? Do I jettison them? Or do I attempt to reframe truth, beauty, and goodness in light of the philosophical critique and the digital revolution?

Here's my answer—first the definitions, then the educational recommendations.

Truth is about statements, propositions. The proliferation of information on the Internet makes it more difficult, initially, to determine truth. But with patience and persistence, we have a better chance than ever before to determine whether a proposition is true, false, or indeterminate.

Beauty is about our experiences. A single standard of beauty is gone forever. We should now apply the term "beauty" more flexibly to experiences that are interesting, memorable, and worthy of revisiting. While truth is ultimately convergent, beauty becomes divergent. We each have the potential to develop, and to change continually, personal conceptions of beauty. And since one person's beauty need not clash with the sensibilities of others, this situation is welcome—no need for a consensual canon.



—Ian Kim

Good and *bad* denote our relations to other persons. For most of history, our relations were restricted to the hundred or so individuals in the vicinity; the "neighborly morality" of the Ten Commandments or the Golden Rule sufficed to guide our interactions. But in complex and interconnected societies, we must also master the "ethics of roles": What it means to be a good worker and a good citizen. Notions of "good" evolve as conditions change at the workplace or across the political landscape; only through continuing discussions among thoughtful individuals is it possible to recognize and work for "the good."

Given this reframing, what implications follow for education, in school and throughout life? My answer features three concepts: methods, portfolios, and commons.

Truth will always remain at the center of formal education. Only through deep immersion in disciplinary work can persons learn how to think scientifically or mathematically or historically; only through deep

immersion in professional practice can an individual learn the truths of that profession, be it surgery, engineering, or teaching. Happily, factual information is readily available—no need to memorize. Instead, we should focus on the methods used by disciplinarians and professionals to ascertain what is true and why. Online courses or activities can help, but there is no substitute for direct engagement over time with master teachers. Such immersion at school or work reveals the techniques for ascertaining truth—what the world is like, what happened in the past, how to achieve desired results going forward.

I am an unabashed proponent of arts education for discerning and creating beauty. Note, however, that digital media allow us to educate our own aesthetic sensibilities informally, through interaction with peers, or even alone. Thanks to ingenious "apps," one can now create works in one or more artistic media, thereby gaining a sense of what it means to be an artist.

Sheer perception or creation of works of art alone does not suffice. The key to a sense of beauty is the capacity to make consequential distinctions. Only then is one's evaluation of aesthetic experiences meaningful—rather than being, say, mere habit or a response to celebrity. Initially, with guidance, each person should assemble a material or digital portfolio of her evolving experiences of beauty in one or more art forms or realms of nature. Over time, each person should enrich that portfolio with her evolving experiences of beauty. The creating and curating of the portfolio constitutes an education in beauty.

Turning to goodness, we should continue to treat our neighbors as our kinder ancestors have over the millennia. No need for novel educational interventions! The challenge today is to develop an ethics of roles adequate for a global society. No longer can each profession, let alone each nation, embrace its own ethics, indifferent to what happens in other polities.

At present, the most powerful examples of a globally accepted "good" come from science and medicine, or, in a different key, from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but these remain works-in-progress. A genuine 21st-century Enlightenment cannot be dictated by a few middle-aged European Christians males in the 18th century; it must draw on the collective wisdom of major civilizations as well as smaller societies that have sustained themselves and their environment.

"What happens to canons of beauty when one has access to literally millions of works, any of which can be morphed by the click of a mouse?"

Borrowing a pastoral metaphor, I call for the establishment and maintenance of a commons—a set of common spaces—where reflective individuals can describe the dilemmas that arise at work or in their civic roles, how they have dealt with them, how they might behave differently in the future. The initial commons should be located in school: Teachers, staff, and students should discuss ethical issues, debate respectfully with one another, attempt to arrive at a consensual solution. Models are welcome!

Readers of *Education Week* naturally focus on the first decades of life. Yet, any thought nowadays that education should end at age 20 or 30 does not withstand scrutiny. We must continue to hone our senses of the virtues: learning new methods, updating our portfolios, participating in appropriate common spaces. In a digital era, the challenge for formal education is to provide the tools—cognitive and meta-cognitive—that will allow us to continue to educate ourselves with respect to truth, beauty, and goodness. As we age, we are well advised to collaborate with younger persons. All can draw on our knowledge and experience, while younger persons can alert us to the potentials and the pitfalls of the new technologies.

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