

TRUTH, GOODNESS, AND BEAUTY

By Dr. Nick Gier

“Moral beauty is an exceptional and very striking phenomenon. . . . Much more than science, art and religion, moral beauty is the basis of civilization.”

—Alexis Carrel

I believe that ethics is the art of making the soul great and noble. The ancient Chinese believed that moral development is like the cutting and polishing of a precious stone, and even today we say that the people we admire are real "gems." Children should choose such people as models for their lives, as they craft their growing moral selves from the raw materials of their being.

The Chinese philosopher Mencius switches from stones to plants, just as I did, when he suggests that we all have virtue sprouts that must be carefully nourished and tended. If they are not, then the virtues shrivel up and die, as many of them have done in our contemporary culture.

Please note that my definition of ethics above says nothing about following moral rules or doing one's duty. Rather, it means that truly good people are wise, courageous, compassionate, loyal, just, patient, and tolerant.

Most virtues are means between extremes that are actually creative choices. Courage, for example, is the middle way between foolhardiness and cowardice, but this will be a unique and distinctive path for each person. Gandhi's courage in confronting the British had a quality and personal style different any soldier in battle or any other person who stands firm in the face of danger.

A simple example will demonstrate the truth of this idea. People have learned that eating too little is just as bad as eating too much. But a guy such as Arnold Schwarzenegger can eat a lot more than I can without becoming a glutton. Each of us will find our own right amount to eat.

Our personal means between gluttony and anorexia are not just subjective whims. If we are mindful, objective factors such as temperament, body size, and metabolism will guide us to our own Golden Mean, but if we are not careful our bodies will tell us, sooner or later, that something is wrong.

Gandhi observed that although Socrates was not considered handsome, "to my mind he was beautiful because all his life was striving after truth." Some have said that Gandhi was just as ugly as Socrates, yet one friend said that "there was a rare spiritual beauty that shone in his face." Gandhi's moral beauty came from the courage of being true to himself and being true to others.

Moral beauty appears in lives that unite goodness and truth. As Alexis Carrell once said: "Moral beauty is an exceptional and very striking phenomenon. . . . Much more than science, art and religion, moral beauty is the basis of civilization."

The external beauty of many celebrities may blind us to the fact that they may be too proud and self-conscious about the attractive facades they have created. True moral beauty is never showy and ostentatious; if it is, it is false and only a semblance of virtue.

One can imagine even the most crippled and deformed presenting themselves with elegance and dignity. The literary examples of Beauty and the Beast and The Elephant Man make this point dramatically. The final line of the former is "To judge by appearance is to miss the beauty of our inner souls." In the ballet version the Beast's movements become increasingly elegant as he is accepted by Beauty. In real life Jimmy Carter's Veteran's Affairs Secretary was a Vietnam vet with one arm and no legs, but he played wheelchair basketball remarkably well and inspired everyone who met him.

Virtue ethics is emulative--using the sage or saint as a model for virtue--whereas rule ethics is based on simple conformity and obedience. The emulative approach engages the imagination, personalizes, and thoroughly grounds individual moral action and responsibility. Such an ethics naturally lends itself to an aesthetics of virtue: the crafting of a good and beautiful soul, a unique individual gem among other gems.