Truth, *Beauty*, and Goodness Reframed

Educating for the Virtues in the Twenty-First Century

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Preface

In 1904 Henry Adams, notable historian and member of arguably the most distinguished family in American history, published privately a lengthy (close to two-hundred-page), convoluted essay called *Mont-Saint Michel and Chartres: A Study of Thirteenth-Century Unity*.* Adams felt inadequate to deal with the many transformations that had taken place since his birth in 1838—the growth of cities, the rise of mass transportation, the influx of immigrants, the political assassinations, scientific breakthroughs such as Darwinism, and, above all, the new technologies—X-rays, radio, the automobile. Unlike his contemporary, the novelist Henry James, Adams did not turn his back on these unwelcome developments and move to Europe. Instead, he looked with nostalgia to a much earlier time—indeed, to Europe of the medieval era.

As he saw it, life in France in the eleventh and twelfth centuries represented an ideal. And that ideal was most dramatically conveyed, indeed embodied, by the magnificent Gothic cathedrals—awe-inspiring buildings where individuals of various backgrounds and classes gathered to worship, to behold splendid works of art, to hear magnificent chorale works, and to be spiritually uplifted. These cathedrals testified to a precious unity in life. The abstract entity—the Church—and its physical realization—the cathedral—represented a world to which all should aspire. 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. In a characteristic passage, Adams waxes rhapsodically:

> The whole Mount still kept the grand style; it expressed the unity of Church and State, God and Man, Peace and War, Life and Death, Good and Bad; it solved the whole problem of the universe . . . God reconciles all. The World is an evident, obvious, sacred harmony. . . . One looks back on it all as a picture; a symbol of unity; an assertion of God and Man in a bolder, stronger, closer union than ever was expressed by other art.

And as if the comparison with his own age was not sufficiently clear, Adams puts it into words: “All the centuries can do is to express the idea differently: a miracle or a dynamo; a dome or a coal pit; a cathedral or a world’s fair.”

Nearly a century later, in 2010, novelist-turned-essayist David Shields published a book entitled *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*. This book proves more difficult to describe than Adams’s. Presented in twenty-six chapters, each identified by an alphabet letter and a pithy title, the book actually consists of 618 squibs ranging from a few words to a page or so. The terrain of topics covered is very wide—from writing to memory to communication to politics—and the ordering of the squibs seems arbitrary, even random.

What makes the book unique is that nearly all of it consists of quotations from other writers. The careful or informed reader gradually infers that much of the text comes from others; but in most cases it is not clear who is the "I" or "we" that is penning the words or what is the book or other literary work being referenced. 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 lawyers at Random House, he supplies dozens and dozens of footnotes, indicating the sources of nearly all of the quotations.

But by this time, readers like me have become suspicious. If we have been led along a deceptive path for two hundred pages, why should we suddenly believe the author? And indeed, nearly all of the quotations call into question what truth is, whether it can be achieved, whether it matters. Consider just a few:

> *"The life span of a fact is shrinking, I don't think there's time to save it."*
>
> *"All the best stories are true."*
>
> *"Something can be true and untrue at the same time."*
>
> *"It's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen."*

I am impelled to revisit Shields's book in light of the trinity that inspired Henry Adams. As a student of reality, I have to ask: "What, if anything, in Shields's book is *true*?" As a student of morality, I have to ask: "Is it *good* to publish a book that actually is a string of quotations, initially unacknowledged as such?" And as a student of the arts, I have to ask: "Is this work *beautiful*?"

In principle, David Shields's book could have been written at any time—certainly at the time of Henry Adams and perhaps even during the Middle Ages. Yet, it is unimpeachably a work of our time. It represents the sentiments of postmodernism—the unflinching challenge to any notion of impeccable virtues. And it self-consciously embodies the practices of collaging, mashing, and pastiching that are enabled by the new digital media.

The two books—and these two authors—exemplify the problematic of the present volume. No longer, if ever, can we accept such terms as *truth*, *beauty*, and *goodness* without scrutiny, if not skepticism. And yet, at least some of us, and perhaps most of us, want to preserve them in a valid form.

And so my goal in this book is twofold: to define truth, beauty, and goodness for our time and to explicate how we might nurture these virtues going forward.

*All references can be found in the notes section, beginning on page 209.

Chapter 1

The Virtues and the Challenges

Here I am, sitting in my study in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It's a lovely, chilly January morning, with the sunlight streaming through the window to my left. In a box above my desk is a set of cards, each bearing a reproduction of a well-known Impressionist painting. The book on which I am now working—and that you are now reading—has two purposes. First, it's designed to help all of us think clearly about the current status of three crucial human virtues—truth, beauty, and goodness. In the light of this reframing, I offer suggestions to parents, teachers, and others, including ourselves, who ponder how we should educate across the generations.

I've just written a few sentences that would seem beyond objection, at least to anyone except a trained philosopher. Indeed, the sentences appear to exemplify what I'll term the *classical virtues*. The statements are *true*—it really is January, I am actually seated in my study, etc. I refer to paintings by artists like Claude Monet and Edgar Degas, works of art that are widely considered to be *beautiful*. And I have cited the goals of my literary exercise—to discuss pivotal issues thoughtfully and to offer sound educational recommendations—both of which undertakings are widely considered to be *good*.

Let's suppose that statements like these, and the sentiments that they capture, were actually as unproblematic as I've just claimed. This book would be easy to complete—indeed, it could stop right here. And indeed, most of us do live our lives taking these virtues largely for granted: We assume that most of what we hear from others, pick up in the media, perceive with our own senses, is *true*. We could scarcely function if we devoted real time to doubting each and every input to our senses and our psyche. Likewise, whether or not we invoke the word *beauty*, our choices reflect our aesthetic sensibilities: We value certain sights and sounds above others, gravitate toward certain scenes and experiences even as we avoid others, and attend to our own appearances, as well as the looks of those humans (and pets and gardens and dining rooms and meals) for whose presentation we feel responsible. And then, there's the matter of our relations to other people, and our evaluations of the behaviors of others—those known to us personally as well as those drawn from the news, history, or literature. We rarely hesitate to judge some as good, some as bad, most others as an indeterminate amalgam. We could hardly survive—in fact we could scarcely make it through the day—if we did not, at least implicitly, navigate among the true (and what is not true), the beautiful (and what is not beautiful), and the good (and what is not good). Just try to do so!

Our classical virtues, however, have been pummeled by developments in our era. In the West, in recent decades, conceptions of the true, the beautiful, and the good have been subjected to considerable, perhaps unparalleled, strain from two unexpected quarters—both quite new: the ideas that we describe as postmodern and the ever-expanding, ever more powerful digital media.

From one angle—a *philosophical* one—postmodern critiques emanating from the humanities have questioned the legitimacy of this trio of concepts (hereafter, *the trio*). According to this skeptical account, assessments of what is true or beautiful or good

reflect nothing more than the preferences of whoever holds power at a given moment; in a multicultural, relativistic world, the most to which we can aspire are civil conversations across often irreconcilable divides. And so, for example, the mild postmodernist might challenge my characterization of Impressionist art as beautiful, claiming that I am just yielding to an account of painting that, by an accidental set of circumstances, has come to dominate textbooks. The more aggressive postmodernists would throw out the term *beautiful* altogether—claiming either that the concept is meaningless or something even more venal: shorthand for stating that I have ascribed to myself the right to determine merit. So, too, my statements about truth and about goodness would be seen as arrogant, subjective, or meaningless.

From a quite different angle—a *technological* one—the new digital media have ushered in a chaotic state of affairs. Thanks to their predominance, we encounter a mélange of claims and counterclaims; an unparalleled mixture of creations, constantly being revised; and an ethical landscape that is unregulated, confusing, indeed largely unexamined. How to determine what is truth—when a statement on Wikipedia about who I am and what I am doing can be changed by anyone at any time? Or when we can all present ourselves on social network sites any way we want? Or when blogs can claim without evidence or consequence that the current American president was born in Kenya? How to ascertain what is beautiful—when a photograph by a once acknowledged master can be endlessly edited on Photoshop, or when judgments of works of art rendered by a majority vote are given more weight than those offered by experts? How to arrive at goodness—the right course of action—when it is so easy to circulate unsubstantiated rumors about another person's private life, or when nearly everyone downloads pirated music even though it is technically illegal to do so.

The postmodern critiques and the digital media have independent origins and histories, and yet they make strong and powerful bedfellows. Either force alone should engender anxiety in those of us who value truth, beauty, and goodness; taken together, they should give pause even to the most confident among us. In this book, I unflinchingly defend the importance, indeed the essential vitality, of this trio. Without claiming that they are the sole unsettling agents, I seek to take seriously the threats posed by postmodernism and the digital media. I trust that the resulting analysis will tease out the "essential core" of these virtues, help us to preserve that core in our time, and suggest how best to pass these virtues on to succeeding generations.

Why *should* we care about the true, the beautiful, and the good? And why *do* we care? Why, indeed, do I care, so deeply? Such caring is fundamental to our condition as human beings, and has been so for thousands of years. Early humans displayed Machiavellian intelligence: They deceived one another through words or deeds, acts that are possible only if one person believes that a fellow member of the species does not have access to what the first person believes to be true. Such humans also decorated themselves, their graves, and, most dramatically, the interior walls of caves where they practiced rites—surely dawning (and perhaps crowning) manifestations of beauty. And even as statues were erected to commemorate human and divine heroes, swift and brutal punishments awaited those who blatantly violated the norms of the group—those who committed deeds deemed villainous. Indeed, since the dawn of history, every known civilization has developed a conception of which statements are true and which are false; which experiences are considered to be beautiful, ugly, or banal; and which human actions and relationships are deemed good, compromised, or frankly evil.

Human beings reached a crucial milestone when they began explicitly to speak and write about these virtues and their lack: In the founding texts of the Hebrew Bible, the Confucian Analects, the Vedic Upanishads we find telling references to important truths, examples of beautiful language and images, and clear identification of good and evil. And a high point arrived when the philosophers of Athens—preeminently Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle—laid out explicitly their own definitions of truth, beauty, and goodness and what it means to lead lives guided by this set of virtues. (Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead was within acceptable hyperbolic limits when he wrote: "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists

of a series of footnotes to Plato.")

At times, the definition and delineation of these virtues may not have been widely debated but rather simply dictated from on high. Totalitarian and authoritarian regimes pose fundamental challenges to the ongoing exploration of the three virtues—because despots like Stalin, Mao, or Hitler declare that these matters have been settled and insist on silencing all those who might dare to dissent. Writer George Orwell had such societies in mind when, in his dystopian novel *1984*, the Ministry of Truth declares, "War is peace, Freedom is slavery."

While concern with the virtues is always looming, vigorous debate about them has permeated the most vital societies. Is knowledge of truth innate, as suggested by Socrates' interrogation of a slave, or is it established by the kinds of observations and classifications arrived at by knowledgeable observers and detailed by Aristotle? Is beauty achieved by rigorous adherence to the golden mean and ratios, or is it a gift divinely offered by or seized from the gods or from God? Does goodness emerge from a single deity, from conflicts among those perched on the Olympian pantheon, or from laws chiseled on a tablet by a powerful leader or by representatives of the populace? Such discussion seems to have flourished during Hammurabi's reign in Babylon, the Greece of the fourth century, Republican-era Rome, the Sung Dynasty in China, the Moorish caliphate in Syria and Egypt, the Italian Renaissance, and the founding of the great constitutional democracies of the modern age. Armed with historical hindsight, we clearly discern the threats posed when a spirit of debate and inquiry collides with narrow delineations: the medieval Cordoba of Maimonides is overwhelmed by the Spain of the Inquisition; the Confucian China of poets, painters, and sages gives way over the centuries to the human massacres and cultural destructions of Maoist China.

But when conceptions within a society conflict too stridently with one another, epochal upheavals are likely. Consider the last gasps of czarist Russia in the first decades of the twentieth century, or the waning years of the German Weimar Republic in the late 1920s. In each case, civil debate waned, armed camps arose; to paraphrase the poet Yeats's phrase, "the center did not hold." The ultimate results were Stalinist Russia of the gulag and Nazi Germany of the concentration camps—societies in which *any* open discourse about the virtues became taboo.

In our own society and in our own time, both nationally and over much of the planet, unfettered inquiry and debate are manifest—and this state of affairs is certainly preferable to the alternative. Consider some examples. For every pro-virtue statement from one authority, one finds an objection from another. Nobel Prize winner Albert Camus declared: "Only one thing on earth seems to be a greater good than justice—that is, if not truth itself, the pursuit of truth." As if in response, Nobel Prize winner Harold Pinter claimed that "[t]here are no hard distinctions between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false." Writer Gustav Flaubert tried to have it both ways: "Of all lies, art is the least untrue." A whole generation of artists and writers about art avoid discussions of beauty; and then, in short order, literary critic Elaine Scarry, philosopher Roger Scruton, and polymath Umberto Eco devote entire books to explorations of beauty. Clearly, these issues require, demand, reexamination. Conditions change, people change, and, in the absence of continuous dialogue, received wisdom evolves into unreflective orthodoxy. Still, we need constantly to steer a course between the papering over of differences, on the one hand, and outright hostility to those of contrasting viewpoints, on the other.

And so, we arrive at our current situation. Any society that hopes to endure must ensure that these concepts and values are passed on in viable form to succeeding generations. For, if we give up lives marked by truth, beauty, and goodness—or at least the perennial quest for them—to all intents and purposes, we resign ourselves to a world where nothing is of value, where anything goes. Lest we succumb to such a joyless or normless or pointless existence, it is vital to revisit the conceptions of the trio in clear light. Recalling the lively debates that marked earlier civilized eras, we need to determine what is essential, what cannot and should not be scuttled, what is no longer relevant or justifiable, and what ought to be reconceived going forward. Debate yes,

dismissal no. Ultimately we must transcend the relativism and often concomitant cynicism of postmodernism; we must come to grips with the vast changes entailed in a digital universe; but we cannot simply revert to the simplicities or the absolutisms of past eras or of contemporary dictatorships. We also must reconsider how our young people should be introduced to these three virtues and how—and to what extent—older persons should periodically reconceptualize them.

Start with truth. Courtesy of the postmodern critique, we are insecure in stating that the truth is evident and consensual. Perhaps we are merely seeing the world through our own prejudices—be they those of Fox News or National Public Radio, of the BBC or Al Jazeera. Perhaps truth is too intertwined with power to have any validity at all—what, after all, was *actually* true in Orwellian Stalinist Russia or in Maoist China, or in the "truthiness" of Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld Washington? And if we consider the welter of information and misinformation available on any search engine, how can we possibly determine what is true, or even whether the *search* for the truth has become a fool's errand?

Next, beauty. Perhaps we can gain universal assent—or at least a landslide majority of experts and art lovers—that a classical Greek vase or a Persian miniature or the seascape by Claude Monet above my desk are beautiful. But as you may remember from Art History 101, the works of Impressionist painters like Monet were widely repudiated by knowledgeable critics 140 years ago. And nowadays, in any comprehensive art museum, we see displayed numerous works that are valued and valuable, but that would not ordinarily merit the epithet *beautiful* (e.g., works by the British painters Francis Bacon and Lucien Freud). No wonder many writers about art now avoid altogether any assertions about beauty. Indeed, in much of the academy or among the chattering classes, it is considered unsophisticated to mention beauty because the purpose of art, as "enlightened opinion" now holds, is not to make stunning objects (that's passé or kitsch) but rather to shock us or make us think anew.

Or consider the options available with the new digital media. One can endlessly make and remake works of art through Photoshop; one can execute countless mash-ups of musical passages; one can string together dozens of verses by poets known and obscure, rewording them as much or little as one wishes. In so doing, one substitutes for an authoritative judgment of "beautiful" the vagaries of individual taste or the cumulative efforts of legions of anonymous creators whose work is never done, or always undone. When any image or sound pattern is evanescent, and when anyone in possession of a mouse can become a creator of art, the term *beauty* seems on thin ground or, if you prefer, floating aimlessly in cyberspace. In a textbook example of postmodern thought, the late critic Susan Sontag opined: "In the form of photographic images, things and events are put to new uses, assigned new meanings, which go beyond the distinction between the beautiful and the ugly, the true and the false, the useful and the useless, good taste and bad."

And finally the good. Within a particular historical era or geographical area, one can with some confidence identify what is good and what is evil. For example, in ancient Athens, valor in war and kindness to slaves qualified as good. Refusal to participate in battle or to condone slavery was a dubious stance—if not grounds for a forced shot of hemlock. But with knowledge of the twists and turns of human history, and growing familiarity with disparate cultures across time and space, we become tentative, timid, about assertions of good and evil. One group's terrorist is another group's freedom fighter: Who embodies good or evil—Athens or Sparta, Hamas or the Jewish Defense League?

Again, our technologically saturated era poses profound challenges to once relatively uncontroversial assertions of what is good, moral, ethical and what is not. How, in a digital era, do we think about a sense of privacy, the rights of authorship, the trustworthiness of an electronic correspondent whom one cannot look in the eye and who may reappear at any moment under a wholly different guise in a social network or on a blog? What is "goodness" in the virtual reality of Second Life? In multiple-user games like World of Warcraft, is it okay to bully and cheat because, after all, such a

game is not *really* real? Are the plausible but unconfirmed rumors that circulate at warp speed on the Internet welcome wake-up calls, spurs to further investigation, or pernicious lies? In our fragmented, polyphonic digital age, the ideal of shared moral standards seems ever more elusive.

In my view, the three virtues are conceptually distinct from one another—each must be considered on its own merits (and demerits). As an example, we realize that something can be true (the fact that over fifty-seven thousand Americans lost their lives in the Vietnam War) without being beautiful or good. By the same token, something can be good without being beautiful—consider a gruesome documentary about prison life intended to shock people into embracing prison reform. And a scene of the natural world, after the demise of all human beings, can be cinematically beautiful, even though it is neither true historically nor good, at least for the species that has been annihilated—that is to say, us.

Yet it is important to recognize that what appears self-evident to contemporary informed adults has not always been so. A character in Bernhard Schlink's *Homecoming* muses, "Children hope against hope that what is good is true and beautiful and what is evil is false and ugly." Indeed, in many societies throughout most of history, the three virtues were seen as being integrally linked, if not identical to one another. Writer Margaret Atwood has suggested one such period, with reference to the ancient Egyptian concept of "ma-at." As she puts it, "'Ma-at' meant truth, justice, balance, the governing principles of nature and the universe, the stately progression of time . . . the true, just, and moral standards of behavior, the way things are supposed to be—all those notions rolled up into one short word. Its opposite was physical chaos, selfishness, falsehood, evil behavior—any sort of upset in the divinely ordained pattern of things."

And so, I must walk a fine line here. In what follows, I treat each virtue independently. I'll present its defining characteristics, its constant as well as its varying features, and the threats posed by postmodernism and the digital media. Indeed, as I see it, in our era each of the virtues has a different status and will have a distinctive fate. Yet I'll bear in mind the human tendency—across the ages and across the age range—to conflate the virtues. And I'll take care to point out times when we are in fact dealing with more than one virtue, as well as ways in which the virtues may impact one another.

Having laid out an admittedly grand scheme, I owe it to the reader to reflect on what has brought me to this point. I was trained as a psychologist in the specialized areas of developmental psychology, neuropsychology, and cognitive psychology. While I have wandered far and wide across disciplinary terrains, I still see the world through the lenses of a psychologist. The "far and wide" is captured in three successive thrusts of my work: I began as a psychologist of the arts, hence a researcher of the traditional terrain of *beauty*. Then, for many years, I investigated human cognition: through studies of intellect and understanding, focused on what is *true* and how we make such a determination. Most recently, for a decade and a half, I have collaborated on a study of ethics. Our team has been trying to determine what it means to be a *good* worker, a *good* citizen, a *good* person in the fast-paced, media-drenched, consumer-driven, global society of the twenty-first century. In the absence of a master plan (at least one that has been disclosed to me), my own scholarly life has in fact traced an arc from beauty through truth to goodness.

While I have long been interested in the issues addressed here, my own thinking has changed significantly in recent years. Courtesy of my psychological studies of intelligence—most notably, the theory of multiple intelligences—I became involved in educational efforts in the United States and abroad. This engagement ultimately stimulated me to put forth my own educational philosophy. In *The Disciplined Mind*, published in 1999, I contrived an entire curriculum around three topics: Darwinian evolution, the music of Mozart, and the Holocaust of World War II. These topics were not chosen casually. Rather, evolution was selected explicitly as an example of scientific truth; Mozart, as an example of artistic beauty; the Holocaust, as a historical instance of human evil (the sharpest contrast to good). With the benefit of hindsight, one

could say that I wrote that book as a *naïf*—I simply accepted as unproblematic the trio of classical virtues. In this way, I probably resemble most readers—and most teachers—not versed in postmodernist thought.

But I now realize a peril in such naïveté. If we simply accept the virtues, we are unprepared for sophisticated (if not sophistic) arguments that attack notions of the truth, the beautiful, and the good. For example: Since the Impressionists were initially rejected by knowledgeable critics, how do we know we are right in revering their works and extolling their beauty? Are we smarter or more discerning than the "eyes" of 1870? How could slavery, or the inferior status of women, have been embraced in ancient Greece, the very society where philosophy and democracy were first forged? Why did people so long believe that the sun orbits around the earth and that the earth is flat, and why do so many still insist that man was created on the sixth day? (According to a recent poll carried out by the Barna group, 60 percent of Americans believe that God created the universe in six days.) Lack of satisfactory replies to such gadfly queries can lead even sophisticated adults to jettison notions of beauty, truth, and goodness. Restless youths, already primed to challenge conventional wisdom, will even more readily do the same.

In my naïveté, circa 1999, I also ignored rapid cultural changes, such as the emergence of the new digital media, which at the very least *problematize* these classical notions. If an entry in Wikipedia can be altered on a minute-by-minute basis, how can we establish what is true or, indeed, if truth even exists? If artist Damien Hirst's website consistently attracts attention and his art commands record-breaking prices, can we therefore conclude that his works—perhaps most notoriously, a dead shark floating in formaldehyde—must be beautiful or that beauty no longer matters? If a teenager commits suicide after being de-friended by a person on Facebook or photographed surreptitiously having sex, is there an evil person whom one can blame? I understand the feelings of a character in Daniel Kehlmann's novel *Fame*: "How strange that technology has brought us into a world where there are no fixed places anymore. You speak out of nowhere, you can be anywhere, and because nothing can be checked, anything you choose to imagine is, at the bottom, true. If no one can prove to me where I am, if I myself am not absolutely certain, where is the court that can adjudicate these things?"

While the idea for a book may appear in a memorable instant, its germs are invariably dispersed over space and time. Even when I wrote *The Disciplined Mind*, I was aware that I had chosen the most clear-cut examples, and that notions of truth, beauty, and goodness were by no means self-evident or beyond controversy. When I lecture, questioners frequently remind me of this point. Among my children, their friends, and my own students, I noticed ever more relativistic, if not nihilistic, views of the classical virtues: For those a generation or two younger, the virtues seemed highly problematic, if not anachronistic. I'd been aware of postmodernist accounts for many years, but because of my deepening involvement with New York's Museum of Modern Art, I began to pay more attention to them. Perhaps most important, I began to learn about the digital media. Very tentatively, I began to use them myself, and, with the help of talented colleagues, I undertook a systematic exploration of their use by young people. It gradually dawned on me that my most fundamental assumptions were being challenged. It was time for me to study, to reflect, and, as has been my wont, to present my conclusions in book form.

I can state these conclusions succinctly: Each of the virtues encompasses an abstract realm of experience—verbal propositions, evocative experiences, and relations among human beings, respectively. Each is best exemplified by certain specific human activities: Science and journalism traffic in truth; art and nature are the sphere of beauty; goodness concerns the quality of relations among human beings. The trio of virtues, while unquestionably in flux and under attack, remain essential to the human experience and, indeed, to human survival. They must not and will not be abandoned.

Turning to specifics: We can be ever more confident that truths exist in several spheres. We must strive to identify and affirm truths, while remaining open to revising

them in the light of new knowledge. We must acknowledge the limitations of a canon of beauty and, equally, of a set of artistic attributes with beauty at the helm. Beauty now takes its place alongside other compelling aesthetic values, such as interestingness As compensation, we now each have an unequaled opportunity to attain an individualized sense of beauty. With respect to the good, we must recognize two spheres: the long-standing morality that obtains among neighbors, and the ethics associated with the ever-evolving roles of worker and of citizen. While cherishing their idiosyncratic customs, human societies embedded in a global matrix are now challenged to create and honor conceptions of the good that transcend particulars of time and place.

Every age has its predominant modes of explanation, ones that govern or even constitute the thinking of the era. Following the Newtonian revolution in physics, for instance, it became common to conceptualize people and the universe as mechanical devices. Likewise, the philosophers of the Enlightenment saw the world as marching steadily forward to the tunes of *progress*, *reason*, and *perfection*—and if a political revolution could help move things along, so much the better. Then, in reaction to the excesses of the dramatic political upheavals at the end of the eighteenth century, the nineteenth century ushered in beliefs in the distinctive practices of individual cultures, civilizations, regions, nations, and underscored the power of irrational forces and thoughts.

When I examine my own motivations for writing the present book, I realize that I have been stimulated, in significant measure, by the need to respond to two powerful analyses of the human condition—one emanating from biology, the other from economics. In my view, these accounts have gained undue ascendancy in recent decades. To be sure, nearly all of us have learned from concepts and findings in biology and economics—I freely cite their examples and arguments. Yet, taken as a whole, I take sharp issue with these lenses on the world. Those beholden to biological or economic accounts regularly give short shrift to the power of individual agents, and to the efficacy of individuals voluntarily and tirelessly working together to achieve desirable goals. In a sense, this book may be read as a sustained argument against the hegemonies of biological determinism and/or economic determinism.

First, the biological lens. As we learn more about the brain and about genetics, both scholars and laymen become curious about the extent to which various human characteristics are determined by neurobiology. Is there a gene for our aesthetic sense? Are certain parts of the brain dedicated to the detection of truth? Which? Can we identify the circuits that govern moral judgments? Such biologically specifiable sites may or may not be identified. But simply knowing that certain genes incline us toward preferring one graphic rendering over another, or that certain areas of the brain light up when we are making a difficult ethical decision, hardly constitutes the last words on our senses of beauty or morality. I am not even certain that such knowledge constitutes the first word: Just what is it that we now know that we did not know before?

Even more insidious is a two-step biological argument: (1) Human beings are what we are because of evolution—which is essentially a truism; (2) therefore, thanks to a slippery slope, evolution determines the nature and limits of our judgments of truth, our aesthetic preferences, our moral and ethical codes. On the contrary: I argue that what is distinctly human is our capacity to change, or to transcend, whatever traits and inclinations we may have as initial endowment, courtesy of evolution. Our prehistory, our recorded history, and our numerous diverse cultures testify to the flexibility of our species and the unfathomability of its future course.

Second, the economic lens. Without question, economics has become the privileged mode of social-scientific explanation for human behavior. In a way that seems particularly attractive to Americans, but has also proved alluring in other parts of the world, the application of mathematical or statistical models to real-world problems has become an intellectually privileged form of analysis. Let's count, let's rank, let's chart, let's correlate variables. Then we'll know what's what and, in all likelihood, what we should do. Put succinctly, we can and should quantify and rank—and we can trust the results of that quantification and the resulting ranking. The crowd is wise—and so we

can rely on its determination of what is true. Equally, the market is unerring, and so the best works of art garner the highest prices. Finally, by a magnificent, if not miraculous process, society ends up better off because each of us pursues our self-interest in a lawful way.

Even before the financial meltdown of September 2008, many commentators pointed out flaws in this view of men and markets. We have had ample demonstrations that markets do not automatically adjust; that people do not know what is in their self-interest; indeed, that both individuals and markets are frequently irrational and not to be trusted; and that their combination can be toxic as well as tonic. Yet, especially in the United States, the economic lens remains the fallback position for much of the population. Even with the flaws and limitations of this perspective freshly recognized, a majority of people believe that societies should turn to economic analyses, whenever possible—a so-called accountability approach. If one mode of ranking does not work, we'll simply employ another. Currently, no alternative view of human nature has anywhere near the sway.

I enjoy the works of journalist Malcolm Gladwell, justly acclaimed for his books on the tipping point, intuitive judgments or "blink," and the often astounding performances that emerge when, for one reason or another, a person is an "outlier." In reading Gladwell, one is struck by the telling example—the expert who senses, in a blink, that the new acquisition by the museum is a fake; or the discovery that professional hockey players tend to be born in the first months of the year; or the phenomenon of the slow-selling book that abruptly leaps onto the best-seller list. On reflection, however, it is not difficult to identify cases that run counter to Gladwell's memorable examples. Intuitive judgments rendered in a blink turn out to be accurate except when they are not, indeed when they are disastrous. Professional hockey players turn out to be born early in the calendar years, except for the many born then who are nothing special, or the numerous talented hockey players who are born later in the year. And the vast majority of books register gradually changing sales, with no realistic chance of making any best-seller list.

In my view, the biological and economic lenses suffer from the same flaw, or, to be kinder, the *limitations* of predictability or explanation. There may be a gene or a brain section that lights up when we are altruistic; but there are all too many situations in which we nonetheless behave selfishly. Human beings may well make decisions rationally, particularly when playing an economics-generated game, except for all of those situations where personality or contextual or ideological factors induce nonrational reactions.

I yield to no person in my admiration for the work of Charles Darwin, and the importance of the evolutionary theory that he first proposed. And yet I believe that efforts to account for human behaviors, potentials, and limitations in Darwinian terms have gone way too far. What human beings come to value as beautiful owes far more to the vagaries of history, culture, and—indeed—pure chance than to the tastes that evolved tens of thousands of years ago on the savannahs of East Africa. By the same token, evolution establishes neither that humans are fundamentally altruistic, empathic, and good nor that human beings are fundamentally selfish, insensitive, and malevolent. Powerful proclivities exist in both directions. Look, rather, at the facts on the ground of history, culture, human development, and education. These facts determine *which* congeries of features comes to the core at a particular time and in a particular circumstance. Human agency matters enormously—indeed, it allows us to transcend the determinism alleged by theorists of the market and theorists of evolution.

In what follows, it is not my intention to whack the biological or economic perspectives, except when such disciplining seems warranted. Rather, I emphasize that biology or economics hardly ever provide the definitive account of human actions, decisions, and thoughts. Even when they work together, as through the new field of neuroeconomics, their explanatory power proves remarkably limited. I want to call attention instead to the importance of unique histories, distinctive cultural profiles, and happy—or unhappy—accidents. And I want to underscore the remarkable capacity of individuals to make their own decisions, even in the face of strong pressures to proceed

in a certain direction; and of a few remarkable individuals, by dint of their mastery and their imaginations, to open up new possibilities that change the course of history. When economics and biology add to our understanding, fine; but when they keep us from searching in unexplored regions of the human landscape, as they so often have in recent decades, then these perspectives should be discarded.

One cannot understand the status of these virtues without taking a multidisciplinary perspective: Philosophy has its place, but so do psychology, history, and cultural studies, and, yes, even economics and biology. In the course of what follows, I will wander freely among these disciplinary terrains, while at the same time citing examples from current events and from daily experiences, including my own. But enough of generalities, summaries, promissory notes. It is time now to examine each of the virtues, first in its own terms, then in the light of challenges posed by new currents of thought and new forms of technology. Following the three surveys, I offer my considered views about how best to educate the young, and how those of us who are no longer young can remain engaged with these perennial topics. While not deluding ourselves that we can ever recapture them in idealized form, I believe we can nonetheless preserve central features of the classical virtues.

Chapter 2 | Truth

Since this chapter is concerned with truth, it is reasonable to begin with a consideration of that virtue, and to make sure that I am committed to telling the truth—otherwise, why should you waste your time reading my words? So let me begin with a simple assertion: Truth is essentially a property of statements, of propositions—two plus two are four, True; two plus two are five, False. Statements can reference any topic—the past, the weather, one's aspirations, one's fears. And as the first sentence in this paragraph reveals, statements can even be about themselves.

In fact, this very situation—that statements can be self-referential—can get us, get me, in trouble. We encounter the famous liar's paradox. Suppose I make the statement "Howard Gardner lies all the time." If that statement, as spoken by me, is true, then I have contradicted myself, by stating a truth. Suppose, on the other hand, that the statement is false (I have been telling the truth about myself in what you've read thus far) and I have lied in characterizing myself as a chronic liar. The liar's paradox has amused many, while giving indigestion chiefly to philosophers. It reminds us that language is a supple resource; like a visual illusion, it can play odd tricks with our minds.

I've hinted that truth (and falsity) are tricky matters. The notion that truth and falseness are self-evident, matters of simple common sense, does not withstand scrutiny. And indeed, I do not believe that we can ever establish truth so reliably, that any statement, let alone any set of statements, can be ruled as inviolably true, for all time, and under all circumstances (though 2 + 2 = 4 comes pretty close).

Yet it would be catastrophic to embrace the opposite stance—to give up the effort to approach and, when possible, to establish truths. Suppose we were to take postmodern views to an extreme—for example, to state that truth is but an expression of power, or that truth cannot be established with any validity, or that truth is a vacuous concept. Under such circumstances, we could scarcely function at all. Or if we were to cede all judgments to the digital media—if we posited that truth is nothing more than a majority vote on a webpage, or believed that the most recent edit of an online encyclopedia is more definitive than the accumulated judgments of experts—we would be relinquishing considered judgment to the whim of the crowd (or to the web-surfers with the most time on their hands).

It's important for us to salvage, indeed to valorize, the core idea of truth. I believe that human beings, working carefully and reflectively and cooperatively over time, can converge more and more closely to a determination of the actual state of affairs—to the way that things actually are. There is not just a single area of truth, however. There are different truths, in different scholarly spheres, as well as different truths in different practical spheres. These truths should not be confused or conflated with one another.

In what follows, I'll sketch the course of a sense of truth as it develops, note the many reasons why we cannot simply trust the evidence of our senses, consider the various spheres of truth, review the threats to a sense of truth posed by postmodernism and the digital media, and indicate what of value remains. It hardly needs to be stated that the establishment of the legitimacy of truth is important—not least, of course, for

the rest of the inquiry into beauty, goodness, and education that I'm undertaking here. For while truth is not the same as beauty or goodness, its absence would preclude considered judgments of any and all virtues.

Truth has its natural home in human language, but the possibility for ascertaining the true state of affairs extends to the prelinguistic infant. From the opening days of life, our five senses tell us what the world is like and, by implication, what it is *not* like. A baby reaches for a cup and grabs it confidently—there really is a cup there. A baby reaches for a virtual cup, puts her fingers around it, discovers a simulacrum instead, and whimpers, acts frustrated, or even wails.

Fast-forward two years and a parallel event occurs on the verbal level. The child announces "There's daddy" and the mother nods her head and says, "That's right, that's daddy." But if the mother points to a picture of herself and says, "That's daddy," the child will be confused and taken aback. "No, no, not daddy," he exclaims. In some sense, as embodied in this simple verbal proposition, the two-year-old knows the difference between truth and falsity.

Our conception of truth arises initially from common sense, with an emphasis both on *common* and on *sense*. We rely in the first instance on our senses and, in the second instance, on what is commonly sensed—that is, what is seen or heard or smelled not just by us but by other representative members of the community, particularly those who are considered to be knowledgeable. And for much of life, as well as for the proverbial "man on the Clapham omnibus" or "the little old lady from Dubuque," that is enough.

Alas, common sense cannot get us very far. Misinformation or disinformation can spread readily through a community—becoming, in a sardonic phrase made famous by economist John Kenneth Galbraith, the "conventional wisdom." After all, despite the evidence of our senses, the earth is not flat, the sun does not revolve around the earth, the earth and other celestial bodies do not float in the ether, time and space are not absolute, human beings were not created on the sixth day—the list of one-time widely acknowledged truths now rejected is endless. I can add that innumerable truths are of no interest. I could write that today is January 9, tomorrow is January 10, the day thereafter is January 11, etc.—none of which are false, but nothing is gained by amassing a mound of statements that are true but trivial. Even in the area of mathematics, caution is in order. Two and two may not equal five, but parallel lines *do* meet in non-Euclidean geometry.

Even when we *should* rely on our senses, we can easily be manipulated into ignoring the evidence that they willingly provide. Half a century ago, social psychologist Solomon Asch asked people seated around a table to indicate which of two lines was longer. The correct answer was perfectly clear—one line was perceptibly longer than the other. But then in a second round, respondents who were actually confederates of the experiment leader all selected the shorter line. Under these changed circumstances, the innocent subject-responder would usually conform to other members of the group, affirming what he believed to be false, perhaps even beginning to question his senses. This tendency to defer to others has been borne out in numerous experiments. If, for example, one group is led to believe that a certain tune is popular, and a matched group is not given that information, the first group will tend to rate the tune more highly and download it more often. We can readily be swayed against the evidence of our own senses or our own minds. Any defense of truth must be cognizant of such seductions.

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that not all statements can be accurately described as true or false. Many statements are indeterminate, either for the present or for all time. For example, the frequent assertion that "we use only 10 percent of our brains" is not something that can be determined by science. (Indeed, its validity depends on what is meant by the claim and whether it could in fact be ascertained.) And of course, many other statements are either exaggeratedly foolish ("I am the luckiest person on the planet") or poetic ("My love is a red red rose") or meaningless ("Colorless green ideas sleep furiously").

In reflecting on the human quest for truth, we can and should begin with the

phenomenal experience of our senses. The possibility of a search for truth relies on the existence of our sense organs—our ways of coming to know the world beyond our skin and outside of our skull. But the search cannot and should not end there. The sphere of human knowledge represents a communal trek, over many centuries and many terrains, to place our senses of truth on firmer footing; to separate warranted truths from those statements that are perhaps equally seductive, at first encounter, but are ultimately judged as false or devoid of meaning; to valorize those statements that deserve to be repeated and perhaps even enshrined in a Hall of Strongly Supported and Significant Truths.

In the search for truth, our greatest allies are the scholarly disciplines and the professional crafts—in short, areas of expertise that have developed and deepened over the centuries. Each discipline, each craft explores a different sphere of reality and each attempts to establish truths—the truths of knowledge, the truths of practice. The firmest set of truths lies in mathematics: 2 + 2 = 4, and so long as one remains within the realm of arithmetic, this truth will not change. The axioms discovered by Euclid also remain true; only when a new branch of mathematics arises, one called non-Euclidean (or hyperbolic) geometry, can Euclidean assumptions be called into question within that new sub-discipline. Other disciplines—such as physics or biology or history or psychology or economics—have their respective methods and criteria for ascertaining truths.

Even before there was mathematics, there were the practical pursuits—how to plant and harvest crops; how to slay, prepare, and devour an animal; how to smelt and cast bronze; how to lower a fever without harming the patient. I call these the *practical crafts*. The practical crafts range from the so-called learned professions—such as journalism, engineering, and architecture—to the making of objects, be they necklaces, aqueducts, or violins. It may seem that I've deviated from my definition of truth as a property of statements. But importantly, in principle, these practices can be—and often are—put into verbal propositions: "First you look all around you; then you lift your weapon; then you take careful aim, etc." It is usually easier to *demonstrate* how to slay and carve an animal than to *convert* the sequence of actions into a string of words or phrases. Still, the entire industry of self-help books, such as the enormously successful series of "Books for Dummies," assumes that much of what constitutes practice can be translated felicitously into verbal form, with perhaps an occasional illustration.

Undoubtedly there are powerful links between the practical crafts—some of which date back many centuries—and science as it came to be pursued, first in seventeenth-century Europe and now across much of the globe. Bear in mind that Albert Einstein, by anyone's definition a great scientist, began his work life as a patent officer who became intrigued by a practical problem: how one could synchronize the times on clocks at railroad stations strewn along a route. But the discipline of science is a fundamentally different enterprise from that entailed in effective craftsmanship. Science represents an effort to establish not the truths of practice but, rather, a model of how the world works—or perhaps more truly, though less elegantly, multiple models of how the world works. The models are initially descriptive (a caterpillar grows into a moth or butterfly) but ultimately they may be causal (Y occurs because of X) and predictive (If I enable X to happen, Y will result).

Ideally, scientists make scrupulous, disinterested observations and/or execute careful, transparent experiments. On the basis of these observations and experiments, scientists create such models—of the physical world, of the biological world, of humankind, etc. These models are never final. Indeed, what distinguishes science from faith or fiction or folklore is the possibility of altering, rectifying, or disproving the model. Typically this tweaking is done in gradual fashion. But as historians of science have taught us, there are sometimes abrupt and dramatic shifts in scientific paradigms—and then a whole new set of truths (e.g., those about evolution or relativity or plate tectonics) comes to the fore. We can probably order the sciences in terms of the relative security of the truths, with physics near the top of the hierarchy, psychology and economics closer to the bottom. But all sciences march—or at least attempt to march—to the same


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carefully and impartially; assess the reliability of sources, shun (except under extraordinary circumstances) anonymous sources, confirm or ignore rumors, offer individuals who are criticized or charged with a crime an opportunity to rebut, and so on. As is the case with any profession, one gains the skills of reporting only through modeling by experts, careful training with feedback, learning from one's mistakes, interacting over time with experts, and benefiting from their evaluations—positive and critical. It may be hard to believe today, but for decades, many journalists in the United States even refused to vote—they did not want to undermine their disinterested status. Thomas Jefferson famously declared, "Were it left to me whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter." He had a valid point, if not a truth to be held as self-evident! This, then, is the practical craft of journalism—a craft dedicated to the rapid ascertainment of facts.

To be sure, at first blush, determining journalistic truth has become much more challenging in the era of the Internet. I am old enough to remember a time when the CBS Evening News delivered what we the viewers believed was *the* authoritative truth about the world each evening, through the mellifluous tones of Douglas Edwards or Walter Cronkite. Cronkite even closed the evening news with the revealingly authoritative "That's the way it is." And each evening his somber and sober sidekick, commentator Eric Sevareid, told us what "it" all meant. Truths of the nightly news were confirmed by weekly issues of *Time* and *Life* magazines. While I would not defend those media as flawless, they did make our lives easier.

Nowadays, no news outlet carries anywhere near that much authority. Young people shun print newspapers, and many prefer not even to get their news from the online edition of the *New York Times* or *Time*. Rather, they read a few blogs, typically favoring those with which they are in agreement, watch satirists Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert on the comedy channel, and decide what is true (if not beautiful and good) on the basis of these often eccentric sources. Or as young people have often said to me, "If it's important, I'll hear about it."

In my lifetime, there has been a seismic shift. Perhaps reflecting postmodern skepticism about the possibility of establishing truth, authority and objectivity have been supplemented—or even supplanted—by authenticity and transparency. Put differently, the young (and, increasingly, the not-so-young) do not believe individuals because of their status or their training or their expertise. Youths prefer to lend credence to those individuals who seem to be candid and who freely admit their biases.

But I cannot be satisfied with nostalgia. It's important to acknowledge that many "digerati" see the new media as a democratic nirvana—and at times I share their optimism. The online democrat scans dozens of sources regularly, discounts their individual biases, and arrives at his or her own truth or truths—and perhaps even The Truth. Recently I encountered a version of this stance. I bumped into a young man (I'll call him Ned) at one of those conferences where the briefing booklet contained a photo and a short canned bio of each participant. In a matter-of-fact manner, Ned said, "I never pay the slightest attention to these potted bios. Instead, I go to a search engine and read all about the participants so that I will know who they *really* are—the good, the bad, and the ugly." If this dispensation were truly followed, then in a sense we would all become our own best journalists and, in the extreme, our own best historians. And here, indeed, is the challenge for those of us who want to preserve the core notions of truth: Can we survey widely, synthesize wisely, and converge on what has actually happened? If we can do this, if we can take the proper leaf from the practices of Ned, then we are in a better position than ever before to ascertain the actual state of affairs.

Just as scholarly disciplines have their respective truths, professions and crafts have *their*s, and these truths need to be honed. To be sure, these crafts are far more reliant today than in the past on the results of scholarly work in the disciplines. As appropriate, journalists make use of findings from science, economics, philosophy. Craftspeople make use of mathematics, natural sciences, social sciences—they draw on truths that arise from the disciplines and may be applicable across professions. Professionals such