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Chapter Six

Integral Spirituality

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Beauty, Truth, and Goodness—Philosophical Spirituality

The idea of “philosophical spirituality” may strike some advanced practitioners as ill-advised. Because any philosophy of spirit is bound to be largely mental, it may seem that this kind of spirituality is completely transcended and left behind by those who have experienced spirit directly and trans-rationally. It can indeed be quite embarrassing when spirituality becomes overly intellectualized, because this inevitably leads to stagnation and dogmatism. Nevertheless, even while we are aware of these limitations, in our spiritual quest we must continue to labor under the paradox of “making effective use of thought while at the same time discounting the spiritual serviceability of all thinking.” Moreover, while philosophy may be of little use in the achievement of the higher levels of personal spiritual progress, it can be very useful in building a functional, pluralistic spiritual community. Thus, those who have achieved spiritual growth for themselves often find that the guidance of spiritual philosophy can be extremely useful in their efforts to give back to their societies as well as in their efforts to coordinate with those on different paths who are also motivated to practice their spirituality by attempting to improve the human condition.

From my perspective, the most potent form of spiritual philosophy is found in the recognition of the spiritual quality of values. Throughout our discussion we have repeatedly seen how values—goals, ideals, desires, intrinsic qualities, standards of perfection—serve to energize consciousness and culture and nourish these internal systems with meaningful sustenance. And although the term “values” does have some baggage due to its adoption by the religious

right, this term is too important to concede to those who oppose cultural evolution. Potential alternative expressions of the idea of values could include Paul Tillich's phrase: "matters of ultimate human concern." We can even associate values with the mystical idea of quality itself. However, my own understanding of the idea of values has been most illuminated through the use of the concept of three "primary values"—the beautiful, the true, and the good. These are the three *most intrinsic* values that are recognized as the root qualities from which all values are essentially derived. Just as the millions of colors in the visible spectrum can be fairly represented through the combination of three primary colors, so too can the millions of shades of quality be roughly approximated by reference to beauty, truth, and goodness. If we think about values in terms of beauty, truth, and goodness it makes the rather abstract notion of values more specific while retaining the level of generality we need to really understand values as a category of human experience.

So now we'll spend some time discussing how the triad of beauty, truth, and goodness can become an organizing principle of the emerging spiritual culture of integral consciousness. First, we'll discuss the significant history of the triad of beauty, truth, and goodness, and explore why so many of the world's greatest leaders and thinkers have acknowledged these three as primary. Next, we'll examine the primary values in relation to the spiral of development to see how these values have both a relative and local quality that is shaped by the worldview from which they are perceived, as well as a universal quality that is seen in the way these values define the ever-advancing trajectory of all internal evolution. Then in the following section we'll discuss how these values serve as content for spiritual experience, how they can be recognized as important forms of "spiritual nutrition," and how these conceptual categories actually lend themselves to specific practices that can bring about evolution in both individual consciousness and collective culture.

The fundamental values of beauty, truth, and goodness have been recognized since antiquity as the intrinsic qualities from which all values are essentially derived. Plato was the first writer to associate the beautiful, the true, and the

good together, and to exalt these three as primary. And since Plato in the 4th century B.C., this triad of terms has continued to impress itself upon the minds of philosophers and mystics. This is not to say that all the proponents of beauty, truth, and goodness have been followers of Plato; some have discovered the significance of this triad through decidedly non-philosophical methods. But whether they are arrived at through intuitive inspiration or rational deduction, these three terms keep showing up in the writing of a wide variety of notable luminaries. However, these exact terms are not always mentioned directly. For example, Immanuel Kant clearly recognized three essential modes of mental function; they formed the subject matter of his three great philosophical works: *The Critique of Pure Reason* (which is about truth), *The Critique of Practical Reason* (which is about morality or goodness), and *The Critique of Judgment* (which is about aesthetics or beauty). Since the Enlightenment, the idea of the primary values has continued to be discussed by thinkers as diverse as Freud, Gandhi, and Einstein. Even the *Encyclopedia Britannica* has acknowledged the significance of this ubiquitous trio, stating that: “Truth, goodness, and beauty form a triad of terms which have been discussed together throughout the tradition of Western thought. They have been called ‘transcendental’ on the ground that everything which is, is in some measure or manner subject to denomination as true or false, good or evil, beautiful, or ugly.”

Many mystics and spiritual teachers such as Rudolph Steiner, Sri Aurobindo, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Osho Rajneesh have also championed the idea of these three essential “windows on the divine.” For example, Sri Aurobindo describes what he calls “three dynamic images” through which one makes contact with “supreme Reality.” These are: 1) The way of the intellect, or of knowledge—the way of truth; 2) The way of the heart, or of emotion—the way of beauty; and 3) The way of the will, or of action—the way of goodness. Aurobindo comments further that “these three ways, combined and followed concurrently, have a most powerful effect.”

Among the founders of integral philosophy itself, the triad of beauty, truth, and goodness has also enjoyed considerable attention. Alfred North Whitehead devotes a significant portion of his book *Adventures of Ideas* to the discussion of

the primary values, which he calls the “eternal forms.” But unlike Plato, who saw beauty and truth as being derived from goodness, Whitehead recognized beauty as paramount. According to Whitehead: “The teleology of the Universe is directed to the production of Beauty.” Following Whitehead, philosopher David Ray Griffin cites “cosmic support for truth, beauty, and goodness” as one of the main benefits of a non-materialistic view of evolution. According to Griffin: “The eternal forms are the material of the divine persuasion ...”. Likewise does Ken Wilber acknowledge the priority of the beautiful, the true, and the good by connecting them with the three main “cultural value spheres” of art, science, and morals, which he further equates with the subjective, objective, and intersubjective domains, respectively.

The idea of any kind of “primary values,” of course, drives deconstructionist postmodern academics crazy. For them, values are arbitrary interpretations imposed by establishment power structures, so the proposition that there are three fundamental values is the height of idealistic pretense. After all, beauty, truth, and goodness are just conceptual categories, just abstract words that point to nebulous ideals that perhaps everyone can agree about, that is, until you actually get specific. There is certainly no “hard proof” that all human values can be captured and expansively described using these three concepts. But as we have seen, there is a large degree of “consensus evidence” about the special significance of beauty, truth, and goodness. So why is this? Why not exalt “wisdom, compassion, and humility,” or any other group of lofty ideals? Well, I think the reason that beauty, truth, and goodness have received continuous veneration is because they correspond to some very deep intuitions about the way the universe works. As I describe at length in chapter 10 on *The Directions of Evolution*, the primary values are essential descriptions of the primordial influences at the heart of all evolution. And if this is true, then there are some very good reasons for the remarkable agreement about this specific triad of values.

So far, I have tried to avoid defining beauty, truth, or goodness. But there have certainly been many attempts by philosophers to provide concise definitions.

Thomas Aquinas defined beauty as “unity, proportion, and clarity.” Whitehead defined truth as “the conformation of appearance to reality.” And Kant defined goodness by reference to the “categorical imperative,” which says: “Act according to those maxims that you could will to be universal law.” However, like spirit itself, the values of beauty, truth, and goodness cannot be easily defined in abstract terms apart from the situations in which we experience them, and so far, academic approaches have not proved entirely satisfactory. This is especially evident when we consider the primary values from the perspective of the spiral of development. As we have discussed, each stage of consciousness constructs its worldview out of agreements about values. These value agreements generally arise out of the struggle to find solutions to the problematic life conditions faced by those who participate in a given worldview. Each stage of culture thus develops a discrete set of values that are tailored to its location along the timeline of history. This is one reason why values are “location specific”—as life conditions change with the progress of cultural evolution, that which is most valuable for producing further evolution likewise changes.

But notice that even though exactly what is beautiful, true, or good, is defined specifically (and often conflictingly) by each successive stage of development, the overall valuation of the general directions of the beautiful, the true, and the good remains a common feature of each level. In other words, the values of beauty, truth, and goodness act as compass headings for the improvement of the human condition, regardless of the assessor’s psychic location. Even though each stage of development has its own version of what is valuable, we can see that the spiral as a whole acts to define the overall trajectory of internal evolution for both the individual and the culture. So regardless of the location of a person’s consciousness, we can identify something that is beautiful, something that is true, and something that is good from their perspective. Within the consciousness of every level, the general directions of evolution tend toward more pleasurable feelings, truer thoughts, and decisions that consider the welfare of larger and larger communities.

Thus we can begin to see how beauty, truth, and goodness are relative and subjective, but also universal. Beauty, truth, and goodness are relative because

they are always working to contact consciousness where it is, and then move it into increasingly advanced states. This is what the structures of consciousness and culture actually do—they act as dynamic systems of value that take these universal directions of improvement and translate them, down-step them, so that they can be applied to a given set of life conditions—so that they can be used to make things better “on the ground,” if you will.

However, this aspect of the local relativity of all estimates of value points back to the universal nature of values. According to Plato and Whitehead, we can observe within the universe a certain “Eros,” which has been defined as “the urge towards the realization of ideal perfection.” In our consciousness, this Eros of evolution—this hunger for greater perfection—is stimulated by the eternal images of the beautiful, the true, and the good, which, as we’ve seen, spur us onward and upward and inward into increasingly more evolved states.

When we look out at the external world around us, we describe its most exquisite features as “beautiful;” spirit appears to us in the objective world as delicate loveliness, bold drama, and sublime elegance, all of which are forms of beauty. In the internal realm of thoughts and ideas, those which exhibit the most quality are the ones that are the most accurate, the most descriptive of reality, and the most useful at providing solutions; when we look for spirit in the subjective realm, it most often looks like truth. And in the intersubjective realm of human relations, spirit is revealed through kindness, compassion, fairness, forgiveness, mercy, and justice—actions guided by the value of goodness. So it is from this perspective that we can begin to see how these primary values, these glimmers of relative and fleeting perfection, are truly *the comprehensible elements of Deity*—the most direct ways that we can experience spirit.

Beauty, truth, and goodness are only ideas and ideals, but as we can see throughout history, it is often “just ideas” that end up changing the world. In my own life, the pursuit of these simple ideas has contributed significantly to my spiritual growth. Hopefully, my description of this spiritual philosophy, here and in the sections below, will testify to how much light these concepts can bring. This triad of values is a *conceptual cathedral*, a form of philosophical high technology, and as I explain in chapter 10, a key to the “physics of the internal

universe.” The ideals of beauty, truth, and goodness represent philosophy’s finest hour—these are the concepts by which philosophy makes contact with the spiritual and helps to define the way forward from a middle ground in between science and religion. Indeed, it is in the pursuit of beauty, truth, and goodness that we find the pinnacle of human life. Beauty, truth, and goodness are truly sacred in the way they name and describe the “eternal forms” by which the persuasive influences of evolution enact the universe’s essential motion of consciousness seeking its source.

And now, for some concrete examples of how consciousness can seek its source, we turn to our discussion of the practice of the primary values.

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