

THE PRIMACY OF TRUTH

NOW there remains goodness, beauty, truth, these three: but the greatest of these is truth . . .

If the implied parallel between these three "transcendentals" and St. Paul's disposition of the theological virtues with charity at their heads be not an exact one, the right understanding of the place of truth in human life is nevertheless of no less moment than—is, indeed, an indispensable condition of—an enlightened appreciation of the claims of charity; a fact which may perhaps go far to justify so seemingly bold an adaptation of the scriptural text.

It would not be difficult to show that whatever is permanent in human activity is in some way an expression of man's instinctive worship of "the good, the true, the beautiful." The saints and moral reformers, the philosophers and savants, the artists and poets proclaim their homage by their respective functions; they walk within the sanctuary of this trinity and offer their praises as its chosen votaries. As surely, if less evidently, the more familiar ways of life, the commonplace actions of every day, bring their own witness. To read a newspaper is to admit a need for knowledge, which is another name for truth—however precarious may be this particular means of obtaining it; to smoke a cigarette is to satisfy a craving, assuage desire, that is, to acquire goodness within a limited sphere of reference; to gaze upon an object or to pause and listen for no other reason than that it is delightful is to pay tribute to beauty. And even the merely useful occupation; washing, dressing, eating, journeying, making, machine-minding (assuming for argument's sake that these very various activities are no more than "useful"), if they are informed by reason at all, are directed to something beyond themselves, to the acquirement of a state of wellbeing which answers to the potentialities of mind and heart and senses. Thus we are led back to the inescapable three-in-one, truth, goodness, beauty.

But if truth, goodness and beauty are but three aspects of one reality (*res*), they differ in our manner of apprehending them (*secundum rationem*) in a way that it is of the highest importance to appreciate. In the language of the schoolmen, they present us with three quite distinct "formal objects," and consequently dictate three equally distinct methods of approach; hence the respective sciences of metaphysics, ethics and aesthetics. For all *practical* purposes truth is not to be identified with goodness or beauty.¹ Truth holds an ontological primacy from which it can only be supplanted at a ruinous cost. Truth is the life of the mind, the very stuff of which rational existence is made up. Attempting to define something so elemental that it defies definition, the philosophers have called it the "equating of the mind with the thing" (*adaequatio intellectus cum re*). Truth is the grip of the rational creature upon reality; by it we apprehend (how colourless a word to describe the most exciting fact in life!) the extra-mental world, give birth to those "thoughts that wander through eternity," become one with the universe and heirs of all the ages. Truth is more vital to mental health than air to the body; so necessary is truth to the intelligence that, in default of it, the mind will fashion for itself a substitute and embrace a world of dreams and unreality, the figment of mere imagination.

Nor is truth—and here surely is a common illusion—identical with sincerity. The sincere mind has only the duty of being self-consistent; it is its own judge and can withdraw from the scrutiny of the world at large to seek contentment in the consciousness of its own good will. The true mind will always be sincere, but experience alone suffices to show that the sincere mind is not always true. Sincerity of itself does not render us immune from mere subjectivism

¹ The philosophical insufficiency underlying the oft-quoted lines of Keats:

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know"—

could not be better illustrated than by the life of that great and tragic poet. A. C. Bradley's essay "Keats and 'Philosophy'" (published in his *A Miscellany*; Macmillan, 1929) throws valuable light on Keats in particular and the relation between truth and beauty in general.

and particularity and fanaticism; indeed, where emotion and prejudice take the place of intelligence, it can be the worst enemy of what it counterfeits, the love of truth. Truth is on a higher plain, it passes the barrier of what is personal and peculiar and leads us into the universal order of things; "seraphically free from taint of personality," it stands out boldly before the world, challenging all comers. It is not concerned with points-of-view and individual opinions but with principles and facts; it is critical in the noble sense of that word—it judges—and invites criticism in return; it seeks always for evidence and will submit only to an authority that can show worthy credentials, ever insisting upon examining all things in the light of eternal principles; it concedes no peculiar privileges to priority in time and allows of no proprietorship of person—for the mind which is devoted to truth is, in Plato's phrase, "the spectator of all time and all existence." And yet, paradoxically, the seeming arrogance of truth is but the obverse of its humility. Of itself, the mind is destitute; its only task is to submit to reality, to conform to what *is* (*being*); it belongs to it not to create but to discover. The condition of its existence is its docility before the objects which it desires to know. "In the search after truth," said St. Augustine, "the first way is humility, the second, humility, the third, humility, and as often as you ask I will make the same reply." Without this attitude of submission to what is presented to it, the intelligence becomes incapable of passing judgment upon the objects with which it deals and truth is inevitably excluded. So soon as the mind turns inwards upon itself, being discontent with its proper function of recording in intelligible terms the evidence before it, preferring rather to form its own object of thought, to work out a personal "theory," we have no longer truth but, at best, sincerity.

The moral life—for the Christian, the life of active charity—, if it is to achieve the poise and self-realisation which are its due, must recognise that the pursuit of goodness presupposes the recognition of truth. The mind, of its nature, cannot contravene the universal law that "nothing

is willed unless it is first known" but it can act without conscious advertence to that law, i.e., without paying its due tribute to truth. We must know what we are about before we begin to act at all. To fail in this, even though "good-will" remain, is to countenance what is arbitrary and irrational. The blunders and tactlessness which can sometimes accompany the best of intentions arise from attempting to put goodness before truth; the mistake is simply a lack of perception. In a wider field what is fundamentally the same error can be fraught with tragic consequences. The political "ideologies," whose conflict may destroy our civilization, sin, in the first place, not against goodness but truth. Communism and Fascism are alike in this that they both aim at procuring human happiness and the good life for man; unfortunately they are alike also in their disregard of what man is and wherein his happiness consists. They are not of the truth. Sin itself is a misguided striving after goodness, the pathetic *bonum apparens*; its malice lies in a wilful infidelity to truth. Conversely, good action, virtue, alive to every demand made upon it—not merely the graceful deed but gracefully done!—is no more than the response of the will to what is true. The virtuous man is the follower of truth in action.

The will is not only the faculty which immediately commands all our external activities, it is also the seat of desire and joy. Here too its proper function is to follow the light given to it by the intelligence. Its desires must be directed towards objects of which the mind recognises the worthiness, its joy can only rightly be the *gaudium de veritate*. "It is not in our power," as St. Augustine remarks profoundly, "to determine a thing to please us." Our pleasure can only arise from the delightful qualities of what the mind and senses contemplate. Thus the determination to "keep smiling," to be cheerful at all costs, must have its inevitable issue in strain and unnaturalness unless it proceeds in the light of the knowledge of what truly gives pleasure and what makes for genuine happiness. A reversal of the due subordination of will to intelligence, by which the forces of

activity and desire (in themselves unenlightened) usurp or anticipate the guidance of the mind, lies at the root of the pitiless and despotic dealings with men and things of which the modern world affords so many examples. Thence arises what the psychologists call *non-reality thinking*, "the lie in the soul" which Plato abhorred; from which there result the perpetual and uncertain efforts to achieve the appropriate attitude to each new situation; duty at best becomes the phlegmatic response to a blind "categorical imperative" and morality an uninspired conformity to an external code of regulations, instead of the natural and balanced deployment of the soul's own best laws. Too often is it forgotten, even by masters in Israel, that the life of virtue is but the development of the life which is natural to man: *aptitudo ad virtutem inest nobis a natura, licet complementum virtutis sit per assuetudinem, vel per aliquam aliam causam; unde patet quod virtutes perficiunt nos ad prosequendum debito modo inclinationes naturales, quae pertinent ad jus naturale (II-II. 108.2)*. The Common Doctor of the Church will allow of no disparagement of human nature in order to glorify grace.

If the pursuit of goodness without due reference to truth can have tragic consequences, this is perhaps even more strikingly evident in the case of the third member of our trinity, beauty.² Beauty in its subject is the perfection arising from the harmony of its parts precisely as apprehended, whether by the senses (not necessarily only by that of sight) or by the mind. To be struck with beauty is not (I submit), strictly considered, to receive an accession of truth. The impression of the beautiful is independent of, and does not in fact require, an intellectual judgment about the

² I take beauty to mean the splendour of form, the integrity and perfection of a thing such that the very contemplation of it gives joy; *id quod visum placet*. So considered it has a different *ratio*, or constitutive principle, from truth; though, of course, the term is often and quite justifiably employed with a more extended meaning than its strict connotation. St. Augustine, for example, who uses so often the word "beauty," *thought* of it as truth; or so it seems to me. It is significant that St. Thomas, perhaps the greatest of all lovers of truth precisely as truth, has little beyond the all-important essentials to say of beauty.

existence of the object which conveys the impression; and yet it is only by such a judgment that we arrive at truth! To rejoice in the B Minor Mass or the Fifth Symphony requires no assessment of their truth content. The aesthetic delight induced by reading "The Tempest" or the "Ode to the Nightingale" is unaccompanied by any preoccupation with the historical likelihood of the characters of the one or the real existence of a bird that could evoke the emotions described in the other.³ Beauty, to an immeasurably greater extent than truth and goodness, depends upon sensibility, upon the responsiveness of the senses and the mind; and the measure of a creative artist's greatness is his capacity to work upon our powers of receptivity, both mental and sensuous, in such a way that their very operation causes delight. The lover of beauty is concerned above all else with the joyous experience of what is pleasing; he seeks logically an ecstatic existence of perpetual intoxication, through eye and ear and mind, with beautiful objects—to find inevitably the

". . . Beauty—Beauty that must die;
 And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
 Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh
 Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips."

Not that the experience here described is in any sense immoral; such sensibility can and should, when controlled by prudence, lend grace and attractiveness to the moral life. But so strong are the allurements of beauty to those who can respond to their call that the appreciation of them tends all too often to degenerate into mere aesthetic indulgence.

Beauty, for us, is not the equivalent of truth and goodness. It does not compel us to a judgment and hence the mind is not carried into the real world, which is the condition of acquiring truth. It makes no demands upon the

³ This is not intended to suggest that these great works of art are not manifestations of ontological truth. Truth is of their essence; it is because of their truth that they are beautiful. My point is that the personal realisation of their beauty is something distinct from the recognition of their truth; and further, that aesthetic sensibility, as such, is not concerned with truth, still less with moral goodness.

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will, which is the function of goodness. This second point is of capital importance and often unhappily overlooked. The moral life aims at possessing what is good and achieving for itself a permanent state of wellbeing; to this end the will goes out in desire and gives effective direction towards its realization; *amor meus pondus meum*. But the appreciation of beauty postulates no such striving; the worshipper at this shrine does not wish to possess, he is content merely to "stand and stare." The

" . . . daffodils

That come before the swallow dares, and take
The winds of March with beauty . . . "

have not to be snatched at. All their charm lies in being seen, and—therein is wonder!—in being seen more alluringly through Shakespeare's creative imagination than as they exist in nature. So it is with all beautiful things; they give a repose which borders closely upon enervation. It has been said that "in heaven we shall all be aesthetes"; yet this is only a very partial truth. In heaven we shall be contemplators of Truth—*visio est tota merces*, possessors of all Goodness, spectators of eternal Beauty; three in One; but in order—Truth, Goodness, Beauty.

For the moment, however, we are still upon earth, inhabitants of a world which has little concern for truth. The human race, despite the fall, is essentially sound and can never embrace evil for its own sake; but it can hanker after the phantoms and creatures of wrong desire. It surely would not be an error to diagnose the peculiar evil of our time as precisely infidelity to truth and to suggest that our only hope, not of perfection, for that is unattainable here, but of a society in which men can live in a manner worthy of human dignity, is by a return to this "master light of all our seeing." The relativism and implicit denial of any absolute standards of morality binding upon all men so evident, for example, in the ruthlessness of present-day commercial methods and the cynical opportunism of international politics, testify to this widespread defection from truth. Communism, notwithstanding its own errors, is itself

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a vivid and menacing protest against the lie upon which modern industrial society has been built up; and Fascism, despite its virtues, thrives by its disregard of the truth which it is the first business of every political system to respect, the worth of human personality.

But sanity will not be restored by the simple advocacy of a return to truth. To discern the evil is not to cure it. Man in the mass has little love for abstractions and the philosopher cuts a poor figure beside our contemporary demagogues. Still, human nature has its exigencies which will not be denied; they can only be satisfied by a life which conforms faithfully to the inmost laws of that nature. Men, despite themselves, cannot resist truth in the concrete; if they are impatient of argument, they will be convinced in the long run by what they can see and feel and touch—a fact which those who are concerned with the spread of God's kingdom on earth must recognise and act upon. Perhaps the means of proclaiming truth most efficacious for our day is what might be called the dynamic apologetic of sanctity. The world, it has been well said, is crying out for saints. When they come they will bear witness to truth not to the philosophers only, but also, and especially, to the simple and unlearned and those without the pale. In St. John's phrase, they will "do truth."

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