

# One Virtue at a Time, Please

## Truth, Beauty, and Goodness Reframed: Educating for the Virtues in the Twenty-First Century

by Howard Gardner.  
Basic Books, 244 pp., \$25.99  
(\$17.99, paper, to be published  
in November)

### Alan Ryan

Any book with “Truth, Beauty, and Goodness” in the title will stir questions in the reader’s mind. Is the author about to defend Keats’s assertion that “beauty is truth, truth beauty; that is all ye know on earth, and all you need to know?”

Catching sight of Howard Gardner’s subtitle—“Educating for the Virtues in the Twenty-First Century”—will the reader not think of Plato, who spent much of his life wondering whether virtue can be taught? Part of the provocation for Plato was the career of the Athenian popular hero Alcibiades, who had been Socrates’ favorite student and the ward of Pericles. Alcibiades was dazzlingly clever and attractive, and a military leader of genius, but he was a libertine, and in due course he betrayed Athens to Sparta and Sparta to Athens, before fleeing to the Persian court, where the Spartans had him assassinated. If he could not lead a virtuous life with all the advantages of upbringing and natural talent, Plato asked, was there any reliable way of producing virtuous Athenian citizens? We hardly need to search far for modern parallels.

It will do the reader no harm to bear Keats and Plato in mind, even though Gardner is not wholly on their side philosophically. He denies Keats’s claim that beauty is truth as well as Plato’s claim that the virtues form a unity. Nonetheless, Gardner is firmly on Keats’s side in wanting us, in our efforts to educate the young and ourselves, to take beauty seriously, to cultivate our aesthetic sensibilities, and to learn how to form intelligent judgments about works of art of all sorts. He is on Plato’s side in being deeply troubled by relativism; he fears that “postmodern” thinking and the new digital media have undermined the belief that there is a truth about the world against which our assertions about it can, and must, be judged.

Postmodernism of the kind endorsed by some followers of Jacques Derrida, for example, seems to Gardner to sustain a good-natured, lazy relativism that allows us to say “that’s true for him, even if it’s not true for you”; and he thinks that this is the death of intellectual discipline. He is equally frightened by the ease of spreading any amount of misinformation on the Internet. Any teenager with time on his hands can edit photographs of historical events, persons, or works of art, and the editors of Wikipedia have found it almost impossible to keep out the malicious and the deluded. Gardner fears that when so many sources of information are unreliable, we may lose all confidence that “reality” itself provides a check on what we think.

Howard Gardner may well be the best-known educational theorist in America. He has written on a great range of issues, but from a lay point

of view perhaps his most important achievement came some twenty years ago when he put into circulation the concept of “multiple intelligences.” He identified seven dimensions of intelligence, including the spatial, musical, linguistic, and intra- and interpersonal, as well as the logical and mathematical that feature so prominently in IQ tests. By doing so he helped counteract the destructive obsession with conventional measures of IQ fed by books such as *The Bell Curve*, and ill-judged remarks about intelligence by scientists like James Watson. *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness Reframed* is an engaging mixture of philosophy, personal reflection, and moral exhortation; the philosophy is untechnical, the personal reflection is sympathetic, and it is hard to disagree with his insistence that we collectively need a clearer sense of how to balance the competing demands placed on all of us.

Gardner begins with an interesting juxtaposition. He has been reading Henry Adams’s essay “Mont-Saint Michel and Chartres: A Study in Thirteenth-Century Unity,” published in 1904, and David Shields’s book *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, published in 2010. The unity that Henry Adams longed for and thought the modern industrial world had lost was the medieval faith that the world embodied “the trio”; Adams saw the Mont St. Michel Abbey and the Chartres cathedral as physical expressions of that faith. Gardner writes:

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.

*Reality Hunger*, on the other hand, unnerves him. Its author, David Shields, a best-selling novelist, essayist, writer in residence at the University of Washington, and literary provocateur, describes it as a “manifesto.” Its theme is the obsolescence of the kind of coherent narrative to which the traditional novel is committed in a world where reality thrusts itself upon us in a fragmentary and chaotic fashion. We hunger for a direct experience of reality, which does much to explain the popularity of reality TV and the unstoppable torrent of memoirs, but we know that reality TV is staged and that memoirs are at best selective and occasionally mendacious.

This is a familiar form of skepticism; for Shields, whatever we see or read is the product of memory and interpretation, and therefore more or less a work of fiction. The line between truth and fiction is blurred or nonexistent. The appropriate literary form through which to handle such a fragmented reality, Shields argues, is collage; we should embrace Picasso’s dictum that “art is theft,” and boldly appropriate whatever

we need from wherever we can find it. True to that view, *Reality Hunger* consists of 618 numbered paragraphs, many of them quotations from other writers. The book was well received by reviewers, as it was in these pages, though reviewers usually insisted, as Tim Parks did here, that news of the death of the novel was greatly exaggerated.<sup>1</sup>

What upsets Howard Gardner is not that *Reality Hunger* largely consists of quotations, but that

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 law-

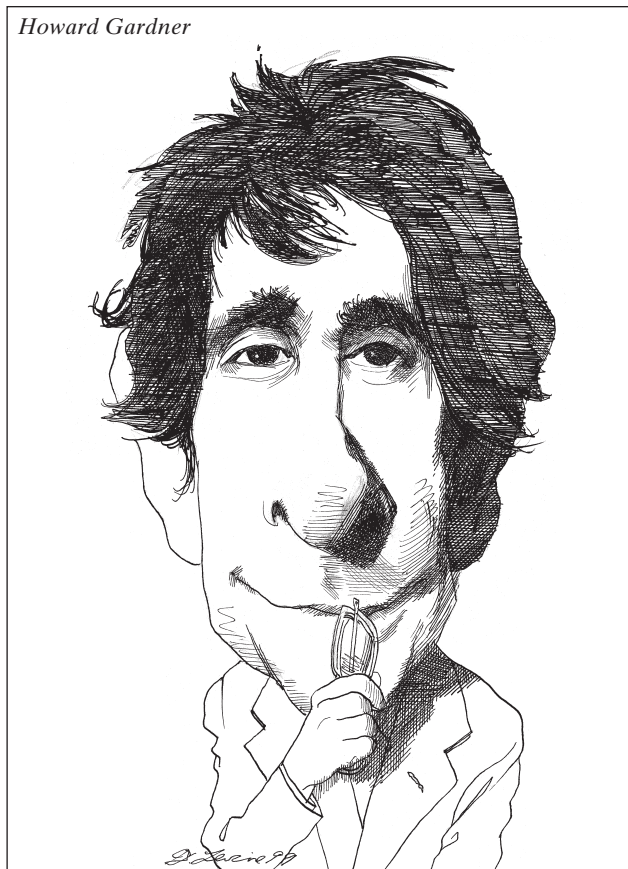
reductionism, evolutionary psychology. It tends to go hand in hand with, and is here criticized alongside, some forms of economic reductionism. We are asked by evolutionary biologists to think that human beings have the beliefs they do—whether factual beliefs about the world, or aesthetic beliefs about what is beautiful, or moral beliefs about what is good—not because those beliefs correspond to something objective in the world, but because they have been built into the human brain and the human psyche as a result of their usefulness in preserving the species. To put their view crudely, these biologists hold that we believe what we believe, find beautiful what we find beautiful, and approve of what we approve because our selfish genes program us to do so.

Gardner is not disposed to reject either evolutionary theory or economics out of hand; indeed, he has written enthusiastically about Darwin. He simply wants the ambitions of the evolutionary biologists in question kept under control. There are, he points out, many occasions when we behave in the way economics predicts—but there are many when we do not. Our moral capacities allow us “to transcend the determinism alleged by theorists of the market and theorists of evolution.” We may be, indeed we certainly are, well equipped by nature to evaluate some sorts of evidence and poorly equipped to evaluate other sorts of evidence, but the fact that we can work that out—and that we can reflectively challenge and moderate some allegedly evolutionary tendencies that supposedly determine our behavior—shows that we are not entirely unequipped to know what is true rather than false, and we should be able to examine critically the alleged results of evolutionary biology.

The heart of the book, however, is Gardner’s discussion of “the trio”—truth, beauty, and goodness—one virtue at a time; and what is significant about that discussion is that for all his obvious sympathy for Henry Adams’s nostalgia for the lost unity of the medieval worldview, he thinks that the virtues are many rather than one, that truth, beauty, and goodness should be understood very differently, and that inculcating a respect for them must proceed along rather different educational lines.

We begin with truth, perhaps the simplest of “the trio” to grasp, as are the reasons why some forms of relativism seem so attractive. Except in philosophy classes, we do not doubt that the words “here is a table,” spoken by a competent English speaker in the presence of the object in question, is literally, obviously, and boringly true. We might wonder what provoked her to say it, but not whether it was true. Indeed, we use the word “true” much less often than is commonly supposed; saying “the proposition that ‘that’s a table’ is true” adds nothing to “that’s a table.” Doubts about truth first arise when we realize that our beliefs about the world do not get their credibility from being copies of the world. Language and belief do not “mirror” the world. You can put two copies of *The*

Howard Gardner



yers at Random House, he supplies dozens and dozens of footnotes, indicating the sources of nearly all of the quotations.

That understates the matter and misses the point; Shields tells his readers to “grab a sharp pair of scissors or a razor blade or box cutter and remove pages 210–218 by cutting along the dotted line.” What Gardner wants to defend is a view of the author’s responsibility to the reader that Shields is determined to subvert. So Gardner, describing himself as “a student of reality,” asks, “What, if anything, in Shields’s book is *true*?” As “a student of morality” he asks, “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, he says, “I have to ask: ‘Is this work *beautiful*?’” At least one critic described it as “one of the most beautiful books I’ve read in a long time.”

One might think that Gardner asks precisely the wrong questions of a book whose intentions are so obviously subversive, and which presents itself so honestly as a collage of *objets trouvés*. However, as the argument progresses Gardner seems to be much less worried by the provocations of Shields than by other sources of a disregard for truth, beauty, and goodness.

One to which he recurs on and off throughout the book is the most recently fashionable form of scientific

<sup>1</sup>Tim Parks, “America First?,” *The New York Review*, July 15, 2010.

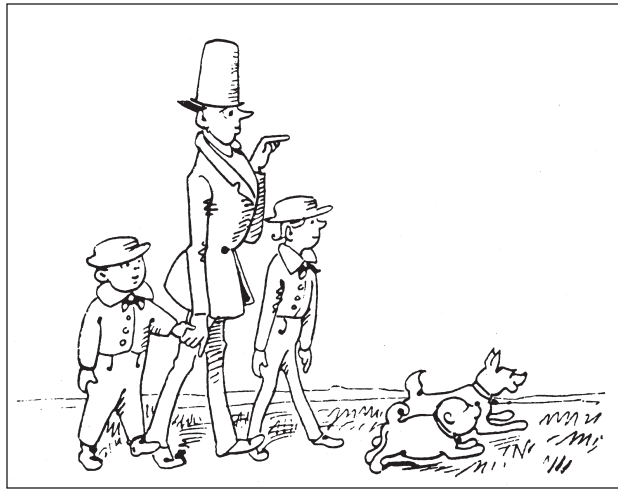
*New York Review* side by side to establish that each is practically identical to the other; you can't put your belief that there is a copy of *The New York Review* on the table alongside *The New York Review* itself.

The temptation to relativism does not primarily engage with low-level utterances such as "that's a table." It is the suggestion that there may exist—or do in fact exist—multiple different conceptual systems that sustains full-fledged relativism. I explain your illness by talking about bacteria in the drinking water; you explain it by claiming you have been the victim of witchcraft. I suggest antibiotics; you want to consult the poison oracle. The realization that what we say "represents" the world, but not by producing a copy of what it represents, can lead to the realization that there are indefinitely many ways of representing the world, and that choosing which to adopt is genuinely a matter of choice. There is, as Gardner recognizes, a thin line between giving proper weight to the historical variability of our theories about the natural world and collapsing into the view that we are all entitled to believe whatever we like. He treads that thin line very deftly, arguing essentially that the virtue of truth depends on the fact that people exposed to the same evidence and with some fluency in the same vocabulary can and do converge in their beliefs. This is not unlike C. S. Peirce's view that the truth is what we are fated to agree on.

Although the discussion of "the trio" begins with truth, I suspect that many readers will find the most interesting part of the book to be the discussion of beauty. Here, too, Gardner's argument is not philosophically complicated, but the discussion is enlivened by his willingness to invoke his own experience of modern art, not only the visual arts but contemporary music as well. *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness Reframed* began as three lectures at the Museum of Modern Art in 2008, and his wife Ellen Winner is herself an artist. He writes at some length about favorite paintings, installations, and pieces of music. He gives an engaging account of how he first saw Matthew Barney's installation *The Department of the Host* (2006) as simply a mess—"a large unkempt bed-like structure"—and was persuaded by the perceptions of his wife and a curator that it could be called beautiful.

The anxieties about relativism and the corrosive effects of the digital media that beset Gardner when he thinks about truth seem not to touch him when he thinks about beauty. He is, in fact, radical about the second of his "trio," accepting that changes in taste are not cumulative in the way in which the discovery of new truths are, and that there is no particular tendency for our ideas of beauty to converge. One page of illustrations indeed does suggest that there are some broad universals in aesthetic sensibilities across cultures: tranquil landscapes are attractive; awkward geometrical forms rebarbative. But such preferences do not carry over into our developed taste in works of art. Where that taste is concerned, divergence rather than convergence prevails.

He has some interesting, if elusive, thoughts about what exactly it is that works of art do for us. Resorting to some simple phenomenology, he observes that "we gain pleasure, a warm and positive feeling, a 'tingle' if you will, from the beholding of the object." It seems a large omission to say nothing about disturbing masterpieces more likely to produce a shudder than a tingle. He remarks on his own enthusiasm for installations such as *Rheinmetall Victoria*, a 16mm movie loop showing an antique typewriter sitting outside in a snowstorm and slowly being covered in snow. When he reflects on how he came to enjoy and understand such works, he wonders whether beauty is perhaps less apt as a description of what we are looking for than something else. Beauty, he writes, "once defined by idealization, regularity, harmony, balance, fidelity to the appearance of the world—is no longer the exclusive



or even the primary calling card of the arts." Increasingly we seek objects that could be characterized as "interesting; its form is memorable; it invites further encounters." This particular and pleasurable arousal of interest, Gardner says, makes it appropriate to speak of beauty even when an object or artwork falls short of the virtuous ideal of harmony.

When he refers to works of art, Gardner makes such an idea sound plausible, at least for those who feel they must preserve the word "beauty"; but perhaps it shows something of a wider application. Some of us, these days, are more likely to call an explanation "ingenious" than "true," and a piece of bad behavior "cruel" or "mendacious" than "bad." The search for originality in art is often criticized, but a great deal of modern art was self-consciously in revolt against what was felt to be a restrictive ideal of beauty, and a great deal else sprang from the sense that an older way of looking at the world could not be endlessly sustained for new work.

What art criticism does, almost invariably, is seize on particular works of art and try to recreate what provokes the artist, what the viewer may be engrossed by, almost always concentrating on the emotional tone of the encounter of spectator and object. When Gardner explains what he likes about the objects and installations he talks about here, that is just what he does, too.

Like many authors who have written as much as he, Gardner finds himself not exploring but offering tantalizing glimpses of ideas he has explored elsewhere. Not only does he take a wholly

different view of the arts than of the sciences, he says in an aside that in a generation or two, we might never look at art in a museum. Instead we will see high-res, 3-D images on screens and other devices we can hardly imagine. (We have long heard such claims about "mechanical reproduction," and they still seem far from coming true.)

The potential obsolescence of the museum is a bold thought coming from a trustee of MoMA, but hostility to the idea of a museum is nothing new. Seventy-five years ago, John Dewey's *Art as Experience* took the view that art should not be locked away in museums. This was an argument for teaching ourselves to see the aesthetic possibilities in everyday life, such as Mohawk steeplejacks building skyscrapers with the easy grace of ballet dancers. (In fact Dewey's ideas are alleged to have had an immediate effect on the formation of the brilliant museum collection in Philadelphia of Albert Barnes, who claimed to be directly inspired by Dewey's ideas.)

When Gardner turns to the third element of his "trio," he descends from the philosophical high ground to the topic implied in his subtitle: "Educating for the Virtues in the Twenty-First Century." Here an interesting aspect of the discussion is his suggestion that what one might call "elementary goodness" is not under much threat, at least in the parts of the world with which he is familiar. He believes that in the US the Golden Rule is acknowledged as a guiding principle for what Gardner terms "the local sphere" and enforced by the usual mechanisms of approval and disapproval and in the last resort the law. However badly small children may behave from time to time, they do not set out on a Nietzschean transvaluation of all values or systematically take evil as their good. "Indeed," says Gardner, "as quintessential essentialists, young children are bent on discovering The Truths, The Ultimate Moral Code, The Decisive Canon of Beauty."

That, however, is not a great source of comfort for Gardner, even if it suggests that everyday child-rearing practices and elementary education are not as bad as they are sometimes painted to be. What causes him unease is the difficulty of keeping up a regard for "the trio" during adolescence and especially thereafter in the world of work. He is no more optimistic than most of us about the usefulness of lecturing teenagers on the importance of truth, beauty, and goodness; what he suggests we need is a curriculum that focuses on engrossing instances of the search for truth, the creation of beauty, and acts of goodness—or their opposite.

Some years ago, he constructed a high school syllabus based on Darwin and the theory of evolution, Mozart, and, as a reminder of the reality of evil, the Holocaust.<sup>2</sup> Whether this was ever carried out and with what results, we don't discover, but elements of such a program are common enough in the United Kingdom, where something like Holocaust fatigue seems to have set in. My own experience suggests that any syllabus that appears to have ulterior aims, such as inculcating tolerance

<sup>2</sup>*The Disciplined Mind* (Simon and Schuster, 1999).

by teaching the history of slavery, however worthy those aims are, is often met with suspicion by young people.

The more unusual feature of Gardner's work is his obsession with professional ethics—truth, beauty, and goodness in the workplace, the lecture theater, or the corner office. For more than fifteen years, he has been engaged in the "GoodWork" project, based in the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Its aims sound deceptively modest—to reach a definition of what constitutes good work and to "determine how best to increase the incidence of good work in our society"—but it is anything but a modest project, as anyone who visits its website discovers.

Gardner's concern in these pages is more sharply focused on the temptations offered to the clever and the unscrupulous to do what one might call "Bad Work," whether it is lying by reporters or looting the enterprises we are supposed to be managing for the benefit of customers, shareholders, and the public at large. He seems—rightly—to be particularly appalled by the sheer shamelessness of some notorious recent offenders.

One aspect of that is the apparent insouciance with which the managers of Enron and WorldCom plundered their companies and ruined the lives of employees and others who had been induced to invest their life savings in companies that turned out to be vast Ponzi schemes, whose stock resembled the worthless mortgages revealed when the housing bubble burst. The teaching and the social reinforcement that sustains "local goodness" does not have the same impact when our victims are distant and anonymous and the payoff to ourselves immediate and real—an idea made all the more pertinent by the greedy behavior that helped produce the recent Wall Street crash.

In fairness, Gardner drafted his book before the national economic recession hardened. Perhaps for that reason he sometimes seems more distressed by miscreant journalists than miscreant businessmen. Jayson Blair's misdeeds at *The New York Times* are mentioned here, and elsewhere he has had some sharp things to say about some of Blair's colleagues. One can see why he might feel like this. In the end, crooks can be undone when the truth about their criminality emerges; but if the urge to tell the truth about what is happening is undermined, then the corrective mechanisms on which we have to rely will be undermined too.

*Truth, Beauty, and Goodness Reframed* is an uneven work. It can hardly be anything else when it is such an unlikely mixture of philosophical analysis, social criticism, art history, pedagogical theory, and moral exhortation. That it hangs together as well as it does is almost entirely a matter of authorial tone. One has no doubt that these are Howard Gardner's genuine anxieties, research interests, and potential remedies for our intellectually and morally disheveled state. Moreover, an extraordinary open-mindedness permeates his book; he is an anxious liberal, not a depressed academic conservative. He is as hostile to "mindless absolutism" as he is to "feckless cultural relativism," and if this makes him hard to pin down, it also makes him easy to like. □