Truth, Beauty, and Goodness

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I

The True, the Beautiful, the Good — through all the ages of mankind’s conscious evolution these words have expressed three great ideals: ideals which have instinctively been recognized as representing the sublime nature and lofty goal of all human endeavour. In epochs earlier than our own there was a deeper knowledge of the human being and his connection with the universe — a time when Truth, Beauty and Goodness had more concrete reality than they have in our age of abstraction. Spiritual Science is able once again to indicate the concrete reality of such ideals, although in so doing it does not always meet with the approval of the times. For in our age people love to be vague and nebulous whenever it is a question of getting beyond the facts of everyday life.

Let us try to understand how Truth, Beauty and Goodness are related, as concrete realities, to the being of mankind.

As the human being stands before us we see, in the first place, the physical body — in our times the object of purely external observation. How the individual organs, the form and functions of the body have been built up in pre-earthly existence — of this people are wholly unaware. In our pre-earthly existence we live in a world of pure Spirit, where, in communion with higher Beings, we are engaged in building up the spiritual prototype, the spirit-form of our physical body. The physical body here on earth is but an after-copy of the spirit-germ that is elaborated by us in our pre-earthly existence.

In earthly life we are conscious of our physical body, but we do not know what this implies. We speak of Truth, little realizing that a feeling for truth is connected with our consciousness of the physical body. When we are confronted by a simple fact, we may either form an idea that harmonizes strictly with it and thus is true, or, from inaccuracy, laziness or positive aversion to truth, we may evolve an idea that does not coincide with the fact. When we think the truth, we are in harmony with the feeling we have of our physical body, even to the point of realizing the connection between this physical body and pre-earthly existence. If out of laziness or untruthfulness we form an idea that is not in accordance with the fact, it is as if we cut the thread that binds us to pre-earthly existence. Untruth severs this thread. In pre-earthly existence a delicate spiritual fabric is spun, and this is concentrated into an after-copy — the physical body. Many threads connect this physical body with pre-earthly existence, but they are severed by untruthfulness. The purely intellectual consciousness that is characteristic of the early stages of our current epoch does not realize that such a
severance takes place. And that is why we are subject to so many illusions regarding our connection with cosmic existence.

Today we tend to regard our bodily health from a purely physical point of view. But when, through untruthfulness, we sever the threads that bind us with pre-earthly existence, this works right down into our physical body, and especially into the nervous system. The feeling we have of our physical body gives us our “spiritual sense of being” in the universe. And this spiritual sense of being depends upon maintenance of the threads proceeding from the physical body to pre-earthly existence. If they break, we must create a substitute for our healthy sense of being — and we does so unconsciously. We are then led, unconsciously, to a feeling of being “out of place”. But even here we have fallen into an inner uncertainty that makes itself felt right into the physical body. For this purely spiritual sense of being that we find existing with greater and greater intensity the farther we go back in history — is it strongly present in us today?

What is it that can strengthen within us this sense of being? In earthly existence we live in a world that is but a copy of true reality. Indeed, we only understand this physical world aright when we realize it to be this copy of reality. It behooves us, however, to feel the true reality within us; we must be aware of our connection with the spiritual world. And this is only possible if the bond that links us with pre-earthly existence remains intact.

This bond is strengthened by a love of truth and integrity. Nothing establishes our original sense of existence so firmly as a feeling for truth and truthfulness. To feel duty bound first to “prove all things” we speak, to set due restraint on our words — this helps to consolidate the sense of existence that is worthy of our being. This “sense of being” is connected to our awareness of the spirit within the physical body. There is an intimate connection between the physical body and this ideal of Truth.

II

We acquire the etheric body (or body of “formative forces”) only a short time before we descend from pre-earthly to earthly existence. We draw the forces of the etheric world together to build up our own etheric body. Now in earlier epochs of evolution there was a better understanding of the etheric body than we have today. Indeed, instead of feeling the reality of the etheric body, we are more likely to scoff at the idea of its very existence.

The sense of the reality of the etheric body is strengthened by the experience of Beauty. When truth and truthfulness enter the realm of real experience, we are living rightly in the physical body. A highly developed sense of beauty gives us a right relation to the etheric body of formative forces. Whereas Truth is connected with the physical body, Beauty is connected with the etheric body.

This will become clear if we think of the significance of beauty as manifested in art. If we have before us a human being of flesh and blood, we know that this is one of
many. Yet the one has no meaning without the many who live around him. Slender indeed are the roots that bind us to physical life, without the existence of others around us.

If we try either through sculpture, painting, or drama — indeed, through any art — to portray a human being, we endeavour to create a figure that is sufficient and complete in itself — one that contains a whole world, just as we contain the whole universe within ourselves in our etheric body. For we draw together the etheric forces from the whole universe to form our etheric body within earthly existence.

An intense feeling for beauty existed in earlier ages. Nothing of the same kind is present in modern civilization - we cannot be truly human if we have no sense of beauty. **To possess a sense of beauty is to acknowledge the reality of the etheric body.** To have no sense of beauty is to disregard, to disown, the etheric body.

Modern humanity is completely unaware of this. **When the Greek approached a temple, or beheld within the temple a statue of a god, he was conscious of an inner, glowing warmth, of a kind of inner sunlight.** It was as though forces streamed into his being and into his different organs. Gazing at the statue of the god, his whole heart cried out: “Never do I feel the peripheral structure of my hands and fingers so vividly as when this statue stands there before me! Never have I such an inner sense of the arch of my brow as in the temple!” **Inwardly warmed and irradiated — god-inspired — thus did the Greek feel in the presence of beauty. And this was nothing else but an experience in the etheric body.**

In the presence of ugliness the Greek's feelings were quite different from ours. We at most express abstract feelings in regard to ugliness by making a grimace! However, ugliness cast a chill through the whole body of the Greek, affecting even the very pores of his skin. In ancient times people were vividly aware of the reality of the etheric body, and in the course of evolution a part of human nature has indeed been lost. All these things of which I have been speaking — and which were actual experiences in earlier times — remain unconscious in mankind today, for with our rationalistic intellect and love of abstraction we tend to view everything from the head only.

Enthusiasm for truth and truthfulness can kindle within our souls a feeling for pre-earthly existence. An epoch of civilization in which this feeling is absent can possess no real sense of truth and truthfulness. **But when this sense is highly developed, it binds us strongly to our pre-earthly past, and our more immediate experience of the present tends to cause a certain sadness to arise within us.** It is a sadness that can only find consolation if the sense of beauty is awakened in the soul. Beauty gives us joy once more, even in the presence of a sadness that must always accompany great enthusiasm for truth. In a delicate, subtle way this enthusiasm tells us: Truth, alas, is only really present in pre-earthly existence. Here in this earthly world we have but her echo. Having left the pre-earthly life, we no longer stand within the essential substance of truth. Only
enthusiasm for truth can help us to maintain intact our relationship with pre-earthly existence.

A genuine feeling for beauty forges a link that binds our sense of pre-earthly existence with our present earthly life. We should never undervalue the significance of beauty in education and in outer culture. A civilization that is filled with ugly machines, with chimneys and smoke, and dispenses with beauty, is a world that makes no efforts to forge a link between mankind and its pre-earthly existence; indeed, it breaks this connection. Not by way of analogy, but in very truth we may say: A purely industrial city is a fitting abode for the wayward beings who would like to make us forget our pre-earthly existence in the realm of spirit.

Yet our delight in beauty must be paid for at the cost of realizing that the beautiful, in its essence, does not endure in earthly reality. The more perfectly we represent the human form, in sculpture or painting for example, the more we must admit that this does not correspond to a lasting reality in earthly existence. It is but a consolation afforded by beautiful semblance, and hence lasts only until the moment we pass through the gate of death.

The world of spirit in which we live during our pre-earthly existence is always present. We have but to stretch out our arms, as it were, to this pre-earthly world of spirit. Although it is always there, a link can only be forged in the depths of unconscious life when we have enthusiasm for truth and truthfulness. And when our heart cultivates love for the beautiful, this links our pre-earthly existence with our current life.

III

How can we develop an actual power that will lead us back into the world we left when we descended to the earth from pre-earthly existence? The answer is, when we are filled with Goodness — the goodness that flows to other people and is not confined to self-interest. Such goodness can lead the soul into the qualities, nature and experiences of others. It embraces innumerable forces of soul; and these forces are of such a nature that they actually instill into the human being elements of the spiritual world to be encountered after death. Through our sense of Beauty we cultivate, by means of a picture, an awareness of the spirit in our present life. If we embody Goodness, we establish a connection with our spiritual future. A good person is one who can bear his own soul over into the soul of another. Upon this all true morality depends, and without morality no true social order among earthly humanity can be maintained.

When this true morality develops into strong impulses of will which then pass over to reality in moral acts, it begins to be a quickening, all-pervading impulse in the soul, inasmuch as we can then be moved to real sympathy with other human beings — our own astral body feels pain at the sight of suffering in others. For just as the sense of Truth manifests in man’s right relation to the physical body; just as a warm enthusiasm for Beauty expresses itself in the etheric body — so does Goodness live in the astral body. And the astral body cannot be healthy,
or maintain its true position in the world, if we are not able to pour through it the forces proceeding from Goodness.

These ideals of Truth, Beauty and Goodness show us how far we are able to fulfill our entire human nature, when, to begin with, we live in the physical body and are filled with a genuine sense of truth, instead of conventional “opinions”. Again, full humanity is only afforded a worthy existence when we can quicken our etheric body into life through a feeling for beauty. Indeed, we must become capable of elevating ourselves to the same feeling of beauty experienced by the Greeks. We must not simply gaze upon beauty, but must learn to experience it. Today it is the case that most people only gaze, and this does not enliven anything in the etheric body. The moment we experience beauty, however, the etheric body is quickened.

We may do good because of some convention, or because punishment is in store for serious wrong-doing — or even to avoid losing respect for doing wrong. We can also, however, do good from sheer love of goodness. Such an experience of goodness will always lead to a recognition of the reality of the astral body. Indeed, only this recognition will teach us anything about the essence of goodness. There can only be abstract knowledge of and inconsequent chatter about goodness, if loving enthusiasm for goodness in its essence does not lead to actual experience of the astral body.

Now to realize the good is not, as in the experience of beauty, merely to create a present awareness of spirit that ceases when we pass through the gate of death. To experience goodness is, indeed, to unite oneself with a world which is ever present. We have but to stretch out towards it. Yet we are separated from this world in material existence. Experience of goodness is a link, leading directly to the world we enter after death.

To be true is to be rightly united with our spiritual past. To sense beauty means that in the physical world we acknowledge our connection with the spirit. To be good is to build a living seed for a spiritual world in the future.

Past, present, future — these three concepts, as they play their part in human life, assume far-reaching significance when we understand their relationship to the ideals of Truth, Beauty, Goodness.

The person who is untruthful denies his spiritual past. One who disregards beauty is building an abode on earth where the sun of spirit never shines, where he wanders in spiritless shadow. The person who acts only out of self-interest renounces his spiritual future.

It was out of a profound instinct that Truth, Beauty and Goodness were once held to be the greatest ideals of human striving. Yet they have faded away into shadowy words, and it is our responsibility to enliven them once again.