

Goodness as a Pure Art Form

by Tim Cimino

When I say that goodness is an art form, I don't mean it in the general sense, that anything done well can be an art form. For instance, we may agree that there's an art to housekeeping, an art to choosing ripe vegetables, or even an art to robbing banks. But I mean that goodness is an undiscovered fine art with its own aesthetic laws. It also has its own medium, just as paint is the medium of painting, and words are the medium of literature and poetry.

My eyes were opened to the aesthetic dimension of goodness by two insights. The first was noticing that an aesthetic impulse to "complete a picture" often prompts a good deed. For example, when we see a landscape that is clear except for one single piece of litter, we might be more prompted to pick it up than if there were more litter.

The second insight was that when people get together and give an award such as "volunteer of the year" or "citizen of the year," they rarely use objective criteria alone. Aesthetics and values usually enter into the judging. In other words, they choose the do-gooder who does the style of good they appreciate and find not only functional but also appealing—in a word, beautiful. In a sense, these awardee-selection processes become beauty contests of goodness.

Just as sound is the invisible medium of music, value-laden acts seem to be the medium of goodness. It is the juggling and arranging of these acts to bring out synergies and other patterns that constitute the art form. This is more than the art of time management or the trick of doing two things at once. That's because time management techniques do not help you recognize the creative possibilities in each value-laden act, nor do they help you weigh or arrange them to create beautiful and unique patterns.

The ramifications of this discovery are far-reaching. One ramification is that goodness can be approached *completely* as an art form. Therefore, people who are artistic, but not especially religious or ethical, may be inspired to do good primarily as a means of creating beauty. Another outcome is academic. Goodness can be taught as an art form, so that someday there will be university degrees given out by the arts

department rather than the philosophy department. A third important outcome is that the discovery helps clarify the distinction between emotional pleasure and spirituality. Just as some literature can produce emotional pleasure but can also lead to self-reflection that leads to spiritual growth, doing good can produce emotional pleasure or contribute to spiritual growth and it is vital to the spiritual path to maintain the distinction.

Grasping that doing good can cause emotional or aesthetic pleasure is also very important for another reason: Sometimes people's choice of a good act is based not on the amount of good done, but on the "feel" or the beauty of the act. In other words, imagine two good deeds that have an equivalent level of difficulty, and require a roughly equivalent level of effort. One may do more good, but be less beautiful. The other may do less good, but be more aesthetically pleasing. An example that approximates this situation is volunteering for a soup kitchen during Thanksgiving. People need to eat the rest of the year, but many more people volunteer during the holidays because of the visual picture or the "thanksgiving narrative" or the homey associations connected with the holidays.

Some people may view my "goodness as an art" insight negatively, as a way to undercut or cloud the ethical and spiritual dimensions of goodness. But others will see it as positive—as a way to get many more people interested in *performing* great and creative acts of goodness, in *sculpting* beautiful works of art that go far beyond what they consider to be their ethical or religious duty.

If nothing else, the realization that goodness is a major new art form whose stature is at least as great as music, poetry or dance is quite remarkable. It opens a new door for humanity.

Music is a fine art requiring timing and harmony.
Literature is a fine art requiring imagination.
Painting is a fine art requiring contrast and perspective.
Drama is a fine art representing the portrayal and resolution
of conflicting values.
Dance is a fine art requiring movement, balance and fitness.
Architecture is a fine art that requires practicality.
Poetry is a fine art that requires intuitive verisimilitude.
But the finest art of all is goodness!
Goodness unifies *all* these qualities, from timing
to perspective
to balance

to intuitive verisimilitude.
Goodness is a performance art whose medium is
human relationships,
your own self,
and the remainder of the natural Universe.

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