Beginning, Etc.

In the beginning was the double negative
'cause there weren't nothin'.
God brooded over the confusion and thought,
"If there weren't somethin'
there ought to at least be nothin'"
But there weren't.
And God said,
"Let's put a little light on the subject."
And he did.
And the light cleared things up.
So everything that was cleared up
God called something.
And everything that weren't
God called nothing.
And when God settled on the difference
between something and nothing
He called it good.
But people call it science
because they don't like values.¹

—Harry Lee Poe

¹. This poem by Harry Lee Poe first appeared in Perspectives on Science and Faith 56, no. 1 (March 2004): 78.
Most people have made bad choices. Perhaps it would not be too extreme to say that all people have made bad choices at some time or other. Now why did we do it? Did we decide, “I think I’m going to make a bad choice today. Let’s see; I’m going to invest some money so that I’ll lose my shirt.” We do not normally, as a rule, decide at the front end, “I’m going to make a bad choice that will result in disastrous implications for the rest of my life.” Yet we face a real problem in making choices, and we share that problem with our ancestors. The first book of the Bible contains a case study in how we tend to go wrong in our choices. The story of Adam and Eve describes how a choice was made to take an action that would have disastrous implications. The choice was based largely on a faulty understanding of values.

How Do We Decide?

The story begins by describing the values at work in the decision: “When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food (the good), and pleasing to the eye (the beautiful), and was also desirable for gaining wisdom (the true), she took some and ate it.” The little phrase “the Good, the True, and the Beautiful” is an ancient, three-legged stool for the highest virtues from the perspective of the Greek philosopher Plato. His philosophical system revolved around his concern for the good, the true, and the beautiful.
Within his system, “the good” was the ultimate reality. As such, “the good” represents the ideal from which all other ideals emerge. “The Good” would be Plato’s concept of “God,” but only in the sense that he conceived of no higher reality. “The Good” was not a personal being who could relate in any way to personal beings, nor was the Good the intentional Creator of the heavens and the earth.

Plato had a disciple named Aristotle who disagreed with his teacher. Aristotle focused on “the beautiful,” and taught that the primal perfect beauty is so beautiful that all the chaos of the universe began to revolve around it. The chaos grew so entranced by “the beautiful” that it began to move in a patterned motion, bringing order out of chaos. Once again, “the Beautiful” represents ultimate reality and Aristotle’s concept of God. This impersonal reality, however, has no awareness of anything but its own beautiful perfection, which it contemplates for eternity. Again, deity remains aloof and uninvolved with humanity or any physical reality.

Demosthenes, another of the Greek philosophers, wandered through the cities of Greece with a lantern in search of an honest man. His system focused on “the True.” So we tend to go our different ways, trying to find some basis for decision making.

Good for food, pleasing to the eye, and desirable for wisdom. Notice that God does not fit into the equation anywhere as being useful in making a practical decision. God has no place in the practical. God has been safely relegated to the spiritual realm where he will not get in the way. God does spiritual things, so we keep God on Sunday morning where he is safe. As far as practical decisions, such as whether or not I should get a tattoo on my nose, or whether or not I should buy an SUV or a four-door car or a truck, or a bass boat with sparkly red things on it, God has no part in it. These are practical matters. These decisions have to do with real-life experience. Does God have anything to say about that sort of thing? Does God have anything to contribute to decisions about whom we date or marry? Can God contribute to a decision when we get so fed up with our job that we quit without yet having another job? Does God care about these things? Is God any help in making these decisions? The God of Plato and Aristotle does not know or care about the problems of people. Perhaps we need a better index for the Bible: a concordance that would allow us to look up all the answers to all the questions. Do I buy a red SUV or a white one? In what book of the Bible do I look for directions on buying SUVs? If God really cared, would
he not have given us more rules? The Pharisees of old had an answer to every question. They had them indexed and cross-referenced with rule upon rule.

In Proverbs we are told, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Prov. 1:7 KJV). We are each left to decide where we fall in the proverb. It is one of those more uncomfortable proverbs that I would prefer had just as soon not been written, but there we are. On the elementary level, this proverb refers to the man who, having gotten the big box home from the store with all the parts inside, proceeds to put the bicycle together without reading the directions. Men do not need directions. We do not need directions for putting together a bicycle any more than we need directions when we are driving in a strange city and appear to our wives to be lost. Directions are for sissies! We can figure this out by ourselves. Why? Because “fools despise wisdom and instruction.”

We think we use our minds to make our decisions and sort out issues of value, but we actually are a hodgepodge of ideas and emotions that become our decisions. Smart people suffer from the failure of the intellect as well as the mentally challenged while we make poor decisions about every phase and area of life.

The Good

What do we mean when we employ the criteria of the good, the true, and the beautiful in our decisions? In the story of Adam and Eve, notice what she says about the forbidden fruit: “It is good for food.” We use the word good in several different ways. We can speak of good food. What kind of a God would have given flavor to food and taste buds that we can distinguish those flavors? Now think about food; it is not just for sustaining life. What kind of a God would have given us the taste of good food? Is that not wonderful? What an incredible pleasure, what a joy at suppertime! Another way we talk about “good” involves aesthetics. Michelangelo painted a good picture on a church ceiling. Why has no one eaten it? Good food, good picture—what do they have in common? Then we speak of a good man. We can say that the soloist did a good job of singing. If we are cannibals, and the soloist has done a good job of singing, then we could have her for supper. Of course, this line of thought is silly, but it underscores the problem of
what we mean when we apply values to the experiences of life. What does “good” mean when applied to such diverse situations?

Often we use the word good pragmatically, rather than in terms of morality or virtue or ultimate truth. We often judge the good of something in terms of its usefulness. Something is good to the extent that it fulfills its purpose. In terms of something’s utility, I value it to the extent that I can get what I want out of it. In this situation the value of something is not intrinsic to the thing itself, but to my view of its utility. To the extent that we view the world as existing for us, to be of utility to us, to have pragmatic ends for us, the more our value judgments take on a subjective character. When we approach life with the primary question “What’s in it for me?” then we subject ourselves to futility in making wise decisions, and inevitably make the most destructive decisions. This tendency makes us look to the short term. We tend not to think in terms of something being good from God’s perspective, or even actually good for us. This attitude breeds the growing sense that there are no ultimate values; there is no ultimate good, there is no ultimate truth.

The Desires of the Heart

The experience of goodness comes with feelings of well-being, comfort, peace, and similar positive feelings that make life rewarding. The feelings come as a by-product of the experience of goodness. Common experiences of life produce these feelings. Good food, good company, good music, good weather, good sleep, good jokes, and anything else to which goodness applies produces these positive feelings. The idea of goodness cannot appropriately be applied to all experiences. Sanity forbids us from speaking of good murder, good torture, good racism, good rape, and the like. A person who has positive feelings from these experiences may be labeled “bent” or “warped.” The fact that some people actually think of heinous crimes as good does not support the relativistic position that some standard of goodness does not exist. Rather, it supports the view that something dreadful can happen to people that results in a dramatic deviation from goodness.

What’s the source of this experience of “goodness” if it can be applied to so many different kinds of things in life? In the opening of the book of Genesis, God evaluated what he had made, and he declared that it was good. He rendered the first judgment in contrast to the last judgment, and his judgment was that it was all good (Gen. 1:3, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). Goodness
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is not a freestanding virtue or value that drifts around in space. Goodness is ultimately the opinion of God. Whenever people experience goodness, they have had a spiritual experience because they have experienced the intention and purpose of God for people to experience goodness. As James, the half brother of Jesus, observed, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows” (James 1:17).

Unfortunately, people have a strange habit of concentrating on positive feelings rather than on the source of those feelings. Some people become so consumed with their desire for feelings that they lose the ability to discriminate between feelings and the circumstances that cause them. Extreme cases of this warping occur with people who like the feelings associated with pain. This deterioration of the capacity to experience goodness can begin casually enough. Rather than having a conscious understanding of the experience of goodness, we focus on the feelings. Instead of aiming for good company, we aim for good feelings. We pursue stimulation rather than goodness. Instead of desiring what is good for us, we desire what feels good. Like Pavlov’s dog, we associate feelings with things that may not be the real source of what we want. In the end, we confuse what we want with what is good.

In the midst of our pleasures, it is difficult to discern matters of right and wrong. Pleasure has a narcotic quality that dulls us to anything but the desire for the pleasure, which we confuse with “the good.” In the midst of pain, however, we grow starkly aware of wrong, bad, and evil. When Elizabeth Smart was kidnapped from her home in Salt Lake City, one newscaster declared that it was “an unambiguous issue of good and evil.”

David wrote in a psalm, “Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart” (Ps. 37:4). It sounds like a straightforward invitation for religious people to claim whatever they really want. The corruption of the human understanding of goodness, however, results in the curious situation that people do not know the desires of their hearts. They may know what they want, but they do not know why they want it. They only know that it is on their list.

Making a List, Checking It Twice

Almost everyone has a list. We sometimes call the list our goals and objectives. Usually, however, the list is a secret known only to us. The list
includes the things we think will make for happiness. We want the feelings. We begin formulating the list when we are young, which means we learn at an early age to lose contact with the source of goodness. Our first child, Rebecca, would eat anything we put before her without a fight, but she liked some things more than others. If we gave her her favorite food to her first, then she would not eat anything else except what she liked best. The other good food was no longer good. We learned to feed her one thing at a time in ascending order of her preference.

As children grow older, they imagine how good it will feel to have a certain toy. They get the toy for Christmas only to discover that it does not do for them what they thought it would. They soon tire of the toy. As they grow older, the list changes from toys to clothes. They think that if they have a certain pair of name-brand blue jeans and name-brand shoes, they will be cool. Being cool involves all the positive feelings that a teenager can imagine. They get the clothes, but the styles change. They still do not have what they sought. Adults also have lists. As they check off their lists and realize that the old lists were silly, they do not stop making lists. Instead, they change the kinds of things they put on their lists. Adult lists are more mature. They include the right kind of job, the right kind of house, the right kind of spouse, the right kind of friends, and the right kind of children. If something doesn’t work out, adults simply look for new toys to add to the list. Sometimes when the toys do not work, they begin to trade up in the spouse market, which often allows them to dump the kids as well. Like heroin addicts who need a larger and larger dose each time to satisfy their desire for the feeling, people frantically pursuing their desires never find an end. We become consumers and not contributors. Other people become a means to an end or an inconvenience to be discarded.

Solomon tried desperately to have the desire of his heart. He had the means to pursue everything that gratifies the senses in any way. He pursued wealth, pleasure, intellect, and power. He overindulged in all areas. Still, he felt empty. He did not feel good. His musings on the problem are found in Ecclesiastes, in which he described his many ventures into what he called “vanity.” He pursued things that did not satisfy. He wanted the feeling rather than the goodness that produces the feeling. He could obtain the feeling of physical sensation, but he could not produce the feeling of emotional and spiritual well-being.
David and his son Solomon form an intriguing contrast between generations. David had to fight for everything he ever had. As the youngest son, he had no expectations, so he went off and joined the army, where he quickly gained recognition. No sooner had he become famous for killing Goliath, however, than he had to flee the jealousy of King Saul and live as an outlaw. When the old king died and David became king, he was king of nothing because the Philistines had gobbled up Saul’s kingdom. David had to fight to win it back. Once it was his, he had to fight his own son Absalom to keep it. His family was a mess, and he had violated a good share of the Ten Commandments. Yet, David was happy. He had tasted goodness.

Solomon, on the other hand, experienced life on a silver platter. His father had fought all of his battles for him, and he never had to go to war to maintain his power. In the power vacuum at the time, Solomon became the great merchant king, trading with all the great empires of the day. He had an international reputation for his learning and wisdom. He had a harem that would make Hugh Hefner blush. Yet, Solomon was not happy. He did not feel good. Everyone experiences passing physical sensations of pleasure that we associate with goodness through confusing the sensation with the cause of the sensation. To feel good, however, one must experience the source of goodness. For David, God was his heart’s desire: “Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever” (Ps. 23:6).

The fact that people attach the notion of goodness to passing fancies does not diminish the source of the experience of goodness. Rather, it reinforces the tragic flaw in people. We do not know the desire of our hearts and what makes something good one time yet not so good another time. After reflecting on all that God had done for the people of Israel since bringing them out of Egyptian slavery, the prophet Micah observed, “He has showed you, O man, what is good” (Mic. 6:8a). What God does is what goodness means. Yet God does not ask people to be good. Instead, the prophet explains, “And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God” (v. 8b). Throughout Scripture, God does not demand that people be good, but that they be holy, righteous, just, and humble, all of which involves a relationship to a standard or conformity to a standard. In each case, God is the standard.
In the story of Adam and Eve, Eve talks about the fruit being desirable for wisdom. The ancient idea of truth was that it stands above mere facts or information. The problem, however, involved knowing what truth was. That question, the one Demosthenes asked when looking for an honest man who spoke the truth, was a great concern to the ancient people. The search for truth concerns people today as well. It is one of the reasons there is so much cynicism in the United States, because there seems to be such a small quantity of truth in the public sector. A generation has grown cynical over what we are fed from the TV set, from advertising, from corporate executives, from politicians, and even from the clergy. Young people are left with the impression that there is no such thing as truth.

Just as the concept of evil ceased to be an academic question and became an issue of everyday experience after the terrorist assault of September 11, 2001, the concept of truth as an objective reality took on new significance after the Enron and Worldcom accounting scandals. The American public managed to tolerate an astounding degree of deceit, fabrication, and lies in the culture until it became apparent that the culture of deception would eventually affect the pocketbook. As soon as we throw away the idea of truth, no sector of life remains safe. When we cease to value truth, we cannot expect society to respect the truth as a courtesy to those who might be hurt if it is violated.

Philosophers and literary scholars of the postmodern variety may argue that no absolute values like "truth" exist, but when corporations present information to their stockholders and to the investment community that indicates they are making large profits and the public later learns that the corporations have actually lost huge sums of money, people know that the corporations have not told the truth. People recognize lies, deceit, duplicity, and misrepresentations as falling short of a standard known as the truth. Philosophical double talk fails when people have lost their life savings. When people violate the standards at our expense, we experience the results of evil behavior.

During the modern period, our culture confused truth with facts, those scientifically verifiable strands of knowledge. Truth was vague, but facts were concrete. You could point to a fact. The truth required concentration. At one time, it was an accepted fact that the spaces between matter are filled by
invisible "aether." This fact was discarded by scientists doing experiments on the speed of light at the end of the nineteenth century. They concluded that the spaces between matter are empty. This fact is now under serious review by a new theory that all of the spaces between matter are filled by "dark" matter or energy. Because the scientific explanations continually changed during an age of scientific optimism, some philosophers gradually came to believe that there was no truth. Notice the subtlety of the mind change. Scientific explanations proved false, but in the love affair with scientific progress, scientific explanations were equated with truth. In this mind-set, if scientific explanations prove false, then there can be no universal truth. The irony, of course, is that the governing standard of truth was the scientific method that allowed scientists to lay aside old explanations as they sought more fitting ones.

As the old confidence in scientific certainty evaporated in the face of quantum theory and chaos theory, which allow for no certainty, the popular culture grew entranced with the information revolution. With the advent of the Internet and its most prolific child, the World Wide Web, information exploded without any necessary reference to truth. Anyone could post information on their Web page at a time when the Web became the first stop of choice for students doing research. The Web is treated as an encyclopedia because of the ease of access to information, but no one knows, and few students ask, if the information is true. Information has become little more than a form of entertainment that need have no basis in fact. Thus, truth is finally discarded in favor of mere data. Erroneous data is still data. We saw this cultural apathy toward truth play out several years ago when a multibillion-dollar space project sent to Mars failed in its mission because the engineers confused standard measures of feet and inches with metric measures of meters and centimeters. Perfectly good data was used, but it was the wrong data. It was not true.

The relativists are quite correct when they observe that different cultures develop different practices that they regard as true, yet which contradict one another. Such practices may be prescribed by law. In some Islamic countries, women are required to cover themselves from head to foot when they go out in public. In some other Islamic countries, women are only expected to cover their heads. Then, some countries with a predominant Islamic population have no standard expectation for women covering themselves at all, though some women go veiled. In some of these countries, the practice of
covering is regarded as an absolute while in others it is regarded more as a
tradition or custom.

The practice of covering becomes even more complicated when we com-
pare different societies. Until the mid-1960s, women in the United States
wore a hat, scarf, or veil to cover their head when they went to church.
Amish women still cover their heads at all times, as do Russian Orthodox
women in Russia. Among these various Christian groups, covering the head
by women was seen variously as a practice related to worship only, or as an
absolute practice for all occasions.

Within Western society, under the influence of Christianity, until the En-
lightenment of the eighteenth century, women covered their bodies to their
wrists, neck, and feet, as well as wearing a headdress. With the Enlighten-
ment and the growth of a secular perspective on life, however, women be-
gan exposing more of their flesh. The neckline receded and the sleeves
disappeared in the eighteenth century. During World War I, the hemline
began to rise from the floor and continued to rise until it went above the
knees in the 1960s. Bathing suits appeared for women that were little more
than undergarments. The bikini left women almost completely naked.

After the 1960s, very little differentiation existed between male and fe-
male dress among children and teenagers in particular. In the post-9/11
period, teenage boys wear their jeans dangling below their hips, defying
gravity, and leave their belts unbuckled, prepared at any moment for the
sex act. Teenage girls' fashions include jeans cut in such a way that the waist
disappears. This style combines with shirts cut in such a way that they can
never reach as low as where the jeans waist would have been, if it still ex-
isted. And these are the fashions of cold weather! In the summer the spa-
ghetti strap appears, and girls wear guy's boxer shorts in public.

From the perspective of conservative Islamic practice, the United States
is morally bankrupt. It is a perverse society where children are not taught
right and wrong, and where the children are actually sacrificed for the cor-
porate profits of the clothing, entertainment, tobacco, and alcohol indus-
tries. American children are encouraged by society to fornicate early and
often, resulting in a casual acceptance of abortion, illegitimacy, divorce,
single-parent households in poverty, children that are left to raise them-
selves, a grab bag of incurable sexually transmitted diseases, and a dan-
gerous acceleration of the cycle. Because of the economic and military power
of the United States, American culture is not satisfied to destroy itself. The
A conservative Muslim has observed that American debauchery exports itself and spreads like a cancer wherever it goes while American corporate interests insist that the rest of the world become as depraved as American youth.

From the perspective of the secular American, Islamic society is repressive. It robs women of freedom over their own bodies. Because men are obsessed with sex, the women must be totally covered or kept out of sight in order not to present the men with temptation. The men cannot control themselves, so the women are punished. Women are virtual slaves while men can behave as they please.

Strict Islamic culture regards the casual sexuality of America and the West as wrong. Secular American and Western culture regards the strict Islamic attitude toward women as wrong. Is this a case of relativism? Actually, it illustrates how cultural perspectives are relative to a higher value. Both cultures are responding to a standard. It is possible for both to be right about an aspect of their practice while being wrong in what they do. This simple issue demonstrates the tragic human ability to be partly right. Humans tend to absolutize their distortion of the truth.

From this example, we can also see why some practices may be legal but immoral while other practices may be illegal but moral. By what standard does a secular American relativist judge that the covering of Islamic women is wrong? By what standard would a secular American relativist judge that the sexual slavery of millions of African and Asian girls is wrong? By what standard would a secular American relativist judge that the rape of a sexually liberated but nonconsenting woman is wrong? After all, her assailant and many law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and men in sports bars would argue, “She had it coming!” An older example would be American slavery. It was legal, yet many evangelical Christians thought it was immoral.

People tend to confuse truth with facts, as naturalists have done during the modern age in the West, or with rules and laws, as the religious legalists of various religions have done. Some facts may be true and some laws may be true, but truth stands above both categories, which pale in comparison with truth.

At the trial of Jesus, Pontius Pilate asked a question that we sometimes forget: “What is truth” (John 18:38)? It is a great question. The gospel of John explores this question in relation to Jesus. John wrote his gospel for the Gentiles who did not have the Law or any background in God’s dealing with the people of Israel, but they had this great philosophical tradition. One of the
things John did was to point the philosophically minded Greek world toward Jesus Christ, who does not simply know what is true, but is the truth.

John's gospel explores what Jesus taught about truth. In the beginning of the gospel, we find Jesus coming into the world from eternity. John says that he came "full of grace and truth" (1:14). In contrast to the kings, emperors, and leaders of his day, Jesus was full of truth. When Jesus explained who he was, he said "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (14:6). With these words, Jesus indicated that he not only spoke the truth and intellectually knew the truth, but that he was truth itself. With these words he suggested that without him, there would be no truth. Truth is a part of who he is.

Jesus said that those who worship God "must worship in spirit and in truth" (4:24). He said that once he was gone, after he had been killed, resurrected, and exalted to the right hand of his Father, then the "Spirit of truth" would come (14:17; 15:26; 16:13). He spoke of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Truth, and he said that "when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth" (16:13). The Lord God Almighty does not intend for people to consult a list of rules he has compiled. He means for people to talk to him. He will guide into all truth because he is all truth.

The Beautiful

In the story of Adam and Eve, Eve describes the fruit as desirable to the eye or beautiful. Beauty represents a criterion we reserve for some of our most important decisions in life. Many people buy a vehicle without reference to its gas mileage, its economy, its efficiency, its safety record, or its maintenance record. Middle-aged men especially reason, "Wow! Doesn't she look great?" Physical beauty has a certain power over people. It is captivating.

Beauty is an intriguing thing. Once it catches your eye, you are hooked. We know this from experience. I remember the first time I saw my wife, Mary Anne: she was coming out of chapel at Southern Seminary. She was wearing a rust-colored corduroy jacket with a V neck sweater vest and dark trousers, walking with two of her friends, one of whom is now in Canada, the other an older lady still living in Louisville. She was carrying her books, and they were walking toward Norton Hall. Without intending to do it, she caught my eye. This is the intriguing thing about beauty: it catches us without effort or self-conscious intention. This phenomenon accounts for why we have the expression "love at first sight": the bedazzlement that people
The Good, the True, and the Beautiful

have experienced at different times in life. It might come from people, it might come from an automobile, or it could even come from clothes. All sorts of things catch our eye.

The Darkness of Beauty

In contrast to beauty we have ugliness, the grotesque, the disgusting. The ancient Greeks glorified the perfection of physical beauty. They developed a value system that regarded proportion as an essential quality of beauty. From the form of the Greek columns to the shape of Greek vases and urns, to the shape of the classical Greek nose, the ancient culture had a powerfully pervasive standard of beauty. Babies who failed to meet the high standard of physical perfection were taken out of town and left on the rocks to die from exposure or as the evening meal for a ravenous animal. The Greek sense of beauty was far too important to risk offending the community by introducing an imperfect body into the world. A similar policy helped to assure the triumph of the Aryan race under National Socialism in Germany.

Beauty can impose a harsh and cruel toll on people and culture when human conception of beauty takes a perverse turn. During the twentieth century one of those strange turns of cultural value occurred that brought a new definition to female beauty. For thousands of years, the full-bodied woman was viewed as the ideal in the West. She seemed healthy and fertile, capable of having many children. During the twentieth century, the great century of death, the emaciated woman became the ideal of female beauty. The woman who seemed to embody famine, pestilence, and death became the standard by which beauty was judged. Her bones protruded on her face and across her body. In an effort to emulate the ideal, a psychological disorder reached epidemic proportions in the midst of the wealthiest and most healthy society the world had ever known. Wealthy and famous women actually starved themselves to death in order to appear beautiful. As with the ancient Greeks, beauty may not be good, or with modern Americans, it may not be true.

One of the most famous of children's stories is the story of the Ugly Duckling. The poor Ugly Duckling was driven away from the flock of ducks because it was so ugly. Isolated and alone, it grew up ashamed of its ugly appearance. Then one day it was approached by a group of beautiful, graceful swans. It bowed its head in shame, but saw its reflection in the water and
realized that it, too, was a beautiful swan. Children’s literature is full of stories like this. In “Beauty and the Beast,” the dreadful monster turns into a handsome prince when the Beauty has compassionate love for him. One step down is the story of the frog that turned into a handsome prince when he was kissed by the beautiful princess. Dumbo the elephant was the brunt of the circus’s jokes because of his huge ears. He was put in the clown act because anything that misshapen was the object either of fun or of fear, a clown or a monster. Of course, everyone’s attitude changed when it was discovered that Dumbo could fly with his ears.

These stories all reinforce the same basic view of beauty and physical perfection. The Ugly Duckling is not worthwhile until after he becomes even more beautiful than the ducks. For Beauty and the Beast to live happily ever after, the Beast must become a handsome prince along with the frog. Dumbo must achieve some great physical feat in order for his deformity to be accepted. His counterpart in Victor Hugo’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* cannot be anything other than a freak. What happens when children wake up and realize that they will never be the prince or the princess? What happens when children grow up and believe that they are the prince and princess because of how people respond to their beauty? Not only is it possible to distort the meaning of beauty, it is possible to distort the value and worth of people while doing it. The concept of beauty has a profound relationship to truth. Without it, beauty is not only a conceit, but also a deceit.

At this point, someone is supposed to ask why God allows the misshapen child to be born. Why does God allow the retarded and the physically imperfect to be born? We indict ourselves with the question because in asking it, we have betrayed our seduction by the Greek concept of beauty. We have judged the worth and value of the life that is not pretty enough or physically capable enough or mentally competent enough. To ask why God would let such a thing be born betrays our carefully concealed value judgment that such a thing should not exist. Part of the cult of perfection includes the unspoken list of what makes life worthwhile. We have never officially compiled the list or voted on it, but we all know what it is. In order for a life to be valid, it must be able to perform a minimum number of physical activities. It must have a minimum mental aptitude. Its appearance must meet a minimum community standard.

My father’s cousin was born in 1913. As a baby he contracted scarlet fever and lost his hearing. He learned to speak by feeling the shape of his
mother’s mouth, lips, and tongue as she spoke. He learned to read lips in place of hearing. He always spoke with a strong speech impediment, like Helen Keller. In later life, he was asked to speak at a local civic club about what it is like to live with a handicap. He worked hard on the talk. He spent hours in the library reading to find out what it would be like to live with a handicap! He did not accept the value judgment that others placed upon him. It never occurred to him that he had a handicap.

We may just as well ask why God would allow blue-eyed babies to be born as to ask why he would allow the severely retarded to be born. The only thing wrong with them is the way we have valued them and made them to feel worthless. They cannot do the things on the list, so they fail. This corruption of beauty by people illustrates a great flaw in the human character. We distort the valuation of beauty when we contrast it with a bad affliction that a person may suffer. The problem lies with the human valuation of what constitutes “good” and “beautiful.” Perhaps because of the prevailing cultural attitude toward beauty during the time that the New Testament was written, the New Testament does not mention beauty, but it refers to the basis for beauty and the true meaning of beauty. We should also note that in the Old Testament, God does not call creation beautiful, but good.

Our experience of goodness, truth, and beauty teaches us that each of these can have a dark side as people express them. People can twist something until it is no longer what it was. For those who think of values like these as “mental constructs,” a problem arises. The term mental construct is a literary/philosophical version of Freud’s idea that God is only an idea that people “projected” onto the universe. This view would suggest that people construct within their minds a set of values that they then universalize as absolutes. The problem with this view concerns how humans might construct a concept of perfect values (regardless of how imperfect they may actually be) when they are not perfect.

C. S. Lewis has an interesting analysis of this kind of problem in the context of literary imagination. People often think of Lewis in terms of his religious writings, but his main work involved literary scholarship. In his Preface to Paradise Lost, Lewis discussed the character of Satan in Milton’s epic poem Paradise Lost. Satan is a well drawn character, but Lewis insists that Satan is

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2. This discussion may be found in C. S. Lewis, A Preface to Paradise Lost (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 94–103, with particular attention to the discussion on pages 100–101.
not Milton’s hero. Lewis observed that the great authors through the ages have had a common problem when writing about their good and virtuous characters. Somehow, they are less interesting than the villains. Lewis argues that we can easily imagine someone worse than us because of the thoughts we have that we may not have acted upon. In our creative moments, we can imagine great wickedness. Conceiving of someone better than us, however, poses a great problem. We have no frame of reference to draw upon for conceiving of virtues we do not possess. Our approximate virtues have all fallen victim to distortion by self-interest. We may deceive ourselves into believing in the virtue of our virtue, but other people see the flaws.

This problem with projection and mental constructs demonstrates the subtle strength of the old ontological argument for the existence of God that Thomas Aquinas developed during the Middle Ages. On the surface, it sounds not only overly stuffy, but also ridiculous: I have in my mind the idea of a being so perfect that none greater can be conceived. A being that exists in fact would be greater than one that only exists in the mind. Therefore, God exists. It sounds as though the argument means that if we think of something, it must exist. We can all think of purple elephants and other strange things that do not exist, but that is not the force of the argument. On the contrary, the argument actually says just the opposite. When Thomas Aquinas constructed the argument, he was actually saying that we cannot conceive of a most perfect being any more than we can conceive of a square circle. We have no basis for conceiving of a being that exceeds us in perfection. A most perfect being would be far greater and better and more beautiful on a different level than me. I can conceive of beings who live forever and have super-human powers, but when humans project beings onto the universe, they come up with the old pagan gods like Odin, Zeus, and Jupiter. Our projections are no more perfect than we are. To have an idea of a most perfect being, however, such a being must exist who can reveal himself to people.

The relativistic rejection of absolute values in the postmodern world consists largely in its rejection of the Greek philosophical tradition that conceives of freestanding eternal values. The postmodern critique that values are personal is consistent with the biblical picture of the origin of values. They come from a personal being who made us in his image, but our effort at values is as far removed from God’s values as our state of being is removed from God’s state of being.
Remember the one thing that Moses wanted from God? He did not want to be a king. He did not want to be rich. He did not want land and descendants. He did not want everything that everybody else seemed to want. He only asked for one thing: "Now show me your glory" (Exod. 33:18). That was all Moses wanted, just to behold God’s glory.

God’s reply to Moses has often been misunderstood. God did not say, “If you look at me, I'll kill you.” He did not threaten Moses. Instead he said, “You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live” (Exod. 33:20). What is it about the glory of God that is so dreadful, so awful, so terrifying? Elsewhere in the Old Testament we learn that glory also involves the idea of holiness. People have a tendency to think of holiness as a stern, severe, dreadful thing. Yet, perhaps the most common word found in the Old Testament to describe holiness is the word beauty. Frequently the Old Testament employs the phrase, “the beauty of holiness” (1 Chron. 16:29; 2 Chron. 20:21; Ps. 29:2, 96:9 KJV). In recent years a new colloquial expression grew up in popular culture that may actually help in grasping the meaning of the beauty of holiness and why people cannot survive a full experience of the holiness of God. The expression is “drop-dead gorgeous.” What severe and awesome beauty would be so powerful that the experience of it results in death? This modern expression conveys a bit of the meaning of the Old Testament idea that people cannot behold the glory of God and live. God is so beautiful that we cannot stand to behold him in our present state. In order to experience God fully, we have to be changed by his Holy Spirit. This is part of the idea of salvation: that we are born again, that we are renewed, that we are transformed by his Holy Spirit so that we can, in fact, behold him. Immediately after the last Passover meal with his disciples before he was arrested, Jesus expressed his own concern for his followers to experience the fullness of the divine glory: “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world” (John 17:24). The effect of this transformation appears at the end of the New Testament, where the followers of Christ enjoy the eternal presence of God: “They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light” (Rev. 22:4–5). In the call of Isaiah, the angels sang, “Holy,
holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isa. 6:3). The angels flew to and fro, but they covered their faces with their wings, shielding themselves from the glory of the Lord. By contrast, people will behold him.

Conclusion

What does the glory of God have to do with decision making? The tragedy of the story of the fall is that the man and the woman had come to take for granted the presence of God. Familiarity breeds contempt. It happens in marriages; it happens in families and friendships; it happens whenever people take one another for granted and begin to ignore one another. God was still around. The man and woman were not atheists. They did not stop believing that God exists. They simply took him for granted and went about their business until we find them trading the beauty of the Lord of glory for some summer fruit. It is the same kind of thing that happened later on when Esau traded his inheritance for a bowl of soup (Gen. 25:29–34). It seems like such an unimaginably ridiculous thing to have done, yet we do the same sort of thing ourselves every day. We make decisions and choices without ever thinking, “I wonder if God has an opinion on that?”

We all have our own opinions about things. God made us in his image so that we can have our own opinion about things. Repentance means changing our own mind and conforming it to the mind of God. As Paul said, “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5 KJV), and “be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2a KJV). God has an opinion about things, but so do we. Whose opinion do we go with? Part of our problem in our decision making is separating all of creation, and all of our activity in creation, from the one who made us and is the only one who has the proper perspective to understand goodness.

And so, here we go, reliving an old, archetypal story—each one of us in our own way, reliving the fall. Could things be different? The problem is that the values of goodness, truth, and beauty remain a feature of human experience, but how do you decide what is genuinely good, true, and beautiful from a limited human perspective? Experience tells us that goodness, truth, and beauty are best understood in personal, relational terms rather than in legal or scientific terms. This common experience suggests that the
origin of these values, the continuing basis for these values, and the standard that determines these values is personal rather than impersonal. The only ultimate truth is the Lord God Almighty himself. The only ultimate good is the Lord God Almighty himself. The only ultimate beauty is the Lord God Almighty himself. He caused goodness, truth, and beauty in the world by virtue of the act of creation. Because God is good, what God does is good and the result of what God does is good. Thus, creation is full of the afterglow of God’s goodness, leaving people with a taste of what goodness really is.