Plato's Trinity as Problem and Promise in University Life

OBERT C. TANNER

Plato's three great ideals of goodness, truth, and beauty have been so universally accepted through all the centuries by all men that one would never suspect them of being a source of trouble. As ideals they give no trouble. Everybody talks freely about them, firmly believes in them, and claims them for his very own. These three particular ideals are like mathematical formula that pass as negotiable media of thought all over the world. They do not separate nor divide individuals and nations and religions. Everybody believes in goodness, truth and beauty.

When, however, these great ideals are adopted within our daily lives, when they are taken from Plato's heaven of eternal forms and brought down into our world of becoming, made flesh of our flesh, and blood of our blood—then we involve ourselves in real trouble. Ideals and principles made incarnate produce the infinitely varying contrasts between our theory and our practice, between great principles and actual living, between professed faith and daily performance. Our trouble is not with our ideals. Our trouble starts with their humanization, both in our personal and institutional living.

One solution to the problem would be to turn our backs on these ideals and live on some lower plane of human existence. But man is so made that his eye repeatedly searches out the heavens in quest of ideals that give direction and meaning to life. To live without ideals is impossible, and to live with them in successful daily practice is equally impossible. Indeed, it is to the glory of man that goodness, truth, and beauty draw like magnets with such power that before

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Obert C. Tanner is professor of philosophy at the University of Utah. This address was delivered to Brigham Young University Chapter of the American Association of University Professors, October 9, 1961.

them and in loyalty to them man willingly condemns himself to ultimate failure.

Another solution would be to deny that there is a real problem. We could, and sometimes do, maintain that our lives are altogether quite close to our ideals, and while there are failures, there is really no great gap between our principles and practices. So we call attention to our own comparative superiority and boast freely about daily accomplishments. Thoughtful people reject such pretense and self-righteousness. Human nature itself insures daily practices that are mixed with failures.

The only remaining solution is to face the problem as insolvable. We never can live by our ideals. We can use them each day for direction, be drawn toward them, but never reach them. It is well to face the problem, the solution of which lies beyond our capacities. In so doing, we reduce the dread chances of hollow pretense.

The fact is that Plato's trinity is at once both an insolvable problem and also a promise with infinite possibilities.

Nowhere is this promise and problem felt more keenly and lived more fully than in a great university. Other institutions may follow the ideals of goodness, truth, and beauty, but specialization compels them to stress one of them, as religion emphasizes goodness, science truth, and the arts seek the beautiful. But a university may not so specialize. The concern of a university is the universal—all of man's life. Neglect of any one great theory or prominent practice in man's life would deny the true function of a real university.

The second source of trouble, concerning Plato's trinity, comes when one of the three would assume a supremacy over the other two, when goodness would dictate what truth shall be or what truth be taught, or when truth usurps the center of the stage, making goodness and beauty play minor roles in university life. On the other hand, the promise of this great trinity of values comes when there is a good balance between them, when each is important and none is neglected. This careful balance of these three great ideals is the challenge of any truly great university.

No proof is needed that universities today are primarily concerned with truth-seeking and truth-teaching, and that they neglect the ideals of goodness and beauty. Goodness must have been neglected somewhere, as witness our present world situation. Beauty has nearly always been slighted. Our persistent university questions of today do not ask: Is it good? or is it beautiful? but rather, is it scientific?

It can be argued that the major concern of a university should be confined to truth-discoveries and truth teaching. If so, humanity must continue to stumble over the barren wastes of the unbeautiful, and edge its way along the narrow precipices between peace and war, and otherwise suffer great failures of goodness.

These past twenty-five centuries began with the Greeks holding that beauty was man's supreme value, then later centuries centered upon the good as supreme, and today we are giving most of our efforts to discovering and teaching truth.

This present unbalance of these three great ideals brings us to a great challenge facing Brigham Young University today: It is the challenge of maintaining a good balance between each of Plato's trinity, of goodness, of truth, and of beauty. These three great disciplines do not overlap. One should not dominate the others. Each ideal has a value-jurisdiction that the other two should not encroach upon. They are autonomous and each be independent and free of dictation from the other two. Moreover, each ideal is practiced better if the other two receive careful and adequate attention. Truth flourishes if goodness is a near and friendly neighbor. Beauty is more easily found everywhere if aided by truth and goodness. And goodness itself is helped if there be no lagging in the search for truth and encouragement in the creation of the beautiful.

Brigham Young University has a charter of strong emphasis upon goodness. All the past years, including today's policies, stress goodness that all can recognize. Thus, B.Y.U. might issue this challenge to her sister universities.

"We intend no neglect of truth, but we do also intend that our truth-seeking and teaching be balanced with goodness, and with adequate attention to the beautiful."

Such a challenge from B.Y.U. would be heard around the world. Such an achievement would make of B.Y.U. a mother institution, giving rise to better universities, a pattern for others to follow.

Nevertheless, there is one problem that must first be solved, and though it is a profound problem, it is not insuperable, not without great hope. This problem might be stated by sister universities to B.Y.U. as follows:

"You do stress goodness and beauty, but you do not balance these two values by an equal emphasis upon truth. Your goodness-value dominates your truth-value. When the two clash, it is goodness that sits as the supreme court to decide what truth shall be, or what truth shall be taught."

This is a challenge that Brigham Young University must answer, and try to answer successfully. It may take many years to do so.

Let us consider now the conditions for a future successful answer to this challenge.

If a university is not to neglect its goal of seeking and teaching truth, then among others, there are two basic preconditions: (1) Freedom; (2) Good method.

Consider first the indispensible requirement of freedom in any great university. Surely the basic requirements are met here at B.Y.U. in ample abundance: freedom of books in the new and magnificent library, freedom within beautiful classrooms, freedom of discussion, freedom of a well-trained faculty. Surely truth is well served where such fundamentals of freedom are met.

But all these great achievements do not completely satisfy. More is required. Great libraries and responsible teachers and free classrooms are necessary, but not sufficient for the freedom that truth requires in a great university. There is, in addition, the necessity of what might be called the delicate atmosphere and encouraging climate, where the winds of freedom may blow gently, and softly, and surely.

Freedom is a fragile plant that bends easily to every breeze of pressure. Freedom wilts before innuendoes of power. Freedom disappears in the presence of absolutism. Freedom smothers with unfair argument. Freedom is destroyed with prying personal questions. Freedom is dead where men are afraid.

Our great libraries and class rooms are achievements for freedom, but they are not freedom's guarantee; for freedom is born of human life, and subject to the frailties of human nature—man's jealousies, man's vanities, man's great satisfaction in exercising dominion and power and authority—these fragile aspects of human nature itself are the bullets that kill freedom.

Freedom lives by confidence and trust. It is born in generosity. It grows with tolerance. It flourishes with kindness and love. Surely goodness is a life companion of truth, and never can truth bless humanity so well as it does by the sunshine of true goodness.

This is one great challenge before us: whether our goodness will be good enough to encourage freedom in truth-seeking, or whether our goodness will be mixed with the frailties of human nature—man's fears that new truth may endanger his peace of mind, jeopardize his place of importance, weaken his exercise of authority, challenge his place of exaltation—in short, upset his cherished and hard-won security. On the other hand, if goodness be kindness and patience, then the delicate breath of freedom may blow gently and surely across this campus from day to day, from year to year, and from generation to generation.

If someone here feels discouraged about the reality of the atmosphere of such freedom here at B.Y.U., may I add that such freedom is the great problem of all universities everywhere. Every campus has teachers and administrators and visiting speakers and a public press—all too human—impatient with new ideas, restless by lack of cooperation, fearful of criticism, anxious about preserving the past. Indeed, such people outside the university are frequently strangers when they visit a campus. They are lost when they witness the life of a great university that is correctly performing the true functioning of a great university, so frequently involved

with reconstructing, recreating, and pioneering toward some new way heretofore untried and uncertain.

But freedom is only one prerequisite if truth is to flourish. Another requirement is good method.

The ideal method of progress toward truth is the scientific method. The scientist, as scientist, is the true professional practitioner of the Christian virtue of humility. He holds all hypotheses and generalizations and theories and laws with true modesty, with mental reservations. He is open-minded and even eager to hear a new modification or reservation or contrary fact, or even an outright contradiction.

This ideal of scientist, of holding his beliefs with a provisional attitude, a tentative spirit, a teachable mood—this is the ideal that scholars need badly in the non-scientific disciplines—the humanities and in religion itself.

Mormonism at its core is a religion of progress—continuous revelation. But there never can be progress if emerging and exploratory ideas are stopped by dogmatisms. Mormonism ideally should have none of the clashes common in other churches, such as that of reason versus revelation. There should be none of the heresey trials that judge ideas by standards of infallibility. Every gospel principle, every teaching, every ideal, according to the Mormon ideal of eternal progression, is subject to the enrichment that comes of wider experience in thoughtful and prayerful deliberations. Each gospel standard is enlarged and made nobler by our probing for new possibilities, deeper insights, and more universal comprehension. Mormonism may progress statistically without such pioneering, but it never can make spiritual and intellectual progress without the humility of a spirit or mood that is tentative, provisional, expectant, searching and awaiting new possibilities. Such progress enables us to receive revelation from God quite as much as we might say that scientific discoveries become our better reading and understanding the language of God.

Our gospel ideals are enriched as we think deeply and prayerfully. The last word has not yet been spoken on any Mormon ideal or principle or practice. Our progress here must be eternal. But eternal progress can be greatly halted

by fearful men, by dogmatic men, by powerful men, or by men lacking in the deep humility that makes new discoveries possible.

Moreover, while the scientist's success is verification by observable fact, successful validation of religious principles is more broadly based, namely a wider coherence between revelations and the rational, already supported by prayer and the probabilities we discover and other tests of our daily living. As faculty members we may not waste millions of hard-earned wealth and countless years in otherwise productive lives now wasted by endless hair-splitting with propositions that are unreasonable and improbable. An old Mormon admonition to "stay out of the mysteries" is still good advice to avoid great wastefulness. We must follow good methodology of high probabilities if we are to successfully engage ourselves with the truth ideal. Truth is the companion of him who looks at God's handiwork as examples of the reasonable, the probable, the natural, and the common within our daily experiences.

Finally, if the great ideal of a great university be a careful consideration of goodness of itself, and truth of itself, of beauty of itself, neglecting no one of them, nor permitting any one of the three to dominate the others, then such a challenge can only be met by the faculty members themselves. Administrators and policy boards can help, but the labors of each faculty member, free and courageous, prayerful and studious, kind and patient—this faculty ideal will win or lose the great challenge now facing B.Y.U.

If someone is discouraged let him know that every great ideal is unattainable. Our trouble is that God has made us to live by the light of our ideals in ways that are always imperfect. Such trouble is a good trouble. Nowhere is it felt more keenly than in a university.

The hallmarks of a great university are these:

1. A people willing to give, not only of their material resources, but also of their great spiritual and intellectual resources, such as freedom of students and teachers to pioneer in quest of a greater good, or a larger truth, and to create and appreciate the beautiful everywhere.

2. A great university is one whose individual faculty members are able to handle this freedom with careful responsibility, devoted to good methods and courageous when freedom is threatened.

If B.Y.U. is to lead other universities as an example, it now faces the demand that truth be autonomous, not subject to goodness, yet encouraged and supported by goodness. For while the gospel is essentially goodness, love of God and man, Latter-day Saints hold that the gospel also includes truth and beauty, and that a careful balance of all three means a good life for man. Such is the great challenge now facing this wonderful university.