

# Beauty as Outward Virtue—Virtue as Inward Beauty: The Sacred Art of Living

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**T**his paper presents the ideas of Frithjof Schuon who was the leading exponent of the Traditionalist school, the perspective of which was inaugurated by René Guénon and Ananda Coomaraswamy, the first in stressing pure metaphysics, the second in integrating within metaphysics a true ‘philosophy’ of art, a view of art which derives from philosophy in the real sense of the term, ‘love of wisdom’. Schuon himself combined the two approaches, through an ‘applied metaphysics’, the actual art of following a spiritual path, where esoterism, again literally understood as the ‘inner’ way, reveals the often hidden connection between abstract metaphysics and concrete activity, in realms as diverse as art, science, ritual, and ethics.

The focus of this paper is on the way in which Schuon magisterially synthesises the most elevated metaphysics with the most concrete requirements of the spiritual life by analysing the nature of the Divine Beauty and its radiations and reverberations in manifestation through nature and sacred art in the outward world and with the beauty of virtue in the inward—in the soul. Virtue is revealed in his perspective as the cornerstone of spirituality and the reflection within us of the Divine Beauty. In showing virtue to be the reflection on the human plane of the divine qualities, he galvanises our consciousness of both the beauty and the necessity of virtue: its beauty which is divine before becoming human, and its necessity if the human is to become fully spiritualised; for it is only by becoming “whole” and thus holy that the soul can realize beauty in its totality. It is from the heights of this metaphysics that we must begin to trace the reciprocity in the spiritualised soul between

inward and outward beauty—though we cannot hope to do justice to the depth, subtlety and breadth of this topic and Schuon's vision of it.

### **The radiation of the Infinite**

*"I was a hidden treasure and I wished to be known and so I created the world"*<sup>1</sup>

This *Hadith Qudsi*, which is so often cited by Sufis, expresses the truth that the hidden Treasure, the Absolute Reality—the Sovereign Good—wills to radiate in contingency through its very Infinity. This is also affirmed in the Platonic and Augustinian axiom that it is in the nature of the Good to communicate itself. Schuon explains the 'hidden treasure' further by saying, "Beauty stems from God's Infinity, which coincides with His Bliss and God's tendency to communicate it, hence to radiate; this is the overflowing of the Sovereign Good, which at one and the same time projects its beauties and attracts souls."<sup>2</sup> Thus this treasure is the Beauty which is manifested through God's Love and his desire to give himself through it into the world. For "God wishes to be known not only in Himself but also from 'without' and starting from another than He: that is the Substance of the Divine All Possibility."<sup>3</sup>

### **The traditions on Beauty**

The traditional philosophy of beauty has been presented by Coomaraswamy, who laid the groundwork by synthesizing and commenting on the traditions on beauty from the West and East, from Plato and Dionysius and the Scholastics, to the Indian philosophers. According to the Scholastics who derived their ideas from Plato, Absolute Beauty is unchanging and total for it is Beauty in all ways and in Itself. It is an overflowing of the super-beautiful for in God it is that superabundance which is the Fount of all beauty which is then exteriorised and deployed into existence. It is also the harmony reflected in the equilibrium of

<sup>1</sup> Hadith Qudsi whose meaning "is sound according to its unveiling," says ibn Arabi, even if its line of transmission is weak. William. C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1989, p. 250.

<sup>2</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Roots of the Human Condition*, World Wisdom Books, Bloomington, 1991, p. 118.

<sup>3</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *The Transfiguration of Man*, World Wisdom Books, Bloomington, 1995, p. 64.

the divine archetypes.<sup>4</sup> Most importantly according to the Platonic dictum, “Beauty is the Splendour of the True” and is thus inseparable from the Truth. “In Being, the Universal Substance, the *materia prima*, is pure beauty and is the eternal complement to the Divine Intelligence which communicates to it the divine qualities to be incarnated,”<sup>5</sup> Schuon says. Thus the relationship between beauty and truth reverberates down to the level of terrestrial forms whereby beauty externalises Truth and Bliss. Beyond this and essentially, beauty illuminates because according to the Scholastics it is made of Light.<sup>6</sup> According to Rumi (who has been described as bathing in beauty like an eagle soaring in the light of the sun<sup>7</sup>), “Beauty is a ray of Perfection’s Light.”<sup>8</sup>

Terrestrial beauty itself is defined as, “That which conforms to its own heavenly essence.”<sup>9</sup> It is that thing that conforms most perfectly to its true self and fully is what it ought to be, being neither incomplete nor erroneous, but reflecting perfection and harmony in its integrity, whereby all parts work to one common end. It is thoroughly or “well and truly” made and it is this quality which renders it attractive. Again and in contrast to the aesthetic point of view, beauty is objective and does not depend on the onlooker for its perfection. As Schuon says its perception is not a subjective illusion but is in fact the object of love which is the subjective pole. He then explains that beauty satisfies the intelligence, removes doubts and anxieties, melts hardenings in the soul and calls forth love.<sup>10</sup> For it manifests a reality of love, of illimitation, of equilibrium, of generosity and of beatitude.

However, the function of beauty is not to please but to summon to something other than it—to the archetype or the immortal principle that it incarnates. Through beauty God gives us a message of his nature—these are the *ayat* that the Holy Qur’an speaks of—*on the horizons and*

<sup>4</sup> Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Traditional Art and Symbolism*, Princeton University Press, Bollingen Series, New Jersey, 1977, chapter on The Medieval Theory of Beauty, p. 217.

<sup>5</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, Harper and Row, New York, 1975, p. 242.

<sup>6</sup> Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Traditional Art and Symbolism*, Princeton University Press, Bollingen Series, New Jersey, 1977, chapter on The Medieval Theory of Beauty.

<sup>7</sup> S. H. Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, Oxford University Press, London, p. 142.

<sup>8</sup> William. C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1983, p. 250. Diwan 14286.

<sup>9</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Roots of the Human Condition*, World Wisdom Books, Bloomington, 1991, p. 118.

<sup>10</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Echoes of Perennial Wisdom*, World Wisdom Books, Bloomington, 1992, p. 9.

*in ourselves.*<sup>11</sup> For Beauty, Schuon says, is also an outward projection of a universal quality immanent within us. In beauty man sees what he should be. "Oh, I have seen my beauty in thy Beauty. I have become a mirror for thy Beauty alone," cries out Rumi in the Diwan.<sup>12</sup>

### **Goodness and Beauty**

Schuon explains the relationship between goodness and beauty. "Beauty and goodness are two faces of one and the same reality, the one outward and the other inward; thus goodness is internal beauty and beauty is external goodness... from another point of view, however, goodness and beauty are situated at the same level, their inward face then being Beatitude and Beatitude is inseparable from the knowledge of God."<sup>13</sup> It is to this knowledge that we are invited through the aesthetic experience when it is directed aright, by passing beyond appearances and following the vibration back to its roots—and ultimately to union with its Divine Source.

In some ways, Schuon says, beauty can be seen as inferior to goodness "as the outward is inferior to the inward." However, in some ways beauty is superior to goodness because it is "disinterested and serene like the nature of things and without objective, like Being or the Infinite...as being is superior to doing or as contemplation is superior to action; it is in this sense that the Beauty of God appears as a mystery even more profound than his Mercy."<sup>14</sup> Because of this serenity, beauty both relieves and appeases. Schuon explains this in another way by saying that Beauty stems from the ontological pole and therefore it reposes in its original simplicity and innocence. "Beauty does not want to conquer anything; it always reposes in That which is."<sup>15</sup>

### **The Reciprocity of Beauty**

This revelation in manifestation of Beatitude requires of man reciprocity. What God gives to man, man must return to God by giving

<sup>11</sup> *Holy Qur'an*, 41:53.

<sup>12</sup> William. C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, State University of New York Press, 1983, Albany. Diwan 23677.

<sup>13</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, Harper and Row, New York, 1975, p. 247.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid* p. 247.

<sup>15</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *The Transfiguration of Man*, World Wisdom Books, Bloomington, 1995, p. 72.

himself totally to God in his heart thus showing gratitude to God for his revealing Mercy. Now at the time of the Earthly Paradise, the primordial world, when man knew God integrally by the *fitra*, the creation was One in the inward and the outward. Goodness was internal beauty and beauty was external goodness. Before the loss of the harmony of Eden, primordial man saw things from within, that is, in their “Substantiality within the Divine Unity.”<sup>16</sup> He was totally at one with his Lord, his soul was in conformity with God’s Beauty and Goodness. There was no separation. But after the fall, man saw things only as accidents and as external things and so outside God and his soul became fragmented, atrophied and sinful.

The sacred art of living—the Way—means a return to the vision enjoyed by the innocence of Primordial man, to the inward where as Schuon says “all things die and are reborn in the Divine Unity.”<sup>17</sup>

### Islamic Art

In Islamic Art these truths of the radiation and harmony of the One in the outward and the harmony and beauty of soul of the primordial or perfect man (*al-insan al-kamil*) in the inward are illustrated through a plethora of abstract motifs “whose crystalline purity and joyous profusion express this unity,”<sup>18</sup> *Tawhid*. Their essential message is one of harmony and happiness through the radiation of the Divine Beatitude into existence, the primordial beauty and harmony of the primordial soul, and the return of creation to its Transcendent Lord. For paired alongside the divine name of Beauty—*Jamal*, is also that of Majesty, *Jalal*, and it is to this aspect that Unity refers by expressing “the transcendence of the Supreme Unity, its non-alterity and absolute Solitude” Having realised the nothingness of other than He, “the finite then is reintegrated with the Infinite.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, Penguin Books, Baltimore, 1972, p. 154.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid* p. 154.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid* p. 137

<sup>19</sup> Titus Burckhardt, *Sacred Art in East and West*, Perennial Books, London, 1967, p. 102.

These geometrical motifs are to be found all over the Islamic world in all the visual arts and crafts, in Qur'anic frontispieces, in pottery, weaving and metalwork, on the ceilings of domes and in tile and plasterwork. In Islam the centre is everywhere.

*God is beautiful and he loves beauty.*<sup>20</sup>

### Nature

In the outward, God reveals his goodness through the beauty of his creation and in virgin nature. This is God's Art. Nature is close to heaven in that it offers vestiges of the earthly paradise and a foretaste of the heavenly paradise. For this reason virgin nature is often treated by traditional peoples as a sanctuary. It is a dwelling place for the sages and saints, and for the contemplative soul a place of pilgrimage to its rivers, mountains and caves, forests and deserts. In it, Schuon says, the pilgrim, "passes beyond space and finds himself reintegrated in the formless prototype of the sacred place."<sup>21</sup> And in it he is thus purified.

The contemplative man prefers the paradisaical virginity of nature and its solitude to the corruption and dispersion of urban life for in nature he sees something of "the Divine Archetypes which they manifest under the aspects of beauty and truth."<sup>22</sup> As manifestations of the inward in the outward they retrace the function of revelation which descends in order to bring man back to God. Thus in the same way, they are *ayat*, the signs mentioned in the Holy Qur'an. However the *ayat* as verses of the Holy Qur'an are also like the phenomena of nature in that they are virginal and maternal and reveal God through springing from the Mother of the Book and being transmitted by the virgin spirit of the Prophet.<sup>22</sup> (On whom be peace)

God's Generosity and Mercy are reflected in the outward beauty and generosity of nature; through it God gives us our daily bread. For Goodness is written into the very substance of the universe, and all terrestrial beauty is a reflection of God's Love. The divine qualities can be found in all the forms of nature, be they animal, vegetable or mineral. In the innocence and peace of the dove and the sheep, the majesty of

<sup>20</sup> Well-known Hadith.

<sup>21</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, Perennial Books, London, 1987, p. 48.

<sup>22</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, Penguin Books Baltimore, 1972, p. 154.

the lion and stag, the divine possibility in the flowing of a stream, the holy in a forest, the infinite reflected in the vastness of the ocean, the eternal in the sky, the absolute in the lofty mountain peaks and in the very form of man himself; “the moon-faced beauties of the world have stolen a mote of our Beauty...” says Rumi.<sup>23</sup>

### Sacred Art

The sacred arts of man, which are divine in inspiration, are another means through which God manifests his saving Mercy and Love through beauty. Although the language of nature is less intelligible than art for it is not human but angelic, there is a complementarity between virgin nature and the sacred arts of man, as Schuon says, “Each in its own way manifests the inward in the outward and plays its part in bringing about the reflux of the soul towards the inward.” Fallen man cannot reach the depth of God’s love because of his hardness but in sacred art and in nature he can taste something of this love in the nostalgia it evokes in him, although for the truly passionate man it may seem to echo only the world’s seduction. The born contemplative, however, cannot perceive beauty without perceiving in it something of God, and this divine content allows him to detach himself from appearances.<sup>24</sup> For all sacred art, Schuon says, has God as its author, man as artist is merely the instrument. Therefore because of this all the treasures of art are found already prefigured in the divine bliss. Thus sacred art, in vehicling spiritual presences, helps man find his own centre and offers him a sensible consolation.

In an overview of the traditional arts, Schuon shows how each form of art reveals through its beauty something of God’s Truth and Bliss, for the first thing, he says, that always strikes one in a traditional masterpiece is its intelligence. He explains for example, “that the beauty of a sanctuary is like the crystallisation of a spiritual flux or of a stream of blessings. It is as though an invisible and celestial power had fallen into matter—which hardens divides and scatters—and had transformed it into a shower of precious forms, into a sort of planetary system of symbols surrounding us and penetrating us from every side. The impact... is

<sup>23</sup> William. C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1983, p. 203.

<sup>24</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, Perennial Books, London, 1987, p. 30.

direct and existential; it goes beyond thought and seizes our being in its very substance.”<sup>25</sup>

In connection to the sacred sanctuary is to be found the sacred visual and audible arts, “representing a transcendent reality and permitting the fixing of the mind upon this symbol—a spiritual message leading back to a liberating truth” in which the artist and the onlooker effaces and forgets himself. These arts must be an adequate expression of their content so that the sanctity and wisdom contained within them becomes apparent.

Again, true poetry expresses above all beauty of soul and spiritual realities with sincerity of feeling this being particularly true of the mystical poets whose spiritual endowments enabled them to express with sincerity truths beyond the range of ordinary humanity.

Music “distinguishes the essences but not their degrees” so some may hear passion while others hear the angelic, to some it is a temptation because of their worldly nature while for another the same piece of music may exhort to the truth.

Beauty of dress reveals the spiritual and social function of the wearer in which category Schuon mentions the Arab genius reflected in a traditional male dress of “unsurpassed virility, resignation, nobility and sobriety,” for it is sacerdotal in nature reflecting the fact that in the traditional Islamic world every man is in a sense priest, every man can perform the essential rites for himself. He also mentions the Hindu feminine dress, the sari, as being “unsurpassable in its beauty, dignity and its femininity,”<sup>26</sup> which reflects something of the divine mother which this perspective incarnates.

In order for the divine inspiration to radiate in the outward form, traditional artists prepared themselves by fasting, meditation and prayer and, in creating, by following and mastering the rules of form particular to their work of art. It was the element “object” that determined their work rather than their own need to create and express their personality through it. In Islamic art this impersonality is almost a hallmark of its beauty. Islamic art attains to a kind of perfection almost independent of its authors whose personalities are totally effaced beneath the uni-

<sup>25</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, Perennial Books, London, 1987, p. 33.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid* p. 40.



versal character of the forms<sup>27</sup>. For it is the forms of art that confer on it a sacred character, these forms must reflect the spiritual vision of the religion in question and vehicle a given quality of being through their symbolism.<sup>28</sup>

To this divine inspiration the artists then added their humble pious inspirations. For while they respected the formal symbolism they found their creative joy in the “loving recreation of revealed prototypes”<sup>29</sup> expressed in manifold variations. For those perceiving the work of art, Schuon analyses this perception of sensible theophany when he tells us that it must be accompanied by the remembrance of God, which will lead us beyond the thing perceived back to its divine Origin.<sup>30</sup>

Speaking of the sacred in general, which necessarily includes sacred art he says:

The sacred is the projection of the celestial Centre into the cosmic periphery. To feel this concretely is to possess the sense of the sacred and thereby the instinct of adoration, devotion and submission: the sense of the sacred is the awareness, of That which cannot not be, whose immense remoteness and miraculous proximity we experience at one and the same time. If we are to have this awareness, it is because necessary being reaches us in the depths of our heart, by a mystery of immanence which makes us capable of knowing all that is knowable and which for that very reason makes us immortal.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Disequilibrium of Modern Art**

Nothing could be in greater contrast to the static impersonal beauty and harmony of the Islamic decorative arts, and by extension the traditional sacred art of every religion, which outwardly reflect metaphysical truths of an inward nature, than the disturbed and disturbing outcries of a modern art which despite clever originality is often incomprehensible to ordinary folk when they admit they can't make head or tail of it. This modern art reflects the nature of the modern world itself where according to the Traditionalists, “Ugliness has become a norm and a principle under the guise of realism”<sup>32</sup> and utilitarianism, and beauty

<sup>27</sup> Titus Burckhardt, *Sacred Art in East and West*, Perennial Books, London, 1967, p. 107.

<sup>28</sup> Titus Burckhardt, *Sacred Art in East and West*, Perennial Books, London, 1967, p. 102.

<sup>29</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, Perennial Books, London, 1987 p. 39.

<sup>30</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Echoes of Perennial Wisdom*, World Wisdom Books, Bloomington, 1992, p. 69.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.* p. 69.

<sup>32</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, Harper and Row, New York, 1975 p. 247.

is now marginalized as a speciality and a luxury. It has also become a question of taste.

In modern art, its naturalism, idealised in classical aestheticism, is merely an imitation of nature, not of the sacred within it, which on the contrary is to be found in the arts of the East and indeed in Islamic art itself, "which repeats the message of nature without copying its results." Any truth that modern art contains is of a psychological nature and reveals "only the errors of its authors or it objectifies only individual fact." Its originality leads to "the subhuman aberrations of surrealism, which are wholly improbable" or they are an affectation.<sup>33</sup>

For in fallen man, whether modern or traditional, truth and beauty have been supplanted in varying degrees, by error and vice and with it a corresponding ugliness, and the soul is out of harmony. Some of its faculties are in discord while others have been atrophied. These psychic dissonances are reflected in a modern art which strives to express the perturbations and anxieties of the individualistic soul, cut off from its beatific root through ignorance and egoism.

### **The Way of return**

How then does fallen man, indeed modern man, who publicises his state so readily in his art, return to the primordial norm? And what is the Sacred Art of Living that will lead him back to goodness and inward beauty and to happiness and beatitude? For it is beauty and the love of beauty which makes man happy, and if he wishes to be so permanently he must bear the beautiful within himself by realising virtue which is also goodness and piety.<sup>34</sup>

First, one cannot realise this inward beauty without there being an understanding of the Truth. For "there is no lustral water like unto knowledge." The mind must be purified by doctrinal truth and the whole being must be purified through virtue, which is inward beauty itself. As Schuon explains, "Truth is essential to virtue, for virtues cut off from truth do not have the power to raise us above ourselves. Truth makes us understand the spiritual virtues—while the virtues also lead us to truths and transform them into realities that are concrete, seen

<sup>33</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, Perennial Books, London, 1987, p. 34.

<sup>34</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Echoes of Perennial Wisdom*, World Wisdom Books, Bloomington, 1992, p.10.

and lived.” Or again, “he who wants the centre must realize the whole. He who wants to know must know with his whole soul.”<sup>35</sup> The spiritual virtues are based on the analogy between the human and the Divine and the centre and the totality; “to meditate on the Divine Qualities is to meditate on the virtues and subsequently the vices.”<sup>36</sup>

### Interior Beauty

What are the spiritual virtues? Schuon tells us that the virtues radiate from the nature of Being and are not productions of man. The virtues represent intrinsic beauties, testifying to the Beauty of God, which then conform to modes of action through which they find their reality here below. Their practice is the pursuit of purity of heart with a view to the knowledge of God. Interior beauty reflects the existential and contemplative aspect of the virtues and at the same time their metaphysical transparency. “Every virtue is a mode of equilibrium and a way of participating in the Universal Equilibrium. By participating in the virtues man remains at the centre and escapes the vicissitudes of the moving periphery.”<sup>37</sup>

Nor are they merely natural virtues which Schuon says are like a crystal trying to illuminate a dark place without the presence of light to reflect. Natural qualities do not necessarily keep their efficacy on the spiritual level for they may be subverted through pride or stupidity. For a quality has only a definitive value through its inner humility which stems from our knowledge of our nothingness in the face of God. Pride can destroy virtue for it is in its nature “to attach itself to the good in order that it might perish,” as St Augustine tells us.

“Virtue is the abolition of egoism, which is based on an error, which falsifies the proportions of things with regard to God and our neighbour.”<sup>38</sup> Thus egocentricity is the most deep-seated root of evil. It is also the most ugly thing; to be virtuous is to step outside the ego, to see it as something seething, noisy and suffocating as Schuon says in

<sup>35</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, Perennial Books, London, 1987, p. 193.

<sup>36</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, Perennial Books, London, 1987, p. 184.

<sup>37</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, Penguin Books, Baltimore, 1972, p. 133.

<sup>38</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, World Wisdom Books, Bloomington, 1986, p. 206.

his memoirs. Just as the correct perception of beauty requires the sense of transcendence—the Essence is infinitely greater than all its manifestations—, so the correct assimilation of virtue requires a sense of effacement: the individual is nothing in the face of the Absolute, whose qualities may be reflected in the soul, but do not belong to it. This art of living beautifully, in the light of the Absolute, means that one apply to oneself a strictly metaphysical appreciation of the relationship between formal beauty and its principal archetype. On the one hand beautiful things manifest their divine archetype, but on the other the divine beauty infinitely surpasses all such manifestations; without such appreciation the perception of beauty lapses either into a sterile aestheticism, or worse into outright idolatry: the beautiful thing is cut off from its source and worshipped as a god in its own right. In just the same way, in the very measure that virtue, inward beauty, is detached from its divine source, infinitely beyond the ego, such “virtue” is deprived of its beauty and becomes in fact the source of pride—the most deadly of all sins. Virtue detached from God is pride, just as beauty detached from God is idol; virtue attached to God is sanctity, just as beauty attached to God is sacrament.<sup>39</sup>

The virtues, therefore, in no sense belong to us. We should be attached to the virtues for their own sakes, not so that we may possess them but because they are beautiful and are comprised of beatitude because they belong to the Sovereign Good. A man can enjoy a good conscience through participating in a virtue but he does so “in the same way that he might enter a sanctuary”<sup>40</sup> full of gratitude and reverence. He “must not want to acquire a virtue but rather to get rid of a vice; for only our faults belong to us; our qualities belong to God. By eliminating the vices we allow God’s qualities to penetrate the soul.”<sup>41</sup>

In another place he says, “Virtue implies an incessant movement of our will for there is no life without continual renewal. To attribute to oneself a quality is equivalent to a fixation of the inner flux which makes that quality live; the result is to make that quality sterile.”

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<sup>39</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Echoes of Perennial Wisdom*, World Wisdom Books, Bloomington, 1992, p. 17.

<sup>40</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, World Wisdom Books, Bloomington, 1986, p. 204

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.* p. 204

In a wonderful passage Schuon says, “everyone wants to be out in the open air, no one likes to be shut up in a dark and airless tower, and that is how one should love the virtues... no one who loves the light and the sun would think of proclaiming, ‘I am the sun’ or ‘I am the sky’. ...A humble man would rather be a beggar out in the open air than a king in a dark and airless tower.”<sup>42</sup>

Thus virtue is to conquer a fault by understanding its nature, detesting its consequence and putting this comprehension and sentiment into practice. Our intelligence then will serve to show us the cosmic significance of virtue, our sentiment will convince us through its beauty and the corresponding ugliness of vice, and our will should then implement both our comprehension and our sentiment.

### **The Essential Virtues**

Schuon, in his writings, comes back again and again to the three essential virtues upon which all the others depend. These are humility, charity and veracity: the effacing of the ego, the giving of oneself to the neighbour and God and the realisation of the truth—purification, expansion and union—these are the three dimensions of the Way and the Art of the spiritual life. From these essential virtues and their combinations, derive all the others.

In a magnificent passage, contrasting the various dimensions of existence, Schuon expresses these spiritual attitudes by saying:

To this false life is opposed a true death; the death of passion; this is spiritual death, the cold and crystalline purity of the soul conscious of its immortality. To false death is opposed a true life; the life of the heart turned towards God and open to the warmth of his love. To false activity is opposed a true rest, a true peace, the repose of the soul which is simple and generous and content with God, the soul which turns away from agitations and curiosity and ambition, to rest in the Divine beauty. To false rest is opposed a true activity, the battle of the spirit against the multiple weaknesses which squander the soul—and this precious life—as in a game or a dream.

To false knowledge, to vain thought, is opposed a manner of being; that of the spirit united to its divine source, beyond discursive thought which is scission, indefinite dispersion, movement without issue. To false existence, to crude and blind fact is opposed a true knowledge, true discernment; to know that God alone is absolute Reality, that the world is only through Him and in Him and that, outside Him, I am not.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *ibid.* p. 204

<sup>43</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, Perennial Books, London, 1987, p. 222.

It is through these spiritual virtues that the soul realises inward beauty—a harmony and holiness of soul that reflects beauty in the outward. In its perfection, in the full flowering and balance of its parts it is like the Islamic geometric motif, the star radiating out from the centre and reforming and interconnecting to form other stars, in one harmonious whole. The one star in the middle is connected to all, and is endlessly repeated like an infinite centre which situates and integrates within Oneness the endless disclosures of the 'Hidden Treasure'.

*Wheresoever ye turn, there is the face of God.*<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *Holy Qur'an*, 2:115.