



Human Goodness

Yi-Fu Tuan

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Yi-Fu Tuan is known for his ability to take on big issues and make them accessible, a skill which has served him well in his career as a professor and author of more than two dozen books on philosophical and metaphysical subjects. Tuan is the J. K. Wright and Vilas Professor Emeritus of Geography at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and has been honored with the Cullum Medal of the American Geographical Society, the Charles Homer Haskins Lectureship of the American Council of Learned Societies and the Laureat d'Honneur of the International Geographical Union.

Although he considers himself a “pessimist,” believing as he does that “true goodness—true moral excellence” is rare and that any “sensitive individual is right to be appalled by not only the evil but also the drab wastefulness in so much of human life,” Tuan has chosen to focus attention on people whose lives have been of great value, and who were considered, both by the evaluation of their peers and by time, to have been “good” people. Though the individuals whose lives are examined in this work are not without their faults—gifted and complex people like Confucius, Socrates, Mozart, Keats, Albert Schweitzer, and Simone Weil—they have all made lasting contributions to world culture, and their lives shine like stars against the backdrop of human misery.

In spite of differences in time, place, profession, and culture, Tuan asserts that all “good” people have characteristics in common and that these characteristics can be identified without resorting to mysticism. Instead they are recognized in practical descriptions of the behaviors, actions, and contributions made to the welfare of the whole. Some of the characteristics under consideration include: the ability to go against a “customary good” for a higher good; selflessness and a childlike quality that manifests as curiosity, enthusiasm, *and* disregard for the opinions of others; physical vigor; strong individualism; openness; humility, gratitude, and the ability to give credit to those who paved the way for one’s success; an inclusive outlook on humanity; a strong “sense of place”; civility and the ability to respond without prejudice; generosity; devotion to truth; and fearlessness, even in the face of death.

In defining the characteristics of those called “good,” Yi-Fu Tuan has offered the opposite of the negative focus presented by the media and the social sciences. *Human Goodness* is an important and encouraging contribution to the literature on what it means to be truly human.

KRISTINE MORRIS (April 14, 2008)

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