

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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Part 1 of 3

TRUTH, GOODNESS, AND BEAUTY

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I. INTRODUCTION

- A. As many of you know, we held a very special seminar at the beginning of this summer, based on the reading of a book of mine, *Six Great Ideas* three of which are truth, goodness, and beauty, and to one of which—beauty—I wish to devote

most of my attention this evening, (The other three are liberty, equality, justice.)

1. That seminar was filmed by Bill Moyers and his filming of it will become part of six one hour programs—one on each of the six great ideas. These will be nationally broadcast by Public Television in the fall of 1982.
2. The participants in that seminar included representatives of non-Western cultures as well as representatives of our Western intellectual tradition.
 - a- The task of moderating a discussion thus constituted forced me to recognize that the six great ideas, as I have come to understand them, are characteristically Western in their origin and development.
 - b. This in no way changed my deepest conviction that the Western understanding of these six ideas is of critical importance for all the peoples of the world, and especially for the future development of a world cultural community, upon which the intellectual brotherhood of man depends.
 - c. With regard to three of these great ideas—truth, goodness, and beauty—I learned from moderating that seminar another thing of the greatest importance.
 - (1) An adequate consideration of these three ideas cannot be achieved without dealing with two basic distinctions.
 - (a) One is the distinction between the objective and the subjective aspects of each.
 - (b) The other is the distinction between what is absolute and what is relative in the sphere of each idea.
 - (2) The non-Western participants in our seminar did not recognize—forgive me for saying also that they did not understand—these two fundamental distinctions. They would say, in fact. they did say, that these distinctions are not relevant.

- (3) The line that divides Western civilization from non-Western cultures can be drawn in terms of the difference just mentioned with regard to the significance of these two distinctions.
3. Let me state for you at once my understanding of these distinctions and my sense of their significance.
- a. The *objective* is what is the same for you and me and everyone else.
The *subjective* is what is different for you and me and others.
 - b. The *relative* is that which differs at different times and places, or that which varies with change in circumstances.
The *absolute* is that which remains the same at different times and places, or that which does not vary with change in circumstances.
 - c. If truth were entirely subjective and relative, there could not be any transcultural truths upon which all mankind might unite in agreement.
 - (1) If truth were entirely subjective and relative, there would be no possibility of progress in the pursuit of truth.
 - (2) The effort to advance knowledge and correct error would be an illusory undertaking, not, as we view it in the West, one of the most important enterprises for a civilization to engage
 - (3) At the risk of being chided for my parochialism, I would be so bold as to say that progress in the pursuit of truth and in the advancement of knowledge is singularly characteristic of Western civilization. No non-Western culture, ancient or modern, manifests anything like our extraordinary devotion to the enlargement of knowledge, the steady improvement in our understanding of what we know, the implacable effort to root out errors and misunderstandings.
 - (4) Though non-Western cultures may not place the same high value on these achievements as we do, they do nevertheless acknowledge the value of

the technological advances they have adopted from the West, advances that would not have been possible at all without dedication to the objectivity of truth.

(Digression here: The qq. in re flight to Kyoto: Western Businessman and Zen Master)

- d. If good and evil, right and wrong, were entirely subjective and relative, there could not be any transcultural moral values upon which all mankind might unite in agreement.
 - (1) The adoption by the United Nations of a declaration of human rights—to be secured, safeguarded, and promoted by all the peoples of the world—would be an obvious travesty.
 - (2) If good and evil, right and wrong, were entirely subjective and relative, there would be no universal principles of justice by which the governments, institutions, and laws of diverse peoples could be judged to be just or unjust.
 - (a) What is just in one society could then be exactly the opposite in another.
 - (b) In addition, in the sphere of international relations, the principle of might makes right would prevail, for there would be no standards of international justice by which the conduct of nations could be judged right and wrong.

- B. So far I have not mentioned beauty. The problem of the objective and subjective aspects of beauty and the problem of what is absolute and relative in the sphere of beauty are much more difficult than they are in the case of truth and goodness. I will, therefore, proceed as follows.
 - 1. I will, first, very briefly, state the basis for affirming the objectivity and immutability of truth.
 - 2. I will, next, briefly state the basis for affirming the objectivity and universality of certain—not all—judgments that we make about good and evil, right and wrong.

3. With that as background I will then try to deal at length with similar problems in the sphere of beauty.
 - a. Beauty is not unrelated to truth and goodness.
 - b. Keats, you will remember, told us that truth is beauty, and beauty truth and that is all we need to know on earth.
 - c. And Eric Gill enlightened us by saying that if we take care of truth and goodness, beauty will take care of itself.

II. *THE OBJECTIVITY AND IMMUTABILITY OF TRUTH*

- A. The objectivity and immutability of truth rest on a definition of truth and on a single presupposition underlying that definition.
 1. The definition is as follows: the opinions we entertain in our minds, and sometimes affirm or deny, are true if they agree with the way things really are.
 - a. They are true if they declare that which is is or that that which is not is not.
 - b. They are false if they declare that that which is not is or that that which is is not.
 2. The underlying presupposition is that there exists an independent and determinate reality.
 - a. It is *independent* in the sense that it exists whether we think about it or not.
 - b. It is *determinate* in the sense that it is what it is no matter how we think about it. (Non-contradiction)
 3. The existence of an independent and determinate reality—a reality that is the same for all human beings everywhere on earth and, when it changes in its determinations from time to time, changes in the same way for all human beings on earth—makes truth and falsity objective and immutable.

- a. Consider for a moment opinions we entertain but do not affirm or deny. We hold these opinions in our minds, but we suspend judgment about them.
 - b. According as they agree with the state of reality at the time we hold them, they are universally and immutably true. Even if reality changes in some determinate respect, their immutable truth is preserved by adding a dateline to the opinion held at a given time.
4. What is subjective, relative, and mutable are not opinions thus entertained, but the judgments that human beings make about the opinions they entertain.
- a. Thus, if I affirm an opinion that happens to be true, my judgment is sound; if I deny it, I am in error.
 - b. When you and I disagree, and I say that what is true for you is not true for me, I am not talking about the objective truth or falsity of the opinion that you affirm and I deny. I am talking only about our subjective judgments, judgments relative to the state of our private minds.
 - c. When you say to me that what once was true, is true no longer, what you are saying is that, at different times and under different circumstances, the prevailing judgment about what is true or false has changed.

(Before the 20th century, the prevailing judgment of experts was that the atom is indivisible. In the 20th century, we have learned how to split the atom. The opinion that the atom is indivisible was always false, and the judgment of earlier experts was incorrect. The opinion that the atom is divisible was, is, and always will be true.)
5. Three qualifying remarks must be added to what I have just said.
- a. Most of the judgments we make concerning what is true or false fall in the sphere of doubt, not in the sphere of certitude. Falling in the sphere of doubt, they are judgments with a future—judgments subject

- to rejection or amendment and amplification as the result of better evidence or sounder reasoning.
- b. Attributing absoluteness and immutability to truth does not mean that our pursuit of truth will ever achieve the whole truth and nothing but the truth until the end of time, *if then*.
 - c. Not all matters fall in the sphere of truth, concerning which there is some point in arguing with one another and trying to reach agreement. Some matters fall in the sphere of taste? Argument about expressions of taste is not profitable. There is no point in trying to reach agreement about differences in taste.



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