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THE UNITY OF MAN AND THE UNITY OF TRUTH

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Part 1 of 2

I

Let me begin by stating the problem as I see it. It is generated by three theses, which I hope you will agree are indisputable. The first is that the human race is a single biological species, renewed generation after generation by the reproductive determinations of a single gene pool. Hence, man is one in nature; that is, in specific nature. All individual members of the species have the same species-specific properties or characteristics.

The second thesis is that, the human race being one, the human mind is also one. I am here using the word "mind" to signify the complex of cognitive and ratiocinative powers and propensities that, when exercised, result in human thought and knowledge, in social institutions, and in the productions of the arts and of technology. The human mind, thus understood, is a species-specific

property: it is to be found in every individual member of the species, and it is the same in all. The fact that mind, in the sense indicated, is subject to variations in degree (some individuals having its constituent powers to a higher, some to a lower degree), does not in any way negate the proposition that the same powers, to whatever degree, are possessed by all human beings.

However, the truth of this thesis does preclude the notion that there is, within the human species, a primitive mind that is characteristically different from an Occidental one, or even a child mind that differs in kind, not just degree, from an adult one. What I have just said is, I take it, a fundamental thesis of a movement called "Structuralism," which has a current vogue but which, if I understand it correctly, is based on an insight that can hardly be regarded as novel, however novel may be the particular psychological discoveries of Piaget and the particular anthropological discoveries of Levi-Strauss, from which the movement draws its inspiration.

My third thesis is that world peace is an ultimate desideratum—not as an end in itself but rather as an indispensable means or condition prerequisite to the achievement of a good human life by all human beings in some future generation. The propositions that I must now add to that thesis, I hope you will agree with as much as you agree with the thesis itself: (I) that world peace is impossible without world government; (2) that world government is impossible to establish and, even if established, would not long endure and prosper without world community; and (3) that world community requires a certain degree of cultural unity or unity of civilization, a condition that certainly does not exist at present.

In the light of these initial theses, and the propositions attendant upon the third, I can now state the problem that I would like to present to you. It concerns the kind and degrees of cultural unity required for world community as a basis for world government and world peace. It involves two questions. One asks how much cultural diversity should and will persist after enough cultural unity is achieved to create a world community? Stated another way this questions is: How much cultural diversity is compatible with the unity of man and the unity of truth? The second questions then follows: What kind of cultural unity is demanded by the unity of truth; and, therefore, what kind of cultural diversity is precluded?

Both questions, you will have noted, make reference to the unity of truth, a term that I have suddenly introduced into the discussion and connected with the term that summarizes my first thesis—the unity of man. While you may agree with my first thesis about the

unity of man, and even with its immediate consequence—the unity of the human mind—you may justly wonder whether I have not slipped a ringer into the discussion by adding the unity of truth as a third term to that pair. I will presently explain that third term and try to show you that it is inseparable from the other two members of the triad.

Before I do so, let me call your attention to another point that I mentioned just a moment ago and that may also need a little substantiation. I said that the cultural unity or unity of civilization that is indispensable to world community does not exist at present and has never existed in the past. To support that statement, I need only remind you of the cultural diversities that have been and still are divisive of mankind, represented by the following dichotomies: Greek vs. barbarian; the Middle Kingdom vs. barbarian; Jew vs. Gentile; Christian vs. infidel; civilized vs. primitive man; and East vs. West; or West vs. East. In all such divisions, one side claims to be the possessor of truth and light, and the other is regarded as being in error and in outer darkness. So long as such divisions persist, a world civilization or culture and a world community will not come into existence.

Can they be overcome? And, if so, how shall they be overcome? That is the problem we face. As I see it, the key to the solution of this problem lies *in principle* in the unity of truth—the term that I added to the unity of man and the unity of the human mind and said constituted an indissolvable triad. Now let me see if I can explain what I mean by the unity of truth. To begin with, I had better say a word about truth itself.

In the history of Western thought (please note that I am compelled to say "Western" here), a profound understanding of truth has prevailed from the time of Plato and Aristotle to the present. This understanding rests upon a single supposition; namely, that there exists, quite independent of the human mind, a reality which the human mind thinks about and tries to know. On that supposition, the truth consists in our thinking that that which is, is; and that that which is not, is not. Our thinking is in error or false when we think that which is, is not; or that which is not, is. In the field of veracity and prevarication, we tell the truth when we say what we believe or think, and we tell a lie when we say the opposite of what we think or believe. This led Josiah Royce to quip that liar is a person who willfully misplaces his ontological predicates, putting "is" where he should put "is not," or the reverse. In contrast to the liar, a person honestly in error is one who unintentionally misplaces his ontological predicates, and the correction of error consists in get-

ting them straight—saying "is" where "is" is required, and "is not" where "is not" is required.

Thus defined, the human mind has a grasp on the truth to whatever extent the judgments it makes agree with or conform to reality—to the way things are or are not. To say this does not involve us in claiming that the human mind has a firm, final, and incorrigible grasp on any truth, though I personally think that there is a relatively small number of self-evident truths on which our grasp is firm, final, and incorrigible. However that may be, we must acknowledge that truth is *in principle* attainable, even though we may never in fact actually attain it. Otherwise, it would be unreasonable for us to engage in the pursuit of truth. That pursuit would be futile and self-defeating if, in the course of it, we did not manage to achieve approximations to the truth—statements that, while not indubitably true, are nearer to the truth, better than, truer than the statements that they correct and replace.

To this conception of the truth, whether fully possessed or only approximated, I must add one other insight that again I am compelled to say is typically Western. It is related to the supposition that I said a moment ago, underlies the conception of truth as consisting in the mind's agreement with reality, the supposition, namely, that there is a reality independent of the mind with which the mind's judgments can agree or disagree. The additional insight expands that supposition to include the point that this independent reality is determinate. Either a particular thing exists or it does not exist; either it has a certain characteristic or it does not have a certain characteristic. It cannot both be and not-be at one and the same time; it cannot have and not have a certain characteristic at one and the same time.

If such determinateness did not obtain in reality, it would follow that the statement that something *is* the case and the statement that it *is not* the case could both be true at the same time. If, according to our conception of truth, both of two contradictory statements (one asserting "is" and the other "is not") cannot be true at the same time, the determinateness of reality must be presupposed. In short, the principle of noncontradiction holds for both thought and reality, and it holds for thought because it holds for reality. (To this I must add the parenthetical observation that, in the controversy between Einstein and Bohr over quantum theory, Einstein was, in my judgment, philosophically sounder than Bohr. The Heisenberg principle of indeterminacy has epistemological, not ontological, significance. It should be interpreted as indicating the indeterminacy of our measurements in sub-atomic physics, not the indeter-

minacy of reality in that area. Reality may be indeterminable with certainty, but this does not mean it is certainly indeterminate. The fact that we cannot assign an equally definite position and velocity to an electron in motion does not mean that the electron really lacks a completely definite position and velocity.)

With this conception of truth and with the principle of noncontradiction as an essential part of it, I can now explain what I mean by the unity of truth. It is merely an extension, but nonetheless a very important extension, of the principle of noncontradiction. To affirm the unity of truth is to deny that there can be two separate and irreconcilable truths which, while contradicting of one another and thought to be irreconcilably so, avoid the principle of noncontradiction by claiming to belong to logic-tight compartments. Thus, for example, one approach to the conflicts between religion and philosophy, or between science and either philosophy or religion, is to claim that these are such separate spheres of thought or inquiry, employing such different methods or having such different means of access to the truth, that the principle of noncontradiction does not apply. One thing can be true in religious belief and quite another, though contradictory of it, can be true in scientific or philosophical thought.

This approach was taken by one of the great Arabic philosophers of the Middle Ages. Replying to a work by Algazeli called *The Destruction of Philosophy*, which rejected certain Aristotelian teachings that contradicted basic truths of the Muslim faith, Averröes wrote *The Destruction of the Destruction*, in which he argued that there can be two separate truths—one in religion and one in philosophy even though they plainly contradicted one another. This Averroist doctrine was later rebutted by Thomas Aquinas in a famous mediaeval disputation in which he defended the unity of truth by arguing persuasively that there cannot be two separate truths that are irreconcilable, no matter how separate their provinces, methods, or sources may be. In effect, he delivered the destruction of the destruction of the destruction; and, in my judgment, for whatever it is worth, he won the argument.

You may not yet be persuaded, as I am, that truth is one—that irreconcilable propositions cannot be saved from the effect of their contradicting one another by regarding them as belonging to separate logic-tight compartments of truth. Even if you are not yet persuaded of this, let me ask you now to follow the argument that develops the consequences of maintaining the unity of truth. By doing so, you may either become persuaded or discover reasons for thinking that Averröes may have been right and Aquinas wrong.

You may, in the light of the consequences, think that, rather than accept them, it is better to reject the ultimate presuppositions upon which the unity of truth rests.

II

The criteria of truth and falsity do not apply to all areas of human culture, but wherever they do apply, there we should expect the unity of truth to prevail and be troubled if it does not. By the same token, in the area of matters to which the criteria of truth and falsity do not apply, cultural diversity is fitting and proper. Two examples, drawn from opposite extremes of the scale, will illustrate this basic distinction.

On the one hand, mathematics is an area in which the criteria of truth and falsity are universally thought to apply, and it is also in an area in which the transcultural character of truth is universally acknowledged. On the other hand, cuisine is a matter of taste not of truth, and so in matters of cuisine we expect and are not at all troubled by cultural diversity. It is appropriate to speak of French, Italian, and Chinese cuisines and to express a preference for one or another that we do not expect others to share; but it is not appropriate to speak of French, Italian, or Chinese mathematics (except in a purely historical sense). Any mathematical theorem or demonstration that is true commands an assent that transcends all national and cultural divisions.

I have just said that in whatever sphere of human judgment it is proper to apply the criteria of truth and falsity, we can and should expect agreement about what is true or false to transcend all the national and cultural divisions of mankind. I must add at once that such agreement may exist in different degrees. There is a stronger and a weaker bond of agreement. The stronger, which I will call "doctrinal agreement," exists when, at a given time, those who are competent to judge agree about what is to be regarded as true, or at least a better approximation to the truth, and expect the propositions thus regarded to receive universal assent until better—truer—propositions are advanced. The weaker, which I will call "dialectical agreement," exists when those who are competent to judge disagree about what is to be regarded as true, but who, nevertheless, being persuaded that the truth is in principle attainable, are at least united in their acceptance of certain logical procedures for resolving their doctrinal disagreements and thus carrying on cooperatively the pursuit of truth.

There are two cultural areas in which we have universally ac-

knowledged the existence of a large measure of doctrinal agreement. They are mathematics and the experimental sciences, together with their applications in technology. There are two other cultural areas in which doctrinal agreement does not exist, not even within the single cultural tradition of the West; *a fortiori*, certainly not in the world, embracing four or five distinct cultural traditions in the Far East as well as that of Western civilization.

I have in mind here the areas of religion and of philosophy, including moral and political philosophy as well as the philosophy of nature and of metaphysics. The question, to which I will return presently, is whether in these two areas it is appropriate to apply the criteria of truth and falsity and, therefore, to expect agreement in at least its weaker form. If not, then religion and philosophy fall across the line that divides the cultural areas to which the criteria of truth and falsity apply and those to which they do not. Religion and philosophy then become like those matters in which the criterion of taste rather than truth is applicable—such matters as conventions or customs, languages, dress and cooking, social manners, and the fine arts. Since there is no disputing about matters of taste, we cannot even expect dialectical agreement in the sphere of our judgments about the fine arts any more than we can expect it in the sphere of our preferences with regard to cuisines.

The question, I repeat, is on which side of the line of demarcation do religion, metaphysics, and ethics fall? Do they belong with mathematics and experimental science on that side of the line where the criteria of truth and falsity are applicable? Or do they belong with aesthetic judgments and preferences as to cuisine, dress, and manners on that side of the line where there is no disputing matters of taste, and cultural diversity should be expect to prevail?

There may be matters which *appear* to straddle the line of demarcation between the unity and universality of truth and the plurality and singularity of tastes. Prudential judgments in the sphere of morals may be matters of this sort, partaking both of the objective and the subjective. So, too, in the sphere of social institutions, customs and positive laws may have both a natural basis and a conventional or voluntary determination, and so may partake of the university of the natural and necessary as well as singularity of the conventional and contingent.

However, whatever is infected, even in the slightest degree, with singularity or subjectivity falls on the side of taste rather than on the side of truth. In terms of the controlling question with which

we are here concerned (namely, what elements of unity should we expect of demand in a culture and what latitude should be allowed for cultural pluralism?). Those elements of a culture that are *partly* matters of taste as well as those elements that are *wholly* matters of taste are matters about which we should tolerate cultural pluralism. Pluralism is intolerable only with respect to matters that are *wholly* or *purely* matters of truth, *e.g*., mathematics.

If the criteria of truth and falsity are not applicable to philosophy and religion, we have no troublesome problem to solve; for these disciplines are then no different from such matters as cuisine, dress, and the fine arts. We can and should expect pluralism or diversity rather than unity to prevail with respect to them, not only as between the Far East and the West, but also within the Western tradition itself. If religion or philosophy is nothing but "a way of life," as it is sometimes said, or if it has no cognitive character or basis, then why should there not be as great a diversity of religions or philosophies on earth as there are cuisines, habits of dress, or languages? We do have a problem, however, and an extremely difficult one, if philosophy and religion claim to be true in the same sense that mathematics and experimental science claim that truth is in varying measures approximated and, at least in principle, fully attainable in their spheres of thought and inquiry.

Let us make the assumption that presents us with a problem. Let us assume that philosophy and religion do claim cognitive status for themselves, i.e., aspire to be knowledge and, therefore, subject themselves to the criteria of truth and falsity. What consequences follow from this assumption?

On that assumption, mathematics and science are necessarily only part of the whole truth—the truth that we seek to learn about the world, about nature, society, and man. On that assumption, philosophy and religion constitute additional portions or segments of the whole of the truth to be attained. Now, staying within the boundaries of Western civilization or culture, the principle of the unity of truth entails the consequence that the several parts of the one whole of the truth to be attained must coherently fit together. As we have already seen, there cannot be irreconcilable contradictions between one segment of the whole of truth and another. What is regarded as true in philosophy and religion must not conflict with what is regarded as true in science.

Moreover, since it is only in the spheres of mathematics and experimental science that doctrinal agreement has been achieved in large measure, if not completely, the truths agreed upon in those

areas *at a given time* test the claims to truth that are made in philosophy and religion—areas in which doctrinal agreement has not been achieved to any appreciable degree. In other words, a particular religious belief or philosophical view must be rejected as false if, at a given time, it comes into conflict with the scientific truths agreed upon at that time. It is worth noting that two of the greatest philosophers and theologians in the Western tradition—Augustine and Aquinas—fully accepted this mandate, and they did so because they fully accepted the principle of the unity of truth and regarded the criteria of truth and falsity as applicable to philosophy and religion.

To say that there is one whole of truth all the parts of which must coherently and consistently fit together does not preclude the parts from being different from one another in a variety of ways—with respect to the objects with which they are concerned, with respect to the methods by which inquiry is conducted, and with respect to the sources or bases of the truth being sought. The truth being sought may be about numbers or justice, about natural phenomena or God; the truth being pursued may be sought by investigative procedures or by armchair reflection, by ratiocinative processes, by intuition, or even by mystical contemplation; its sources may lie in experience or in divine revelation. No matter how diverse may be the objects, methods, and sources involved in the different parts of truth, they all remain, nevertheless, parts of one whole, and as such they must coherently and consistently fit together.

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