



THE UNITY OF MAN AND THE UNITY OF TRUTH

Mortimer Adler

Part 2 of 2

So far, as I indicated above, I have stayed within the boundaries of Western civilization. Now let us broaden the scope of our discussion to include the whole of mankind—all human cultures, East and West. Wherever the fruits of technology are used or enjoyed, the truth of science and mathematics is acknowledged. The fruits of technology are now used or enjoyed all over the world—in the Far East as well as in the West. It follows, therefore, that the truth of science and mathematics is acknowledged all over the world. It is the only part of the whole of truth that is common to the Far East and the West. The same mandate that has been operative within the Western tradition should, therefore, be operative when we go beyond the Western tradition and consider the philosophies and religions of the Far East as well as the philosophies and religions of the West.

Just as, within the Western tradition, the truths of mathematics and science that are agreed upon at a given time have been employed as the test for accepting or rejecting Western religious beliefs or philosophical views, so, in exactly the same way, they should be employed as the test for accepting or rejecting Far Eastern religious beliefs or philosophical views. The principle holds that whatever is inconsistent or incompatible with the truths of mathematics and science that are agreed upon *at a given time* must, *at that time* be rejected as false. That principle is universally applicable—to Far Eastern as well as to Western culture. Its universal applicability is assured by the universal assent to the truths of mathematics and sciences from which the products of technology are derived.

The only way in which this consequence can be avoided is to remove Far Eastern religions and philosophies from the picture by regarding them as making no cognitive claims at all, i.e., by putting them along with cuisines, manners, and the fine arts on the other side of the line of demarcation that divides those areas of human culture to which the criteria of truth and falsity are applicable from those areas which are concerned with matters of taste rather than truth.

Still proceeding on the assumption that philosophy and religion are areas of human culture to which the criteria of truth and falsity are applicable, let us now remember the distinction made earlier between the strong and weak form in which agreement in regard to truth may exist. It will help us in dealing with the problem of the diversity of philosophies and religions, not only in the West but in the world, including the various Far Eastern cultures as well as the civilization of the West.

The strong form, let me remind you, consists in doctrinal agreement at a given time among all those competent to judge the matters in question. The weak form consists in dialectical agreement; that is, agreement about the logical principles and procedures by which doctrinal disagreements are to be resolved. This distinction between a doctrinal and a dialectical unity of men engaged in the pursuit of truth is very much like the distinction between substantive and procedural justice. Where we disagree about points of substantive justice, we must at least agree about the procedural justice of our appeal to due process of law as the way to resolve our substantive differences. Just as our agreement on the principles of procedural justice unifies us in our efforts to resolve our disagreements about points of substantive justice, so our agreement about the intellectual procedures for dealing with doctrinal disagreements

about what is true or false unified us in our efforts to pursue the truth.

We are all at least engaged in a single universe of discourse. We are talking to one another in ways that can be fruitful, rather than isolated from one another by barriers that make conversation futile.

Now with regard to philosophy—philosophy, but not religion—we have achieved in the West the requisite dialectical agreement to a large degree. For the most part, though not without exceptions, doctrinal disagreements among Western philosophers fall within one and the same universe of discourse. They are engaged in dealing within one another, and that dialogue is carried on in accordance with certain common rules of procedure—a common set of logical principles and standards. In addition, the dialogue is for the most part carried on with a common aim; namely, to resolve doctrinal differences or disagreements and to achieve an approximation to philosophical truth about which there can be doctrinal agreement. There is a large measure of doctrinal agreement about the truth of mathematics or experimental science at a given time. Even if doctrinal agreement is never achieved in philosophy to the same extent as it has been in mathematics and experimental science, it is at least regarded as, *in principle*, attainable.

When we turn from the West to the whole world, and particularly to the Far Eastern cultures in their relation to one another as well as to the West, the situation is not the same. There is not one dialogue being carried on, nor one universe of discourse embracing all who are engaged in the pursuit of philosophical truth. Dialectical unity does not exist as between Far East and the West; nor for that matter does it exist between any one of the four or five major Eastern cultures and any of the others. The reason why it does not exist may be that none of the Eastern cultures claims truth for its philosophical doctrines. If that is the case, then, as I have said before, there is no problem. Far Eastern philosophies, unlike Western philosophies, must then be regarded as matters of taste rather than truth. They do not conflict with one another or with Western philosophical thought. In a way that requires resolution, any more than differences in cuisine conflict with one another and require resolution.

However, if the several Far Eastern cultures regard philosophy as an area in which the criteria of truth and falsity are applicable, and if the criteria are operative in the same way in philosophy as they are in science and mathematics, then it must be possible to establish a measure sufficient to make some progress toward resolving

the doctrinal disagreements that exist.

Let me repeat the point that constitutes the nerve of my argument. The fruits of technology are now universally put to use. This confirms the universal acknowledgment of a world-wide transcultural doctrinal agreement about the best approximations to truth that we have made so far in mathematics and experimental science. That doctrinal agreement involves an agreement about the rules of logic and of discourse which enable men to pursue the truth cooperatively and to resolve their doctrinal disagreements.

The logic of science and of mathematics is, like science and mathematics, global, not Western. Though the method of philosophy may not be the same as that of mathematics or science, the basic framework of logic is the same. A contradiction is a contradiction whether it occurs in philosophy, in mathematics, or in science. Unchecked equivocation in the use of words generates fallacious arguments, whether in philosophy or in science and mathematics. And so on. This is my basis for saying that a dialectical agreement at least should be achievable world-wide in the sphere of philosophy. Please note that I said “achievable.” It does not exist at present to any appreciable degree.

The problem of religion is more difficult than that of philosophy. First of all, let us remember that we have no problem at all if religion does not claim to involve knowledge and is not concerned with the true and the false. If, however, it claims to involve knowledge then we must face the further question whether it is indistinguishable from philosophy as a branch of natural knowledge, or regards itself as quite distinct from philosophy and all other branches of natural knowledge because it and it alone has its source in divine revelation, accepted by an act of faith that is itself divinely caused. In the latter case, religion claims to be supernatural knowledge—knowledge that man has only as a gift from God. In contrast, natural knowledge, in all its branches, consists of knowledge that man acquires by the exercise of the powers of observation and thought with which he is naturally endowed.

Parallel to this difference in the way that religion is viewed when it is regarded as involving knowledge is the difference in the way that it is viewed when it is regarded as leading man to his ultimate salvation—on earth or hereafter. *Either* religion consists of a code of conduct that can be formulated and followed by man’s own unaided efforts, and hence it does not differ in any way from a philosophically developed code of ethics; or religion, through ritual and sacrament, affords men access to help from God—help that is

indispensable to man if he is to achieve salvation; in which case religion as a way of life is as distinct from a merely human code of ethics as, in the sphere of thought, religion as supernatural knowledge is distinct from philosophy.

In their orthodox forms, the three great religions of the West—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—all claim to be knowledge based on divine revelation and all promise God's help in achieving salvation. With the possible exception of the religion of the Sikhs, this cannot be said of any of the great religions of the Far East. Most of the religions of the Far East appear to be indistinguishable from philosophical doctrines and codes of conduct. If they are in conflict with one another on essential points, they cannot all be true. If their beliefs are in conflict with the truths of mathematics and of science, they must be rejected. If, on the philosophical plane to which the Far Eastern religions belong, the views they espouse are in conflict with the views advanced in Western philosophical doctrines, that doctrinal disagreement should be ultimately resolvable, but only if all the conflicting views can be embraced within a single universe of discourse; that is, only if the dialectical agreement that does not now exist between the Far East and the West can be established in a measure sufficient to make progress toward the resolution of doctrinal disagreements.

In other words, if the religions of the Far East are indistinguishable from philosophy, then they raise no special problem. We are confronted with a special problem only in the case of the Western religions that claim to have a supernatural foundation in divine revelation and that promise supernatural help in the achievement of salvation. In that case, dialectical agreement cannot serve as a basis for making an effort to resolve doctrinal disagreements. In that case, even though religion claims to be a matter of truth rather than of taste, dogmatic religious differences will not yield to adjudication by any of the logical means that are available to us in the spheres of mathematics, science, and philosophy.

To the extent that Far Eastern religions are indistinguishable from philosophy and do not make the dogmatic claims that are characteristic of the Western religions, they do not constitute an obstacle to the cultural unity of mankind that is more difficult to overcome than the philosophical diversity that now exists in the West or in the world. It is an obstacle that can be overcome by a measure of dialectical agreement sufficient to make progress in resolving doctrinal disagreements. The dogmatically opposed Western religions (which, though Western in origin, are now world-wide in scope) do constitute an obstacle that appears insuperable. I cannot think of

any way in which that obstacle can be overcome.

III

In conclusion, I would like to add a number of supplementary observations that point up the general tendency of the foregoing analysis and argument.

In the first place, you should now be able to see why I think it is unwise to combine selections from Far Eastern and Western literature in a single reading list or set of books, especially if they consist of materials that are essentially philosophical or religious. The issues dealt with in summary discussions of such books are about matters to which the criteria of truth and falsity are applicable. The seminar discussions should be conducted with this in mind.

Even though basic disagreements among the authors read and among the participants are not resolved in the course of the seminar, the discussions should occur within the framework of enough dialectical agreement to render them fruitful rather than futile. The authors as well as the participants should all be talking to one another in a dialogue that represents a single universe of discourse. But, as I have pointed out, no dialectical agreement exists at present between the West and the various cultures of the Far East. Far Eastern and Western authors may appear to be talking to one another, but we are deceiving ourselves if we think that that is the case. If Far Eastern and Western authors are not engaged in dialogue with one another, then we cannot generate a fruitful discussion by reading them together.

My second concluding remark deals with an objection that might be raised to the basic presuppositions of my argument. The objection would probably run as follows. My argument presupposes the correctness of the Western view of reality and of truth as governed by the principle of noncontradiction. That is the basis of everything that has been said about the unity of truth. Some, if not all, Far Eastern thought holds a different view—that reality is at its very core made up of contradictions and that we can approximate the truth only to the extent that we are able to embrace affirmations and denials or contradictory statements about ‘reality.

My answer to this objections is twofold. On the one hand, I must remind you that the Far East as well as the West accepts the truths mankind has so far achieved in mathematics and science, even as they use the products of technology that are based on these truths. The logic underlying the achievement of truth in mathematics and

science presupposes the truth of the principle of noncontradiction, as applied to reality itself and to the judgments men make about it. Far Eastern thought can escape from the consequences of this only by being intellectually schizophrenic. On the other hand, if the Far East insists that the truths of mathematics and sciences are superficial, however useful they may be, and that philosophy or religion which aims to get at the heart of reality must violate the principle of noncontradiction because reality at heart is contradictory through and through, then there can be no dialogue between the Far East and the West on the philosophical or religious plane, for there is not sufficient dialectical agreement to carry on an intelligible and fruitful conversation.


The third observation that I would like to make in conclusion has to do with the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity. Everything that I have said about the unity of truth, and about the distinction between doctrinal and dialectical agreement, applies only to matters that are subject to the criteria of truth and falsity and the principle of noncontradiction. This, in my view, is the realm of the objective in human life. In sharp contrast to it is the realm of the subjective—the realm of feeling and of personal predilection, with respect to which, like matters of taste, there is no disputing and no adjudication by logical means.

A recent book by Theodore Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends*, criticizes Western civilization for its almost pathological addiction to objectivity and its under-evaluation of the subjective aspects of human life. Roszak makes the mistake of arguing not merely for the recognition and enlargement of the subjective, but also for giving it dominance over the objective. That is hardly the right prescription if, as I think is the case, the objective and the subjective are not rival claimants for the dominant role in human life and culture, but are rather supplementary to each other, each enriching human life and culture in its own characteristic way.

This leads me to suggest that one possible view of the most profound difference between the Far East and the West is that the West has made what is by far the major contribution to the advancement of mankind in the realm of the objective, whereas the East has made a comparably great but quite different contribution to the advancement of mankind in the realm of the subjective. Thus viewed, there is no conflict between them, for there cannot be any conflict between areas of culture in which the criteria of truth and falsity are applicable and areas of culture in which these criteria are not appropriate at all.

In the fourth place, I submit the concluding observation that cultural diversity should be tolerated, i.e., accepted as unavoidable, only in those areas in which the criteria of truth and falsity and the principle of noncontradiction do not apply; that is, in the areas concerned with matters of taste (with conventions or customs in eating and in dress, with social manners, with styles in the fine arts) and also in every aspect of human life that is subjective rather than objective.

What I shall call “culturism”—the acceptance or, worse, the promotion and defense of cultural diversity without observing the line of demarcation between matters of truth and matters of taste, or between the realms of the objective and the subjective—is, in my judgment, as deplorable as nationalism, for both are irremediably divisive of mankind and present obstacles to a world cultural community and, therefore, to world government and world peace. Cultural differences, in those areas in which they are acceptable, or rightly to be tolerated, are all superficial. They represent a diversity in the nurture of human beings that overlays the essential or specific unity of human nature—the biological unity of man and the psychological unity of the human mind.

The third great epoch in the history of mankind lies ahead of us in the next millennium. It will not begin until there is a universal acknowledgment of the unity of truth in all the areas of culture to which the standard of truth is applicable; for only then will all men be able to live together peacefully in a world cultural community under world government. Only then will world civilization and world history begin. Such unification of mankind, called for by the biological unity of the species, will not preclude the persistence until the end of time of cultural diversity in all matters where such diversity is appropriate, as well as the persistence of philosophical or religious pluralism as long as men are engaged in the pursuit of the whole truth that, while attainable in principle, is not likely ever to be fully attained. 

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