



HALF-TRUTHS

WHAT'S RIGHT (AND WHAT'S WRONG)
WITH THE CLICHÉS YOU AND I LIVE BY

Montague Brown

INTRODUCTION

We hear them all our lives: aphorisms that sum up bits of life in a nutshell. We hear them from our parents and grandparents; we hear them from our coaches and teachers; we hear them on the radio and on the TV. We even use them ourselves—phrases like “Life is what you make it,” “Ignorance is bliss,” and “He who hesitates is lost.”

These phrases are catchy and easy to remember, and they provide us with quick answers to life's many challenges. We absorb them growing up as we absorb language and culture.

At a certain point, however, they become frustrating. Is it really the case that “it doesn't matter what you believe so long as you're sincere”? Sincerity is good, but what if you're a sincere racist? When you and I close a difficult discussion by saying, “Let's just agree to disagree,” have we preserved our friendship or taken a step toward its destruction?

Once I began looking more closely at phrases like these, I found that most of them are two-faced: embedded in them are real solutions, but if we employ them uncritically, they can harm as frequently as they heal.

In fact, questions of truth and goodness can't be adequately answered within the parameters of these clichés we use to guide our actions. They're true in a way, but they don't contain the whole truth. They need to be qualified; and the qualifications sometimes require us to defend what seems to be the opposite claim. Both contain important truths worth preserving.

That fact suggested this format: I've designed it so that it presents you a kind of debate between competing positions. Each **left page** argues forcefully for the ordinary understanding of the cliché. The **right-hand page** opposite it introduces qualifications and modifications that must be made if the truth in the cliché is not to be lost amid its error.

Does such debate and refinement give us the whole truth about these issues? Of course not. Truth is inexhaustible. But following the opposing sides in these mini-debates enriches our understanding and helps us think more clearly and critically, which is itself a great help in this time of sound bites and controversy.

I've tried first to focus on the usual understanding of each cliché and to draw out the most important corrective to it, but my response is never the final word. More remains to be said. The quotations at the bottom of each page open up the idea to more reflection.

Each cliché is its own little bit of wisdom, with roots and branches that reach into many parts of our lives. Not all the clichés ring equally true to all ears.

My hope is that consideration of these half-truths—along with their other halves—will inspire you to think, to wonder, and to delight in knowing.

It's O.K. as long as it doesn't hurt anybody

People should be allowed to do whatever they want. Freedom's the rule. As long as my free choices don't harm you, I don't see why I can't just do as I please.

Isn't this the basis for our laws? The Declaration of Independence says that we should all be guaranteed "the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." You and I should be free to seek our happiness in any way we please, provided that in doing so we don't destroy someone else's life, liberty, or pursuit of happiness. This is the law's only constraint.

This is as it should be. Actions are right or wrong depending on their consequences. We can tell whether an act is good by seeing whether its effects are good. But who doubts that happiness is a good consequence? It's what we want most of all. So if something makes me happy and doesn't have bad consequences for anybody else, I should be allowed to do it.

We've got to be free to choose how we'll live.
My choices are my business. Your choices are
up to you. If you or I decide to do something,
it's O.K. as long as it doesn't hurt anybody.

*The obvious and simple system of natural liberty establishes
itself of its own accord. Every man, as long as he does
not violate the laws of justice, is left perfectly free to
pursue his own interest his own way.*

Adam Smith
Wealth of Nations, IV, 9

IT'S TRUE THAT people should be free to decide how to live their lives. Such freedom is supported in our nation's founding documents. In our legal system, an action is wrong if it harms another. And certainly a concern for consequences is one of the factors in evaluating moral action. But does the fact that an act doesn't hurt other people mean that no one is hurt?

What if I intend to hurt someone, but fail to do so because of some external intervention? Is my act O.K.? After all, I didn't hurt anybody else. But what about me? What happens to me when I choose to do something I know is wrong? Don't I suffer moral harm? Don't I make myself a worse person?

If I lie, don't I become more dishonest? If I drink too much, don't I become intemperate? There's certainly harm done in such actions—harm to me. And the harm does not depend on the consequences of my actions for other people. They might be harmed by my bad actions; but even if they're not, I am. My bad actions immediately and inevitably harm me.

So morality can't be just about the effects of actions. That way of evaluating actions leaves out what's most essential—intentions. It's wrong to try to kill an innocent person, even if you fail. It's wrong to lie, even if no one gets hurt. The key to evaluating a moral act is the intention, not the results. If the intention is bad, the act is morally wrong.

It's a good thing if my bad actions don't end up hurting other people. However, to do intentionally what I know to be wrong is never O.K., and it always hurts me.

If we do not follow the directions of the one who has knowledge of good and evil, we shall harm and corrupt that part of ourselves that is improved by just actions and destroyed by unjust actions.

Socrates
in Plato's *Crito*. 47d

Everyone's got a right to his own opinion

I've got a right to believe anything I want.
So do you; so does everyone. No one
can say what the truth is for certain.
We all have to make up our own minds.

Nobody has a monopoly on truth. Everyone should be heard. This is how progress is made. It's a joint effort. No one should feel threatened by what comes to light. If we all voice our opinions, the chances are good that we'll see things from all angles. This is the way scientific advances are made. Many different opinions contribute to our knowledge of the truth.

Nor does anyone have a monopoly on virtue. It's not just the educated or the religious who are good. Everyone's good in some way. There are lots of ways to be good, lots of worthwhile causes to support. Some people give money to charity. Others fight for the environment or animal rights. Some think it's better just to take care of yourself and stay out of trouble.

The fact is, people don't agree about
what's really true and good.
I don't care what the experts say. *Everyone's
got a right to his own opinion.*

*Every man has a right to utter what he thinks
is truth! and every other man has a right
to knock him down for it.*

Samuel Johnson
in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*

IT'S TRUE THAT people should be free to voice their opinions. It's essential for cooperative learning. Nobody knows everything; there's much we can learn from one another. To force everyone to have the same opinion would shut down human intelligence. But does the fact that everyone has a right to his own opinion mean that everyone's opinion is equally right?

Say, for example, that my opinion is that nobody else has a right to an opinion. Is this as acceptable to you as your opinion that everyone has a right to an opinion? Obviously not. In order to accept my opinion, you'd have to give up your own. If opinions contradict each other, they can't both be true or right.

If we don't object to conflicting opinions, it's only because we don't care about their truth. It's when people press to have their opinions accepted as true that we run into trouble. At that point, we have to determine which opinion is true. Otherwise we'll just have animosity. Both sides must commit themselves to accepting the opinion backed by the best evidence.

Given the difficulty of sorting true from false opinions, we might be inclined to dodge the issue by breaking off the conversation. But this won't do. Although everyone has the right to his own opinion, everyone's also responsible for trying to turn their opinions into truth. If we sidestep this duty, we invite ignorance and injustice into our lives and communities.

It's essential for living and learning in a community that everyone should be heard. But, although everyone has a right to his own opinion, not everyone's opinion is right.

Admitting that everyone's opinion is true, Protagoras must admit the truth of his opinions belief about his own belief. That is, he must admit that his own belief is false.

Plato

Theaetetus, 171 a



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