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## MULTICULTURALISM

MORTIMER ADLER

1 OF 2

### **I n t r o d u c t i o n**

The world, certainly, is multicultural, and so we should be taught about its cultural diversity. But this, it seems to me, is the time to ask whether society as a whole or its educational institutions should be multicultural in *all* respects, or only in *some*. If only in some, I propose that the word *transculturalism* should be employed for those respects in which multiculturalism or cultural pluralism should not be safeguarded or promoted. Confronting the antithesis of the multicultural and the transcultural, we should seek to understand what determines the line that divides the one from the other.

What do “*transcultural*” and “*multicultural*” mean? Should we expect the domains they characterize to shift their boundaries in the years to come, the one expanding, the other contracting? Should matters that are now regarded as multicultural become transcultural

in the future? I will try to answer these questions in the following pages.

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LET US BEGIN by considering the cosmopolitan cities of the world, both in the United States and abroad—the cities whose populations are ethnically and culturally heterogeneous. What I am about to say concerning Chicago is true of New York, Dallas, and Los Angeles. It holds also for London, Paris, Toronto, Sydney, and Hong Kong.

Chicago is multicultural in its restaurants  
but not in its hardware stores.

For example, Chicago is multicultural in its restaurants but not in its hardware stores. A ruler or tape measure, in centimeters or inches, does not differ from one ethnically special neighborhood to another; nor does the candlepower of a light bulb and the difference between direct and alternating electric current. There is no difference between the tools used in Eurocentric and Afrocentric measurements as there are differences in French, Italian, Japanese, and Thai cuisines. Clocks and calendars are the same in all sections of the city. They are the same everywhere in the world.

Chicago is multicultural in its churches but not in its engineering schools. If its educational institutions have courses in geography, in anthropology, or mythology, these are likely to be, or certainly should be, multicultural, but that is not the case with their courses in mathematics or physics.

The mathematics and physics taught in the schools of Japan, China, India, Egypt, and South America have the same scientific content as the mathematics and physics taught in Europe and North America. There are worldwide international journals in these fields, and the leading experts face no obstacles in communicating with one another.

Chicago's international airport is multicultural. The airports of London and Los Angeles are multicultural to an even greater degree. The planes that leave or land represent a large number of the world's diverse cultures in their interior fittings, the dress and the manners of their cabin attendants, but their pilots all communicate with the control towers everywhere in English and the technical jargon of ground-to-air talk is uniformly the same.

With these examples of the multicultural and the transcultural before us, what determines the line that divides the one from the other?

The dividing line is the same line that separates statements which contain such words as “I like” or “I prefer” from statements which contain the words “I know,” or “my opinion is.”

About likes or preferences there is no point in disputing. One set of likes or preferences does not exclude another.

But when individuals differ in their claims to know, or believe, they are obliged to submit to criteria for judging which of the conflicting claims is correct and which incorrect, or which is more correct than the other.

The line that divides the multicultural from the transcultural is the line that separates all matters of taste or preference from all matters concerned with the truth and falsity of the propositions being entertained or judged.

There are various forms and degrees of skepticism about truth. Complete or extreme skepticism consists in the denial that there is anything true or false. This is tantamount to denying that there is knowledge of anything, either with certainty (or beyond the shadow of a doubt) or with probability (or beyond a reasonable doubt or with some lower degree of doubt).

It follows that such extreme skepticism about truth and falsity entails the denial of anything transcultural. It removes the possibility of putting any restrictions on pluralism or upon the claims of the multiculturalist with regard to the content of education. There are, however, insuperable difficulties about being an extreme skeptic.

In the first place, the extreme skeptic refutes himself. The individual who asserts that there is nothing either true or false must confront the question whether that statement itself is either true or false. If it is true, then it is also false; and if it is false, then skepticism is itself denied. What does one do with a person who answers a question of a verifiable sort by saying both Yes and No? Walk away, for there is no profit in continuing the conversation.

In the second place, if the multiculturalist engages in argument with his opponents, does he not claim a degree of correctness for his views that deserves their predominance over opposing views? If so, then he cannot be a complete or extreme skeptic. If he does

not claim that his views have any superiority with respect to truth or correctness, *what is* he arguing or *why is* he arguing? Should he not try to prevail simply by being in the majority and winning the dispute by the force of numbers? Might makes right, he might say.

In the third place, as Hume pointed out centuries ago in abandoning extreme skepticism, one can be an extreme skeptic in the privacy of one's own closet, but not in one's daily dealings with others—not in conversation with them, not in business transactions with them, not in litigation with them, and so on. In no aspect of one's practical and social life can one honestly espouse extreme skepticism.

However, when Hume abandoned extreme skepticism as impractical, he did not give up milder or more moderate forms of skepticism. If one or more of these are tenable, as complete skepticism is not, then they constitute challenges to the transcultural, for it is only with respect to that which is either certainly or probably true that anything can be transcultural.

The objective is that which is the same  
for you, for me, and for everyone else;  
the subjective is that which differs  
from individual to individual.

The opponent of the skeptic holds that there are some objective and absolute truths. More moderate forms of skepticism maintain that there may be truths, but they are neither objective nor absolute but instead are subjective and relative.

What is the precise meaning of these words? The objective is that which is the same for you, for me, and for everyone else; the subjective is that which differs from individual to individual. The absolute is that which is the same at all times and places and regardless of changing circumstances; the relative is that which differs from one time to another, or with changing circumstances. Only if there is absolute truth is truth immutable.

One form of moderate skepticism consists in saying that what may be true for you is not true for me, and that's all there is to it. All truth is subjective, differing from individual to individual.

Another form of moderate skepticism consists in saying that what was once true is no longer true, or that what was once false is now true, and that's all there is to it. All truth is relative to changing times and circumstances; no truth is immutable.

The error in these two forms of moderate skepticism lies in the words “and that’s all there is to it.” What has been ignored is the distinction between propositions entertained and propositions judged, either affirmed or denied. The truth of the proposition as entertained is objective, absolute, and immutable. It is only the judgments we make about propositions that differ from individual to individual and change from time to time.

One example will suffice to make this point clear. Consider the proposition “The atom is divisible.” Merely entertain it in your mind. Do not make any judgment or assertion that either affirms or denies it. This is easy to do. The statement “atoms are divisible” is clearly different from the statement “I think that atoms are divisible” or “I think that atoms are indivisible.”

The history of atomism in physical theory can be summed up by saying that all physicists who were atomists, from Democritus in Greek antiquity down to the end of the nineteenth century, asserted that atoms were indivisible units of matter. The statement that atoms are divisible—or fissionable—would have been judged false by all of them. It is only in the twentieth century that atomic fission has been produced.

Was it true in all preceding centuries that atoms are divisible, or did it only become true in the twentieth century? The actual fission of atoms occurred only in the twentieth century, but in all preceding centuries atoms were fissionable, although no actual atomic fission had ever occurred before. What, then, should we say about judgments made by physicists before the twentieth century? That they were incorrect, because they affirmed as true that atoms are indivisible, which was then actually false. The truth about the divisibility of atoms has not changed; it is only scientific judgments that have changed.

In short, human judgments about what is factually true or false are both subjective, differing from individual to individual, and also relative, differing with the time of the judgment or with the relevant circumstances. Judgments about what is true or false are mutable, but not what is in fact true or false. If any proposition as entertained is ever true at any time and place, it is true always and everywhere. Only the judgments that human beings make about what is true or false differ from individual to individual and with different times and circumstances .

The error in the two forms of moderate skepticism just pointed out would be avoided if the words *true* and *false* were applied only to propositions as entertained, and the judgments human beings make about them were called “correct” and “incorrect.”

What forms of skepticism remain that are tenable? They consist in specifically limited skepticisms. For example, those who deny that there is factual truth in any of the world’s religions, or assert that all religions are mythologies misconstrued as being factually instead of poetically true, espouse specifically limited skepticism. Social scientists, and especially cultural anthropologists, who are skeptical about factual truth in religion are not skeptical about factual truth in science.

On the contrary, they are often dogmatic about the truth of scientific conclusions and are opposed by those who, while not being skeptical about truth in the natural sciences, are specifically skeptical about truth in the social sciences and in history.

The latter think, for example, that the knowledge achieved in physical science and in mathematics is transcultural (i.e., that all competent to judge in these fields of knowledge will concur in the same judgments regardless of their ethnic and cultural differences in other respects). They also think that, at the present time at least, there is no similarly transcultural knowledge in the social sciences, especially those with a historical perspective.

In the current controversy about multiculturalism in the courses offered in our educational institutions, it is these specifically limited skepticisms—about religion, philosophy, or one form of science or another—which must be considered. Only the specifically limited skepticisms that are correct indicate the extent to which the claims of the multiculturalist about desirable changes in the curriculum are tenable.

For example, if the specifically limited skepticism with respect to truth in religion is correct, then any instruction in the field of religion should be multicultural. If the specifically limited skepticism with respect to truth in the social sciences and in history is correct, then instruction in these fields should be multicultural.

Two forms of specifically limited skepticism have a crucial bearing on the current controversy.

One is specifically limited to the whole field of philosophy as opposed to the fields of experimental or empirical science; or, per-

haps, it would be more accurate to define this skepticism as limited to any mode of philosophy that claims to be knowledge of reality, thus omitting modes of philosophy that restrict themselves to commenting on language as used in ordinary speech or in scientific discourse. To whatever extent logic and mathematics are inseparable, logic must be as transcultural as mathematics.

The other specifically limited skepticism applies to moral and political philosophy insofar as it makes claims to having prescriptive knowledge about what is good and bad, or right and wrong, in human conduct and in human societies. This skepticism is evident in those twentieth-century philosophers who regard ethics as noncognitive. They are philosophers who are themselves specifically skeptical about there being any objectively and universally valid truth in ethics.

Relevant here is the twentieth-century distinction between questions of fact and questions of value, or between factual assertions and value judgments. The skeptical position here consists in holding that there are no correct or incorrect value judgments because there are no entertainable prescriptive statements that are either true or false.

Relevant also is the fourth-century Aristotelian distinction between two kinds of truth—the truth of descriptive propositions (i.e., statements about what is or is not) and the truth of prescriptive propositions (i.e., statements about what ought or ought not to be sought or done).

In the case of descriptive statements, their truth, according to Plato and Aristotle, consists in affirming that that which is, is; and that that which is not, is not. Falsity is found in statements asserting that that which is not, is; or that that which is, is not.

This is the correspondence definition of truth (correspondence between thought and reality) that has prevailed in the Western tradition down to the pragmatic theory of truth, in which William James distinguished between the question of how truth should be defined and the question as to the criteria for telling whether a given statement is correctly judged to be true or false. An exception occurs in modern times with the rise of various forms of idealism and the denial of a reality that is independent of the human mind.

Aristotle defined prescriptive truth as...  
not between thought and reality,  
but between thought and right desire.

It should be obvious at once that the correspondence theory of truth applies only to descriptive statements about what is or is not the case. It cannot apply to prescriptive statements containing the words *ought* or *ought not*. Aristotle defined prescriptive truth as a different correspondence, not between thought and reality, but between thought and right desire.

It is not necessary here to explain or defend this definition of prescriptive truth. Suffice it to say that only if there is no prescriptive truth are the specifically limited skeptics about moral philosophy correct in thinking that all prescriptive statements are noncognitive—neither true nor false.

They are correct in thinking that they are neither true nor false *in terms of descriptive truth*. That, however, leaves open the possibility that Aristotle may be correct in thinking that there is another mode of truth in accordance with which questions of value—about what is right and wrong, good and bad—can be correctly answered by affirming prescriptive statements that, as entertained, are objectively and universally valid.

If statements about the conduct of a good human life can be objectively and universally valid, then there can be a transcultural ethics. If statements about how society should be organized and governed, in order to be good for human beings to live in, can be objectively and universally valid, then a normative or prescriptive political philosophy can be transcultural. It follows that instruction in these matters should not be multicultural. On the contrary, if there are no objectively and universally valid prescriptions in the field of ethics or politics, then descriptive instruction in these matters should be multicultural.

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