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THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Beware of the half truth. You may have gotten hold of the wrong half.

—Source Unknown

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ADLER ON TRUTH AND FALSITY

Before we consider how this form of skepticism affects our understanding of truth, I would like to deal briefly with the other two forms, which tend to involve mistakes that can and should be avoided. One is the mistake that people make when they misinterpret the familiar remark: “That may be true for you, but not for me.” The other is an equally widespread misinterpretation of the remark: “That may have been true sometime ago, but no longer.”

The first of these misinterpretations arises from the failure to distinguish between the truth or falsity that inheres in a proposition or statement and the judgment that a person makes with regard to the truth or falsity of the statement in question. We may differ in our judgment about what is true, but that does not affect the truth of the matter itself.

Let us take, for example, a difference of opinion about the number of peaks in the Colorado Rockies that exceed 14,000 feet. One person sets the number at fifty; the other says, “Not so.” The number of peaks in Colorado exceeding 14,000 feet is some definite integer, and so the statement that sets it at fifty is either true or false, regardless of what the persons who dispute this matter of fact may think about it.

The truth or falsity of a statement derives from its

relation to the ascertainable facts, not from its relation to the judgments that human beings make. I may affirm as true a statement that is in fact false. You may deny as false a statement that is in fact true. My affirmation and your denial in no way alter or affect the truth or falsity of the statements that you and I have wrongly judged. We do not make statements true or false by affirming or denying them. They have truth or falsity regardless of what we think, what opinions we hold, what judgments we make.

A different jury hearing the evidence in a particular case might reach a different verdict. Though the prisoner at the bar may be thought guilty in the eyes of one jury and innocent in the eyes of another, one of those verdicts is right and the other wrong because the prisoner is either guilty or not guilty as charged. If guilty, then a verdict that declares the prisoner's guilt is true even when a jury renders the opposite verdict.

The mistake of identifying the truth or falsity of a statement with our attribution of truth or falsity to it can be easily corrected. Those who persist in the mistake turn truth and falsity into an entirely subjective affair. They are, in effect, espousing the position that what's true for me is true, and that's all there is to it.

Stated another way, they are maintaining that there is no truth at all apart from what is true for me or true for you. When what is true for me is not true for you, I may try to change your opinion and win you over to mine, but even if I do succeed in persuading you that mine is correct, we are together no nearer to the truth in any objective sense than we were when we differed.

The subjective aspect of truth lies in the claim that the individual makes for the veracity of his judgment. The objective aspect lies in the agreement or correspondence between what an individual believes or opines and the reality about which he is making a

judgment when he holds a certain belief or opinion. The objective aspect is the primary one.

To ignore it, or to fail to see that it is distinct from the subjective aspect, washes out the meaning of the word “true.” This is precisely what happens when an individual who claims that a certain statement is true for him adds, “And that’s all there is to it.” He might just as well have said of the statement he calls true that he likes it, and that’s all there is to it.

The form of skepticism that we have been examining is sometimes referred to as “subjectivism” and sometimes as “relativism.” It is widely prevalent even among persons who would not regard themselves as addicted to skepticism because they do not think of themselves as adopting the extreme skeptical view that nothing is either true or false. But they have, nevertheless, allowed themselves to fall back into excessive skepticism by their refusal to acknowledge that subjective differences of opinion concerning what is true or false can be resolved by efforts to ascertain what is objectively true or false, remembering that the truth of a statement resides in its relation to reality, not in its relation to the individual’s judgment about it.

Closely akin is the form of skepticism—or relativism—that makes the truth of a statement depend upon the circumstances of time and place. Everyone is acquainted with such remarks as “That may have been true in the Middle Ages, but it is no longer true,” or “That may be true for primitive people, but it is not true for us.” The mistake here is exactly the same mistake as before.

A portion of the human race some centuries ago held it to be true that the earth is flat. That false opinion has now been generally repudiated. This should not be interpreted to mean that the objective truth has changed—that what once was true is no longer true. If it is now

objectively true that this planet is spherical, it never was true that it is flat. What has changed is not the truth of the matter but the prevalence of an opinion that has ceased to be popular.

Another example may help to make this clear. The population of a country changes from time to time, but a statement about the size of a country's population at a given time remains true when, at a later time, it has increased in size. The presence of the date in a statement about the population of the United States in a certain year enables that statement to remain true forever, if it was accurate in the first place.

“Forever” is a long time and “immutable” is a strong word, and yet it must be said that if a given statement is ever objectively true, it is true forever and immutably true. The impulse to recoil from what many may be inclined to regard as an outrageous claim can be checked by remembering that the claim does not preclude acknowledging that our judgments about what is true or false change from time to time, as well as differing from place to place. What is mutable and variable with the circumstances of time and place are the opinions we hold concerning the true and the false, not what is objectively true and false.

From his book *Six Great Ideas*.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Max:

I thought you and other members might find this material (see below) to be of interest. We see yet another example of how the Internet possesses the fantastic ability to serve in the pursuit of happiness.

Bob Heller

Microsoft Brings eBooks to Windows Users With the Free Availability of Microsoft Reader.

PR Newswire - August 8, 2000

NEW YORK, Aug. 8

Microsoft Corp. today announced that Microsoft Reader for desktop PCs and laptop computers is available free for immediate download at:

<http://www.microsoft.com/reader/>

delivering the pro-mise of eBooks to users of the Microsoft Windows 95 or later operating system.

Barnes & Noble.com and Microsoft also announced the opening of the Barnes & Noble.com eBookStore for Microsoft Reader, the first online retail bookstore to offer commercial content for Microsoft Reader.

In addition, major publishers—including Simon & Schuster Inc., Time Warner Books and Random House Inc.—are making best-selling titles available in Microsoft Reader format through a variety of promotions offered at <http://www.bn.com/>

“The availability of Microsoft Reader, which is clearly the best software for extended reading on any computing device, combined with the opening of Barnes & Noble.com’s innovative new eBookStore, which will offer of hundreds of great titles for Microsoft Reader, means consumers finally have the opportunity to realize the full potential of eBooks,” said Dick Brass, vice president for Technology Development at Microsoft.

Microsoft Reader with ClearType (TM) display technology delivers an on-screen computer reading experience that approaches the convenience and quality of reading text on paper. With built-in access to the Barnes & Noble.com Web site, a book-like layout and active reading features such as electronic annotation tools,

Microsoft Reader offers the user of Windows an unprecedented reading experience.

“This is a major milestone for the publishing industry and book lovers alike, offering anyone with a Windows-based computer the ability to easily experience the power of this exciting new technology,” Brass said. “Anyone wondering about electronic reading needs only to spend some time with a good eBook on Microsoft Reader to see what the excitement is all about.”

The new Barnes & Noble.com eBookStore for Microsoft Reader will offer book buyers hundreds of eBook titles from publishers large and small.

The site, <http://www.bn.com/ebook/>, which can also be accessed through the integrated bookstore in Microsoft Reader, is dedicated to providing content for Microsoft Reader users, and it will expand and evolve as more titles become available later this year.

“Microsoft Reader is a truly remarkable product that offers an unparalleled reading experience for anyone from the avid book reader to the working professional on the go,” Riggio said. “We believe our customers will find that the Microsoft Reader makes the reading experience so great, we are offering free downloads of 100 of the world’s great classics—from Charles Dickens’ ‘A Tale of Two Cities’ to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s ‘The Scarlet Letter’—as an incentive for people to enter and embrace the world of eBooks.”

Max,

Thanks so much for the response. I'm very happy to hear Dr. Adler is relatively well.

I guess I have to get myself to one of his events and see him in person. I've got about a dozen of his books

under my belt now, and I'm still handing out his books to my professors. I'm starting an MA at Texas A&M, and I think there are some professors there who actually know about him, since a few are in the Notre Dame constellation.

Thanks for your efforts—I'm sure you're well compensated, if only by getting so much time with one of this century's greatest men.

Yours,

Dan Demetriou

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As always, we welcome your comments.
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