**Ideas We Judge By: TRUTH, GOODNESS, AND BEAUTY**

**The Pursuit of Truth, From Truth to Goodness and Beauty, Is and Ought**

**The Pursuit of Truth**

**IN DIFFERENT DISCIPLINES or departments of learning, progress in the pursuit of truth is accomplished in different ways—by the employment of different methods and by resorting to different devices for correcting errors or expanding knowledge. The way in which mathematicians arrive at new and better formulations has little in common with the way in which historians make new findings and revise earlier views of what happened in the past. Different from both are the procedures of the experimental sciences and the data-gathering routines of the social sciences.**

**Differences aside, the pursuit of truth in all branches of organized knowledge involves (1) the addition of new truths to the body of settled or established truths already achieved, (2) the replacement of less accurate or less comprehensive formulations by better ones, (3) the discovery of errors or inadequacies together with the rectification of judgments found erroneous or otherwise at fault, and (4) the discarding of generalizations— or of hypotheses and theories—that have been falsified by negative instances.**

**By all such steps, singly or together, the sphere of truths agreed upon enlarges and comes closer to being the whole truth. As the wheat is separated from the chaff, as agreed upon errors or falsities are eliminated, it also comes closer to being nothing but the truth.**

**The complete realization of the ideal that is the goal—the whole truth and nothing but the truth—will never be achieved in any stretch of time. The pursuit is endless. It is in the main progressive, though there are periods when no advances are made and even some when impediments to further progress appear at the time to be insuperable. Nevertheless, the pursuit of truth is never so blocked or frustrated that despair impels us to give up the enterprise.**

**Viewing the pursuit of truth retrospectively, we find that experts who are competent to judge—mathematicians, scientists, historians, each in their own departments of learning have reached agreement about a host of judgments that they have come to regard as settled or established truths in their respective fields. This does not mean, of course, that all these agreed-upon truths have the finality and incorrigibility of certitude. It means only that the shadow of a doubt that still hangs over them because of what an uncharted future has in store does not at the present moment threaten their status as established truth, temporarily undisputed by experts competent to judge.**

**Looking toward the future, the ongoing pursuit of truth presents a different picture. On the periphery of the sphere of truth in each department of learning lie disputed matters about which experts are not in agreement. Out of each conflict of opinion emerges the investigations, researches, criticisms, and arguments by which it is hoped the disputes can be resolved and agreement achieved. When that occurs, the matter under dispute becomes a settled matter, and the pursuit of truth pushes the edges of inquiry on to matters still disputable.**

**The movement from the disputable to things no longer disputed, or from areas of disagreement to things about which agreement has been reached, gives direction to the pursuit of truth. Each step in that direction is a dramatic episode in the long history of mankind’s effort to know as much as can be known.**

**The sphere of truth, in short, is the sphere of those matters about which we think disagreement is profitable precisely because we think these are matters about which it is possible to resolve differences of opinion and to reach agreement instead. There are matters of a quite different sort concerning which we think the very opposite. These are matters of taste rather than of truth.**

**We are all acquainted with the commonplace maxim *Degustibus non disputandum est*. About matters of taste, there isno point in arguing. Disputes are fruitless. Our differences ofopinion look irreconcilable. Arguing about such matters willnot bring us into agreement. On the contrary, we shouldwisely live with and gladly tolerate differences of opinion thatexpress divergent tastes.**

**About matters of truth, the opposite maxim should rule: *Deveritate disputandum est*. About matters of truth, dispute is fruitful. Wherever the truth of our judgments, opinions, or beliefs is a proper concern, we should be prepared to argue with those who disagree with us, with the firm hope that our disagreement can be resolved. Wisdom does not counsel us here to desist from the effort to reach agreement. Disagreement about matters of truth is not, in the final reckoning, to be tolerated.**

**I am not saying that, where disagreement about a matter of truth is extremely difficult to resolve, we can expect to achieve the agreement we seek within any specified period of time or by any resources available to us at the moment. I am only saying that we should never abandon our effort to reach the agreement we ought to seek in all matters that fall within the sphere of truth rather than the sphere of taste. To give up is to abandon the pursuit of truth.**

**We may have to live for a long time with disagreements that cannot be easily resolved. That should not cause us to regard them as permanently-tolerable. As long as it is possible for us to carry on, by empirical and rational means, a process of inquiry directed toward resolving a disputed question and reaching agreement about the answer to it (even if that agreement should itself be altered or transformed in the future), our dedication to the pursuit of truth obliges us to proceed in that direction.**

**We should never rest satisfied with anything less than the agreement of all (about matters concerning which common sense is competent to judge) or of all who are experts (about matters belonging to special departments of knowledge). Unanimous agreement is the appropriate condition of the human mind with regard to anything that is a matter of truth rather than a matter of taste.**

**To illustrate the difference between matters of truth and matters of taste, let me offer some examples.**

**There is a spectrum of matters some of which at one extreme dearly belong to the sphere of truth and some of which at the other extreme just as clearly belong to the sphere of taste. Let us first consider the clear cases at either end of the spectrum.**

**At one extreme, clearly belonging to the sphere of truth, is mathematics and, associated with it, the exact sciences, especially the experimental sciences. Placing these disciplines in the sphere of truth does not mean that at any time there is perfect agreement among all mathematicians or experimental scientists about everything in their fields. But it does mean that, when they do disagree, we expect them to be able to resolve their disagreements by recourse to rational processes employing the methods and techniques of their disciplines.**

**Not only would we regard an irresolvable disagreement in their fields as scandalous and intolerable; not only should we expect mathematicians and experimental scientists to be able to resolve whatever disagreements confront them; but we also think that they are morally obligated to sustain their efforts to settle their disputes until they finally succeed in doing so.**

**At the opposite extreme, clearly belonging to the sphere of taste, are such matters as cuisine, social manners, styles in dress or dance, patterns of family life, and so on. Here we do not expect human beings to overcome their conflicting predilections or preferences, nor do we think they should try to do so.**

**We do not look for uniformity in these matters. On the contrary, we are fully acquiescent in an irreducible pluralism in all matters of taste. We would regard as monstrous any attempt to impose universal conformity to any one diet or culinary program, any one set of social manners, life-style, or style of dress.**

**The adoption of one style rather than another is an act of choice springing from emotional predispositions and cultural conditioning. It is determined extrinsically by temperamental inclinations and by environmental circumstances. In contrast, the affirmation of opinions or beliefs as true and the rejection of their opposites as false involve judgments that are determined intrinsically by the substance of the matters being considered and by reference to the probative force of the relevant evidence and the cogency of the applicable reasoning.**

**In matters of truth, objective considerations play the major role. Ideally, they should operate exclusively, inhibitingeven the slightest intrusion of emotional preference or wishful thinking. The ideal may seldom be fully realized in the actual process whereby mathematicians, scientists, and historians attempt to resolve their differences or settle their disputes. It remains the ideal nevertheless and, being so, it enables us to draw a sharp line of demarcation between the sphere of truth and the sphere of taste. On the other side of that line—in the sphere of taste—temperamental inclinations, emotional predilections, cultural attachments predominate, as they should and must because differences in matters of taste do not yield to reason, to argument, to the weight of the evidence.**

**One further polarity characterizes the two spheres. The sphere of truth is transcultural. Where at a given time it fails to be transcultural, it can become so in the future. The agreement of those who are competent to judge in the fields of mathematics and experimental science transcends all national boundaries as well as the ethnic and cultural barriers that separate different subgroups of mankind.**

**The sphere of truth is global. To whatever extent the whole human race operates as members of a world community, it is with regard to matters that clearly fall in the sphere of truth rather than in the sphere of taste.**

**In the sphere of taste, mankind is divided into a multitude of factions and is always likely to remain so. There are those who will always prefer Chinese or Japanese cooking and those who will always prefer the Italian or the French cuisine. This is quite different from the principles of elementary arithmetic, the laws of algebra, the demonstrated theorems of Euclidean geometry, which cannot be characterized by adjectives derivedfrom a nationality or a culture that has produced them. They are not Chinese, Japanese, Italian, French, or anything else like that.**

**I have been using mathematics on the one hand and styles of cooking or cuisine on the other hand to exemplify asclearly as possible the opposite poles at which lie the sphere of truth and the sphere of taste. Between these polar extremes, philosophical opinions and religious beliefs occupy a middle ground.**

**The prevalent view today, in academic circles at least, tends to place philosophical opinions and religious belief onthe side of taste rather than on the side of truth. That has not always been the regnant view, nor is it necessarily the correct one.**

**Many philosophers in the past have looked upon themselves, and some in the present regard themselves, as engaged in the pursuit of truth, seriously concerned with efforts to resolve disputed questions by rational means. For them, the adoption of one philosophical position rather than another is not determined by emotional preference or personal prejudice.**

**What, then, leads one to place philosophy in the middle— not as clearly in the sphere of truth as mathematics andexperimental science, nor as clearly in the sphere of taste as styles of cuisine or dress? The answer lies in an undeniable historical fact. Over the centuries there has been less evident progress in the pursuit of philosophical truth than has been manifest in the advances made in mathematics and experimental science. Also, over the centuries and at a given time, the agreement of philosophers with one another about fundamental matters falls far short of the unanimity achieved by mathematicians and experimental scientists with regard t o matters that form the core of settled and established truth in those fields.**

**Differences in religious belief, considered within the orbit of our Western culture or seen from a global perspective,would appear to be even more irreconcilable and less amenable to resolution by rational means. This fact tends to align them more with differences in matters of taste, where dispute is futile, than with differences in the sphere of truth, where dispute is not only profitable but obligatory.**

**Nevertheless, adherents of different religious faiths are seldom willing to accept this alignment as correct. Orthodox believers are wont to regard their religious beliefs as constituting the one true faith. The missionary zeal of proselyters springs from the conviction that reason, not merely emotion, is at work in the process of converting the heathens, gentiles, or infidels. It is by opening the mind to the truth, not by coercion or duress, that religious conversion should be consummated.**

**With regard to the very difficult problem of assessing the position of philosophy and religion on one or the other side of the line that divides the sphere of truth from the sphere of taste, I must content myself with three brief observations.**

**First, whatever allocation one makes, the determination itself should be regarded as a judgment that is genuinely disputable. It, therefore, belongs in the sphere of truth rather than of taste.**

**Second, if the judgment is that philosophy and religion are composite in character, combining matters of truth with matters of taste, then, so far as these matters can be separated, they should be dealt with in a manner that is appropriate to the sphere to which they belong.**

**Third, to whatever extent philosophical opinions and religious beliefs belong to the sphere of truth, we should lookupon disputed questions in these fields as resolvable by rational means. However difficult it may be to resolve them, our obligation here, in the pursuit of truth, is to be unrelenting in our efforts to reach agreement—even if it takes until the end of time to do so.**

**When we recognize that the possession of truth is the ultimate good of the human mind, and, recognizing this, commit ourselves to the pursuit of truth, we have a number of moral obligations to discharge.**

**About any human judgment (whether made by a person or common sense or made by an expert in one of the learned disciplines) we must ask. Does the judgment belong to the sphere of truth or to the sphere of taste?**

**Upon deciding that it belongs to the sphere of truth, we should then look for and examine the grounds upon which it may be judged either true or false.**

**If our own affirmation or denial of its truth brings us into disagreement with others (*either* about whether it properly belongs to the sphere of truth or about whether it is true), then we have one further obligation to discharge. We must take whatever steps of inquiry can be employed effectively to resolve such disagreement.**

**However difficult and protracted that process may be, we must never tire of carrying it on. We must never suspend further inquiry as futile or discontinue argument as profitless. To do so is to abandon the pursuit of truth and to treat the matter in question as if it belonged to the sphere of taste. Only if we fully discharge all these obligations are we entitled to regard ourselves as engaged in a lifelong commitment to the pursuit of truth.**

**From Truth to Goodness**

**and Beauty**

**OF THESE THREE GREAT IDEAS, TRUTH is sovereign as, in the case of the second trio, JUSTICE is the governing idea in relation to liberty and equality.**

**Matters that we have come to understand better through our consideration of truth—the distinction between judgments having certitude and judgments in the realm of doubt, the distinction between the sphere of truth and the sphere of taste—lay the ground for a better understanding of goodness and beauty.**

**We have faced the question about the subjective aspect of truth and its relation to the objective aspect; and we have seen why the objective aspect is primary and controlling. This will guide us in dealing with similar questions about goodness and beauty, questions that we will find more insistent and more difficult.**

**Was the skeptical Montaigne correct when he said that there is nothing good or evil but thinking makes it so? Arepeople generally right in saying that beauty exists only in the eye of the beholder?**

**Is there no objective aspect of goodness or beauty? Can some of our judgments about what is good and evil, or about what is right and wrong, be placed in the sphere of truth, leaving others in the sphere of taste? What is the basis for allocating them in this way?**

**Are the objective and subjective aspects of beauty so inseparably fused that it is impossible, in the case of beauty, to separate what is a matter of truth from what is a matter of taste? Does the maxim *De gustibus nun disputandum est* apply without exception to all judgments about goodness and beauty; or do some fall under the maxim *De veritate disputandum* *est?***

**The milder forms of skepticism that I have called subjectivism and relativism are rampant not only in the popularmind but also in academic circles, especially among sociologists and other behavioral scientists and even among philosophers. I think I have shown how they can be combated with regard to truth. I hope I shall be able to persuade readers that the mistakes of subjectivism and relativism can also be corrected with regard to goodness.**

**The importance of doing so should be obvious. If all our judgments about good and evil, right and wrong, are purely subjective; if they are simply expressions of emotional preference; if there is no point in resorting to rational argument when we find ourselves in conflict with others about such matters, the practical consequences are far-reaching and pervasive. They impinge upon the conduct of our personal and public lives at every turn.**

**Subjectivism and relativism with regard to beauty are much less amenable to correction than with regard to goodness. Fortunately, it is also less important to overcome them there, at least so far as their practical effect upon our lives is concerned.**

**Is and Ought**

**THE JUDGMENT THAT SOMETHING IS GOOD OR BAD—or that it is better or worse than something else—is one we make every day, often many times a day. It is implicit in every choice we make. It is expressed every time we appraise anything or estimate its value for us. That is why judgments that attribute goodness or some degree of goodness to things have come t o be called “value judgments.”**

**We see at once a fundamental difference between truth and goodness. We do not usually speak of things as being true or false. In exceptional cases, such as that of counterfeit money, we may think of the counterfeit as false and of the genuine article as true, but when we do so, we are using the words “true” and “false” in a metaphorical sense, borrowing the words from their proper application to the verbal statements we make or the judgments of our mind.**

**“Good” and “bad,” on the other hand, are terms we normally apply to the things of this world, not to our thoughts or statements about them. Included among the items we appraise as good or bad are human beings themselves, as well as their intentions and actions, their institutions and productions, and the lives they lead. In every case, it is the object we are considering, not our thought about it, that we call good or bad.**

**Traditional wisdom places the difference between truth and goodness in the different relationships they involve.Truth resides in the relation between the thinking mind and the objects it thinks about. Our thoughts are true when they stand in a relation of agreement with the state of the objects we are thinking about. Goodness resides in the relation between objects of every sort and the state of our desires. Objects are good when they satisfy our desires.**

**When we talk about the pursuit of truth, we are regarding truth as an object of desire and, in doing so, we are in effect attributing goodness to truth. Having possession of the truth in some measure is a good of the mind, a good we seek when we pursue the truth. If we seek to overcome ignorance and to avoid error, we regard them as evils to be avoided; and in their place, we desire knowledge, which consists in having some hold on the truth about the way things are.**

**Now let us turn in the opposite direction and ask whether there is any truth in our value judgments—our judgments about things as good or bad. When such judgments are challenged, most people find it difficult to defend them by giving reasons calculated to persuade others to agree with them. Since individuals obviously differ from one another in their desires, what one person regards as good may not be so regarded by another.**

**Unless I am lying, my statement that I regard something as good (which is tantamount to saying that I desire it) is atrue statement about me, but that would seem to be as far as it goes. The judgment that the object in question is good would not appear to be true in a sense that commands universal assent— good not just for me but for everyone else as well.**

**We are thus brought face to face with the much disputed question about the objectivity or subjectivity of value judgments. In the contemporary world, skepticism about value judgments prevails on all sides. Value judgments, it is generally thought, express nothing more than individual likes or dislikes, desires or aversions. They are entirely subjective and relative to the individual who makes them. If they have any truth at all, it is only the truth that is contained in a statement about the individual who is making the judgment—the truth that he regards a certain object as good because he, in fact, desires it.**

**Only if there could be truth in judgments that asserted that certain objects are good for all human beings, not just for this individual or that, would value judgments have objectivity. They would then cease to be entirely relative to individual idiosyncrasies. At least some value judgments would then belong in the sphere of truth and be subject to argument. Others might remain in the sphere of taste and be beyond the reach of argument. We might expect men to try to achieve agreement about the former, but not about the latter. Instead of saying that good and bad are entirely subjective values, we would then be maintaining that they are partly objective and partly subjective.**

**However, this is precisely what is denied by skepticism concerning value judgments, at least those that appraise objects as good and bad, which is just another way of saying desirable and undesirable. In the skeptic’s view, the identification of the good with the desirable makes it impossible to avoid the subjectivity of judgments about what is good and bad, relative as they must be to the differing desires of different individuals.**

**That the good is the desirable and the desirable is the good cannot be denied. But we can note a certain duplicity in the meaning of “desirable.” When we speak of something as desirable, we may mean, on the one hand, that *it is in fact desired* and, on the other hand, that *it ought to be desired,* whether or not it is. Certainly, when we say that something is admirable, we can either be reporting the fact that it is admired or be laying down the injunction that it *ought* to be admired, whether or not it is. The same duplicity would seem to be present in the meaning of desirable.**

**With this duplicity in mind, we can ask the following critical question: Do we regard something as good simply because we in fact desire it, or ought we to desire something because it is in fact good? In both cases, the good remains the desirable, but in one case the goodness is attributed to the object only because it is desired, while in the other the object ought to be desired only because it is good.**

**The alternatives here presented are not exclusive. We can affirm that some of an individual’s value judgments attribute goodness to an object on the basis of the fact that he or she desires it. We can also affirm that some of an individual’s value judgments recognize a goodness in the object that makes it an object that ought to be desired.**

**The skeptical view of value judgments holds that they are all of the same sort. All consist in an individual’s calling an object good on the basis of his actual desires. That which he in fact desires appears good to him insofar as he desires it. The object that appears good to him may not appear good to someone else whose desires are different. One man’s meat is another man’s poison.**

**Against the skeptic, are we able to defend the opposite view that, while some objects appear good to an individualsimply because he or she in fact desires them, there are other objects that he or she ought to desire because they are good—really good, not just apparently good?**

**To do this, we must manage to get across another hurdle. The obstacle that now stands in our way is a difficulty that has been raised about prescriptive as opposed to descriptive statements.**

**A prescriptive statement or judgment is one that asserts what ought or ought not to be done. A statement about what ought or ought not to be desired imposes a prescription that may or may not be obeyed. In contradistinction, a descriptive statement or judgment is one that asserts the way things are, not how they ought to be. A statement about what is desired by a given individual simply describes his condition as a matter of fact.**

**How, it is asked, can prescriptive injunctions be true or false? Have we not adopted the view that the truth of statements or judgments consists in their conformity with the ways things are—with the facts that they try to describe? If a statement is true when it asserts that that which is, is, and false when it asserts that which is, is not, how then can there be truth or falsity in a statement that asserts what ought or ought not to be?**

**Even if we possessed all the descriptive truth that is attain able, how could our knowledge of reality, our knowledge of the way things are, lead us to any valid conclusion about what ought to be done or about what ought to be desired?**

**It was long ago quite correctly pointed out by the skeptical philosopher David Hume that no prescriptive conclusion (in the form of an “ought” statement) can be validly inferred from a set of premises, no matter how complete, that consists solely of descriptive statements about the way things are. Even if we had perfect knowledge of all the properties that enter into the description of an object, we could not infer the goodness of the object or that it ought to be desired.**

**We are thus confronted with two obstacles, not one. The first is the difficulty raised by the question, How can prescriptive statements be either true or false, if truth consists in the correspondence between what is asserted and the way things are? The second is the objection raised by David Hume, to the effect that truths about matters of fact do not enable us to reach by reasoning a single valid prescriptive conclusion—a true judgment about what ought or ought not to be done or desired.**

**Unless we can surmount these difficulties, no prescriptive statement or judgment can be true or false. If we cannot truly say what ought to be desired, then the good is the desirable only in the sense that it appears good to the individual who in fact desires it. Acquiescing in the rejection of the alternative sense of the desirable as that which ought to be desired, we also must give up the notion that some objects are really good as distinguished from other objects that only appear to be good and may not be really so.**

**To refute the skeptical view, which makes all value judgments subjective and relative to individual desires, we must be able to show how prescriptive statements can be objectively true. An understanding of truth as including more than the kind of truth that can be found in descriptive statements thus becomes the turning point in our attempt to establish a certain measure of objectivity in our judgments about what is good and bad.**

**Only through such understanding will we be able to show that some value judgments belong to the sphere of truth, instead of all being relegated to the sphere of taste and thus reduced to matters about which reasonable men should not argue with one another or expect to reach agreement.**

* **Mortimer J. Adler *Six Great Ideas*, Part Two, Ideas We Judge By Truth, Goodness and Beauty**