

Six Great Ideas

by Mortimer J. Adler

CHAPTER 8

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 *De gustibus non disputandum est*. About matters of taste, there is no point in arguing. Disputes are fruitless. Our differences of opinion look irreconcilable. Arguing about such matters will not bring us into agreement. On the contrary, we should wisely live with and gladly tolerate differences of opinion that express divergent tastes.

About matters of truth, the opposite maxim should rule: *De veritate 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 clearly 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, inhibiting even 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 derived from 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 as clearly 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 on the 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 dearly in the sphere of truth as mathematics and experimental 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 to 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 look upon 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 of 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.