Toleration, Pluralism, and Truth

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The three concepts serving as the heading for this essay – or rather, the first two – are among the widely accepted guiding principles of contemporary Western Civilization. A civilized man or woman nowadays is expected to tolerate opinions and behaviour which differ from their own convictions and conduct, on the assumption that other men and women are entitled to their own opinions and may choose to live in their own way. It is such a tolerant attitude that facilitates diversity of style, plurality of opinions, wealth of patterns of civilization. The emerging social and cultural pluralism – or, to use another fashionable word, multiculturalism – not only allows people a wide range of choice, and thereby a sense of freedom, but also enriches society and humanity by encouraging diversity.

Diversity, as is well known, encourages comparison and reflection, which form favourable conditions for the pursuit of truth, or rather a rainbow of truths. For in such a pluralistic environment the truth is likely to emerge not as being one and only, definitive and unshakable, but rather a spectrum, a variety, an assemblage of plausible answers, coexisting in peace with one another. Civilized humanity appears thus to be embedded in a garden with many trees, each offering its fruit for general or particular consumption and enjoyment. We face a harmony of diversity, even compatibility of opposites, which supersede earlier pictures of dissent, confrontation and collision of opposing opinions, styles, beliefs, each proclaiming to be the only and the whole truth.

This idyllic picture, however, is based on simplistic notions, which do not explore the exact meaning of the two concepts, 'Toleration' and 'Pluralism,' and conveniently ignore the notion of 'Truth,' which, like a poor relation, is left in the dark, so as not to taint the fashionable mantra coined by the intellectual leaders of the new century. The slogan could be as useful for our times as *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* was for the French Revolution. However, just as Liberty could encroach on Equality and vice versa, and Fraternity be all but forgotten in an earlier age, so our three principles, Truth having entered onto the podium, may hide discrepancies and contradictions.

Conceivably, they could be coordinated to form a harmonious whole, just as such

a goal could be sought in respect of the French slogan. This, however, requires a careful exploration of the meaning of the principles and their actual application to human experience. In short, we have to find out what Toleration and Pluralism mean, and how they are related to one another, and to the seemingly self-evident nature of Truth.

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Toleration, as expounded by its classic defender John Stuart Mill, can be addressed to expression of opinion and to personal conduct. As Mill cogently put it in his famous essay *On Liberty*, toleration ought to be practiced in both instances, though the practice has to be clearly defined and in the second instance carefully circumscribed. Mill advocates universal freedom of *speech*. As to human *conduct*, each mature individual should be allowed freedom, as long as his behaviour does not infringe on the well-being of other individuals and the society at large.

While this criterion is not above possible objections and reservations, it suffices in the present context to point out that there can be no absolute toleration of individual behaviour, because man does not live in isolation and the conduct of one may affect others, who must retain the right to be protected against an encroachment on their liberty. Man's social condition necessitates resolution of conflicts arising from incompatible liberties of various individuals.

Freedom of speech does not appear to suffer from such complexities. An individual's opinion may disagree with the opinion of another individual, or even with an opinion held by most people in a community, but such a personal stand does not infringe on the well-being of others. Reality, the lives of people, are not encroached upon by mere words. People may be annoyed by some unorthodox opinions, but their conduct and situation need not be affected by such opinions in any way.

If opinions may thus seem to be tolerated because they are deemed essentially ineffectual, speech being no more than hot air, this is not what J.S. Mill had in mind. What people think, and express in speech and writing, may be extremely important, for ideas are the precursors of actions. Moreover, men try to use their freedom of expression of ideas to convince other people and affect their action and conduct, notably in social and political affairs. False opinions could lead to mistaken or even dangerous action. The opinions of an individual may influence other individuals and the society at large. Why, then, allow uncurbed liberty of speech?

The well-known answer of Mill combines plain common sense with ingenious sophistication. The plain argument is that the conviction that the established opinion is absolutely right, and thus no contradictory opinion should be allowed, may be countered by the argument that conceivably the prevalent opinion is false or only partially true, and therefore dissenting opinions should be given a chance to correct or to complement the established notions. The sophisticated argument is that even if we could be absolutely certain that the established opinion is true, there is value in allowing the mistaken notions to be aired, for this will require the holders of truth to prove and justify their stand. In other words, the false opinion serves the truth by compelling its proponents to re-examine it and consequently to embrace it with conviction and understanding, and not merely believe in it in a dogmatic manner (Mill, 1859: chap. 2).

In a similar vein, Mill justifies the toleration of diversity of conduct, even of eccentric behaviour, not merely as the right of individuals, but also for the stimulation it brings to the community to look for the *desirable* way by facing a *diversity* of conduct. This is of particular importance in a society dominated by the masses and inclined to conformity, that is to say, in a democratic society (Mill, 1859: chap.3), or, we may add, in a society continuously exposed to the pressure of modern mass media of communication, such as television and radio.

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Pluralism, which seems to be mentioned in tandem with the notion of toleration in recent times, may appear, on the face of it, no more than the consequence of the practice of toleration. If society tolerates diversity of opinion and of conduct, the result is that opinions become numerous and the conduct of people follows a similar diversity. Moreover, as the communication and contact among nations and civilizations increases, the diversity ever grows. One encounters a variety of foods, restaurants, entertainment, music, literature, life style, ideas and ideals.

One is not anymore startled by exotic cultures, religions and cults. Beliefs may range from scientifically validated conclusions to religious convictions, to acceptance of extra-terrestrial connections. Every idea of individuals and all the customs of exotic communities must be admitted on an equal footing into the treasure of human experience and belief. Nothing may be excluded; everything must be included.

This inclusive pluralism inadvertently leads to ethical relativism. If one is ready to look favourably at all the diverse civilizations, and if one is sympathetic to each mode of life, it is only too easy to adopt the humble position and to proclaim: 'Who am I to judge that this way of life is better than that? If people choose their kind of culture, manner and belief, it apparently suits them. Indeed, my respect for humanity does not allow me to assert that my ways are better than their ways. Whatever is, is *ipso facto* of intrinsic value.'

Therefore the differences must not entitle anyone to judge anything as undesirable. In no way may one consider the culture of some aborigines as less worthy than the way of life of the Western world. Indeed, if all are equally good, there is no valid standard or justification for ethical valuation. Such judgments are unwarranted. *Values are relative*. Thus, the approval of all leads to the preference of none, and therefore to the discarding of value judgment.

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Such a conclusion of the contemporary pluralistic stance may be *historically* linked to toleration, but *philosophically* it stands quite apart. For if Mill and his followers, representing Liberalism in its original sense, advocated freedom of speech and looked with approval at the diversity of style and belief, they did not see in pluralism a desirable *end*; they merely viewed it as a convenient *means*.

Let people express diverse opinions, in order to find the truth. Let people explore a variety of ways of life, so that they approximate the optimal way. Toleration or diversity is a clever way to encourage reflection and search for truth. To see it as

justification for discarding such search, let alone for renouncing the notion of universal truth, is giving up the essence of human quest.

Humanity has witnessed social systems in which the final and absolute truth was dictated by potentates or priests, and any deviation was severely punished. Such a way stifled human freedom and human development. The search for truth through competitive coexistence of diverse opinions and manner of conduct, within the limits of consideration for the safety and well-being of all, is a better way. Yet, to assume that the diversity has no goal other than its own perpetuation, that there need be no search for truth because there is no truth, makes no sense at all.

This for the following reasons. One is rooted in basic logic and conveyed in an ancient Greek paradox. If there is no truth, then the statement that there is no truth is also not true. Therefore there is truth. Yet, if so, the first statement may be true, and truth vanishes again. In brief, one cannot consistently deny the existence of truth.

Then, it is easy to offer examples of wicked conduct, sometimes characteristic of a civilization or a regime, which even the relativistic pluralist would find very hard to condone. If cannibalism is an established way of a tribal culture – perhaps on a supposition of acquiring the valiant qualities of a killed enemy – should that be tolerated by a Western administrator of a foreign territory? Should we look with pluralistic indifference at human sacrifice in antiquity? Should we respect the ancient Roman usage of the fight of gladiators, or the torment of prisoners of war by wild animals, performed for public entertainment in the Colosseum? Should we tolerate modern forms of torture and persecution, including genocide? Should the subjection of women in various societies be looked at with indifference? There is no need to enumerate the examples of human cruelty, instituted by custom, belief, political establishment – that is to say, by institutions studied by anthropologists and by historians, as the case may be. To remain morally neutral, or value-free, in such cases in the name of scientific detachment and objectivity, or out of ethical scepticism, is hardly humanly possible.

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For Man – in the essential and hopefully universal sense – is endowed, inter alia, with two basic yardsticks: one is the distinction between truth and falsehood; another is the differentiation between right and wrong. The first is directed at describing perceptions; the second evaluates situations and actions. The first is doubted by few. Even the most ardent pluralists are likely to admit that the earth is not flat, even if they do not mind if some people think so. The second, moral yardstick, is fashionably ignored or even denied. This involves great perils, for such a stance may condone evil, and even promote it.

Having said that, one must point out that passing moral judgement on human affairs and social issues is not always as simple a matter as it may seem from the examples quoted above. A moral determination may be often difficult to attain, just as it may be often hard to reach a valid descriptive truth. The shape of the world, as well as its astronomical relationship with the sun, have been subject to controversy. Galileo disputed the physics of Aristotle, though both were learned and wise men.

No wonder then that reasonable and honest men and women may disagree as to what is the right punishment for various criminal acts.

Still, the search of truth concerning matters of fact and of the right judgement of conduct, the search of descriptive verities and of normative judgements, remain a cardinal challenge of humanity. The search requires perseverance, patience, passion, toleration, and also understanding of the complexities involved in it. One of the basic misconceptions which beclouds the issue ought to be explained and highlighted.

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The common prima facie assumption is that things are either true or false, either right or wrong – that is to say, that the important resolution of how to determine such a judgement does not entail either doubt or lack of clarity. Any vagueness in this respect would cast a doubt on the basic issue of truth and falsehood, of right and wrong. Such issues are subject to the clear distinction between 'yes' and 'no.' 'Perhaps' or 'probably' are out of question. They would undermine the fundamental premises of normative approach.

This demand for unambiguous and definitive answers can be well understood. It has its deep roots in man's basic quest for clear answers and secure ways. It is manifested in religious beliefs which are affirmed with certainty and in a philosophical analysis which pursues truth. A divine revelation proclaims the right ways for man. Socrates looks for exact definitions, and Plato seeks mathematical certainty in the realm of politics. Sciences in modern times have attempted to express the regularity of natural phenomena in exact mathematical formulae, and applied science cannot but rely on the obedience of reality to its findings. Once the strict division between truth and falsehood is questioned, the whole edifice of knowledge and belief may totter and give way to relativism, scepticism, nihilism.

Yet, there is a powerful argument for a different perception of truth, a perception which substitutes the absolute notions with a gradated concept of verity – without destroying the theoretical and practical validity of the basic distinction. This notion is formulated by Aristotle, the disciple of Plato who parted company with his teacher.

When discussing politics, the science that allegedly explores the Supreme good for man, Aristotle (2004, 1994b) makes the comment that the 'account of this science will be adequate if it achieves such clarity as the subject-matter allows; for the same degree of precision is not to be expected in all discussions . . .' And he amplifies, 'for it is a mark of the trained mind never to expect more precision in the treatment of any subject than the nature of the subject permits; for demanding logical demonstration from a teacher of rhetoric is clearly about as reasonable as accepting mere plausibility from a mathematician.'

Thus, to translate this position to our times and place, a person who asserts that he is one hundred per cent *certain* that the Republican (or Democratic) party is always right, but he *thinks* that the sum of the angles of a triangle is more or less equal to two right angles, would be a person deficient in basic logical education, or mental training. The reverse degree of certainty has to be applied in this case.

How would this Aristotelian approach to the assertion of truth be translated into the spectrum of verities in the contemporary universe of beliefs and perceptions?

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What would be, generally speaking, the degree of certainty applied in various fields by a well-educated person nowadays?

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The field of formal logic and mathematics would remain in the domain of absolute truth, which entails the determination of unquestionable falsehoods. Indeed, in this sphere there is no place for multiplicity of opinions, let alone polling the judgements of majorities and minorities. The democratically inspired curiosity as to what people *think* does not apply here: even if the overwhelming majority should assert that five times six equals thirty-five, it will not budge the statement that it equals thirty.

Next come truths concerning the material world, truths sought through observation, experience and experimentation, which may be distilled and combined into scientific theories and laws. Some of these truths are quite simple and founded on observation recorded countless times. If one asserts that the sun will rise again day after day, there is little reason to doubt this prediction. Yet, it ought to be noted that the degree of certainty of such a statement does not equal the certitude of mathematical propositions. The theorem of Pythagoras, or the solution of an algebraic equation, will remain valid, even if the world perishes due to a cosmic calamity. Yet, such a calamity may invalidate the statement about the diurnal rise of the sun, a perception dependent on the earth's spinning round its axis.

Moreover, there may be significant differences in the degree of certainty in various sciences. Laws of physics, at the present stage of scientific development, may be more accurate and reliable than the laws in biology. When we reach the domain of human sciences, which involve the behaviour of men, and the possibility of human volition interfering with man's biological nature, the ascertainment of truth becomes elusive. This does not necessarily mean that the determination of truth does not apply to the situation: the truth may be there, but it is hidden – at least, so far. As it may be uncovered – in stages and tentatively – it will enlarge its domain and enhance its reliability.

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In the realm of religion, belief, though not necessarily devoid of observation and rational reflection, in the last resort is the consequence of a different faculty, distinct from the mental processes involved in uncovering rational and scientific truths.

The rational or scientific element in religion may manifest itself when the believer looks for a sign or a proof of divine presence or promise, as, for example, in the biblical accounts of Gideon asking for tangible divine assurances that he is entrusted with the delivery of his people (Judges 6: 36–40), or in King Hezekiah's quest of a sign that the Lord will heal him (2 Kings 20: 8–11). Yet the cardinal factor which determines faith is sui generis and not amenable to rational persuasion. This does not mean, however, that it is less assertive or less effective than rational conclusion.

Still, the non-rational nature of belief prevents an effective communication of religious faith from one individual to another, or from one community to another. A belief which is held as absolutely true by one person may be considered as unfounded, or even absurd, by another. One community's religious truth may signifi-

cantly differ from another community's truth, and there is no way the belief of anyone can be changed by argument and evidence the way this can be done in mathematics or science. Being Trinitarian means not being Unitarian, but the adherents to one of these beliefs cannot *prove* their case to their opposite parties.

The multiplicity of religious beliefs does not mean that religious truths are *relative*. They are held as *absolute* by the respective believers, no less than the truths of mathematics: they are above and beyond the certainty of natural laws. Yet, they cannot be reduced to uniformity the way logical and mathematical truths can be by cogent argument. Religious beliefs exemplify the coexistence of often contradictory truths, truths which differ from each other without being affected by one another.

Such pluralism of religious views, though it is inherently averse to any notion of relativism (except for those who are non-believers), may be consistent with toleration. For toleration does not mean that the Trinitarian accepts, or even respects, the Unitarian belief, and the Unitarian welcomes the Trinitarian dogma. It merely means that each side leaves the other in peace out of the practical conviction that belief, by its very nature, cannot be imposed on human beings. To be sure, various organized religions did occasionally try to enforce their beliefs on reluctant and resisting individuals and communities, and resorted to force to spread their gospel.

It took the good sense of John Locke (1689), himself a believer, to pronounce the following clear statement in respect of religious faith: 'Confiscation of estate, imprisonment, torments, nothing of that nature can have any such efficacy as to make men change the inward judgement that they have formed of things.' Toleration simply becomes a common-sense conclusion – even of believers.

This applies to monotheistic religions which by their very nature are committed to the true, the only true, belief. Thus, Judaism, Christianity and Islam may agree on some common principles, such as the belief in only one deity and the link between God and morality. However, various important issues – such as predestination and free will, or the nature of sin, punishment and atonement – may remain subjects of profound disagreement which cannot be bridged.

Different is the case of polytheistic religions, each with an extensive pantheon. Here deities – as in ancient Greece and Rome – represent forces of nature, or glorified human traits and propensities, and thus reflect the pluralistic and often chaotic world and humanity. There is no truth here, nor search for truth: just many forces striving with one another and often colliding with each other. The world of Homer is peopled with ambitious, lustful, greedy men, and comparable gods, the latter more powerful and immortal but hardly more virtuous and noble. The search for religious truth rejected such pluralism, and sought the true answer, the only and absolutely true answer, in monotheism.

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Let us turn to the domain of ethics, of right and wrong, and thus reach the main field of controversy between relativism and truth. Needless to say, ethics, even if in one sense an individual determination, carries far-reaching implications for social relations, and thus for social and political institutions. For the notion of what is right explicitly and implicitly permeates and affects human institutions. It is here that the

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issue of the validity or arbitrariness of prescriptive norms and commandments mani-
fests itself with all its force and urgency. Though the problem was touched upon
above, it deserves further clarification.

The argument for the relativity of moral judgement points to the difference of
opinion on such issues as sexual morality, reverence for old age, status of women in
family and society, ways of bringing up children, respect for religion, obedience
owed to authority, respect for people of knowledge and so on. In fact, in many such
issues there is place for clarification and even resolution of conflicting usages and
opinions. We shall not enter, however, into this field, which would lead to a lengthy
and elaborate exploration. Yet, whatever the resolution of such conflicting positions,
let us point out some of the moral imperatives which are above controversy and thus
contradict the thesis of the relativity of values.

Not to kill a person who has not intentionally done any serious harm to anyone is
an imperative which can hardly be contested by anyone but a psychopath. The need
for social concern for the weak, the deprived and the poor would also be admitted
in diverse cultures. So would be the concern for and duty to one's children, assum-
ing they are not congenitally depraved and vicious. Deceptive statements for per-
sonal advantage are deemed wrong and cannot be justified.

In short, there are forms of conduct which are deemed intrinsically wrong and
those which are inherently right. The disagreements in value judgements appear
mainly when some circumstances – foreseen or unsuspected – change the actual
situation in specific cases. Killing someone in an accident cannot be equalled with
deliberate murder. When charity is beneficial and when it may be counter-
productive may be a matter of dispute. How to allocate the budget to various deserv-
ing needs may be a difficult issue to resolve, and so on.

One could try to generalize the ethical commandments and suggest an abstract
formula for them. Some such formulae may be: Treat the other person the way you
wish to be treated; Respect the dignity of human beings; Put yourself into the situa-
tion of another before you pass a judgement on him; Do not tolerate the evil-doer,
out of concern for the victim of his deed; and so on. All such attempts take for
granted the universal validity of the ethical norms.

Social institutions, such as law and jurisdiction, are ostensibly committed to the
implementation of moral imperatives. If they do not necessarily fulfil this function
faithfully and effectively, this is due to some structural flaws, to vested interests
which intrude into the working of an institution, or to flaws and mistakes of the
functionaries. Thus, there may be legislation which favours a certain class or sector
of society, a judiciary which is corrupt, a system of jurisdiction which is unwieldy
and inefficient, and so on. Such failings, however, do not disprove the validity of the
moral principles which the social institutions were intended to enact.

Moral principles are also expected to be implemented by political institutions.
Indeed, various forms of government vie with one another on ethical grounds.
Democracy justifies itself by contending that it expresses the will of the people, and
thus the citizens retain their freedom – an ethical value – despite, or because of, the
political institutions. Some authoritarian systems of government contend that the
people do not know what is good for them and it is the government's task to teach
them what is right and retain its authority to achieve this aim. Such arguments may

be genuine or made up, but characteristically they resort to value-judgements to justify their claim.

Right and wrong are notions which we encounter on countless occasions in private life and in public affairs. While on many occasions it may be quite difficult to *prove* one's case for or against a certain specific action or way of conduct, the sense of the universal validity of the basic principles underlying each controversy – principles such as respect for man, for man's basic needs, for justice and fairness, consideration of the human condition – remain powerful and even dominant. Humanity, as long as, and to the extent that, it is determined to pursue a viable and just civilization, must be guided not only by what it *can* do, but also by what it *ought* to do. When it forgets it, we face various forms of social disintegration and widespread calamity.

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The field of aesthetics is also subject to evaluation – an evaluation sui generis, which differs in kind from ethical judgement. One may admire a painting, a musical composition, a poem, a play, and one can disparage various products of creation in these fields. Why I prefer Shakespeare to Bernard Shaw, why I am enthusiastic about Verdi and averse to rock, why I esteem Impressionist painters and am indifferent to cubists, why I prefer English Romantic poets to most of contemporary poetry, is much more difficult to justify than a stand on moral issues. Perhaps any attempt at aesthetic evaluation ought to be given up, and simply substituted by a personal assertion: 'I like Neapolitan songs and you like hip-hop. It is a matter of taste and *De gustibus non est disputandum.* One can only assert one's preference.'

Such a stance would lead to the conclusion that aesthetics have to be placed in the domain of indiscriminate pluralism. Thus Verdi and Puccini have to rub shoulders with the trendy composers of pop music, while Mozart and Schubert have to remain in the company of concocters of hip-hop. Recent best-sellers have to be admitted to the literary pantheon along with Tolstoy and Flaubert, and so on.

To be sure, there have been various philosophical attempts to establish *objective* criteria of aesthetic evaluation. While exploring such theories is a matter of a complex inquiry, a fairly simple suggestion will offer a possible criterion of objective judgement, which may serve the present discussion. It will focus on the case of music-and-poetry, which were perceived as closely bound by ancient Greeks, but the conclusions can be applied to aesthetic judgement also in other spheres of art.

The answer to our quest can be derived from Plato's treatment of the 'musical' education of the guardians in his ideal republic. An essential element of such education is the shaping of their minds, which begins with the tuning of their emotions, and only eventually leads to the strictly rational philosophical learning. A major means in the sentimental-emotional education is music, which encompasses both literature and music proper. Here, in a broad sense, Plato follows the Hellenic tradition of entrusting to gymnastics the development of the body and to music the cultivation of the soul (*Republic* II: 376).

However, the system of selection of the educational material is guided by Plato's objective of creating good soldiers for his state. Thus, the rhythms, the melodies and

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the words which are 'the expressions of a courageous and harmonious life' will be their spiritual nourishment (*Republic* III: 399–400). If, on the other hand, 'a man allows music to play upon him and to pour into his soul through the funnel of his ears those sweet and soft and melancholy airs,' the consequence will be that his spirit, rather than 'tempered like iron,' will become 'brittle and useless' (*Republic* III: 411).

As our objective is not the shaping of brave and efficient soldiers to the tunes of martial glory and rhythmic marches, but the cultivation of sensitive and compassionate souls, the practical conclusions will differ. It will be those tunes and words which develop man's sentiments and emotions, which attune his sensitivity and compassion, rather than merely discipline and obedience, which cultivate his individuality and not only his *esprit de corps*, which open his soul to diversity and do not limit it to the dictates of uniformity – it will be those that will prepare him for aesthetic appreciation. It will be *La Traviata* and *Cavalleria Rusticana*, it will be Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*, and not the dull uniform rhythm of hip-hop, that will develop the soul's sensitivity and thus be judged to be aesthetically worthy. What sensitizes the soul secures aesthetic appreciation and determines the perception of beauty.

This does not mean that each poem and every song, each aesthetic creation – whether verbal, or audial, or tangible – can be evaluated beyond dispute. Aesthetic judgement may well be less reliable than ethical determination. Still, some cardinal distinctions may remain generally valid.

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Thus, casting a panoramic view on our civilization, we retain the coexistence of Toleration, Pluralism and Truth. The relevance of one or another of these principles varies in accordance with the domain or aspect of culture under consideration. There is no place for toleration, let alone pluralism, in the realm of logic and mathematics. Scientific conclusions allow diverse degrees of certainty. The realm of monotheistic religions excludes pluralism, but necessitates toleration. The domains of ethics, and the related social institutions, allow diversity in secondary matters, but essentially should be guided by universally valid principles. In the case of aesthetics, a diversity of taste suggests a virtually unlimited pluralism. Yet, a universal basic principle of aesthetic evaluation is suggested, which would greatly reduce tolerable pluralism, although this assertion is made with less confidence than the insistence on basic norms in ethics.

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