14
Truth and Unity

The dog, struck by a car, lies yapping pitifully on the highway, its back broken. Death would be merciful, but the organism continues to function. It is senseless, unendurable torment, serving no purpose.

The radiant girl, with vibrant youth and stunning beauty, plays the Beethoven violin sonata with such bold energy and yet exquisite touch that all who hear are moved to a rapture of joyous confusion, whether to yield to her feminine loveliness, her brilliant performance, or Beethoven's genius.

The youth, in a gesture of malefic spite and jealousy, knocked over the ink bottle, spreading ruin and envy over the brilliantly drafted drawing. It was mean and petty and small and vicious. But they deemed it an accident.

The television camera, from the earth-orbiting satellite, scans the small, blue planet, on which we, four billion tiny specks, procreating and dying, pollute the globe and pass on meaninglessly into forgotten history.

The youth lived, breathed, dreamed, and waked solely for art. Everything he saw he wanted to paint; his soul thrilled to line, color, space, form, and measure. Even his most casual acquaintances admitted that he belonged in the world of canvas and pigment; here alone was he happy. But his paintings were dreadful. He was overcome with the love and the longing, but lacked all talent.

ın think about each of these images separately and make sense of
We have our categories and our distinctions. We separate and
guish, and consequently are not disturbed that one image glorifies,
ther reduces to dust. Each image is thinkable in its own terms,
inated by its own lights. They must be kept separate in order to be
ht about. If the distinctions, like chain-link fences, are breached,
ıages pour out like unleashed beasts, destroying one another in a
m of mayhem and riot. We can think about anything, it seems, as
ıs it is enclosed by the proper limits.
t can we think these images together? Is it not the supreme expecta-
of the wise that petty meanness and triumphant glory should
ıow be brought together in one world? If each idea has its own
n, how can the colony survive? But do these images even belong to
me universe? Are people who play sonatas of the same species as
who spitefully ruin a drawing?
he previous chapter we saw that philosophy, as a reasoned endeavor,
unity. It thus becomes imperative to recognize that the truth-
is also the unity-seeker. It becomes obvious that the world of
ng dogs with crushed spines is the same world as that of the finest
oveliest art, and that merely to make distinctions is only the first
f thought; the second, perhaps more difficult half is to reunify that
the distinctions divorced to make manageable.
dieval thinkers would rank the One as among the three great
endentals, together with the True and the Good. Modern critics
ack at this with puzzlement. Why is 'the One' so important? What
t even *mean,* that it can be equated with such lofty notions as the
and the Good? In ancient Greek thinking, Parmenides is noted
s remarkable metaphysics which reduced all to One—a move
os admired by scholars from a great distance but totally uncongenial
present instincts. We know that apples are not oranges, and
e Parmenides must have been dazzled by an error in logic. Today
ps such terms as 'world' or 'universe' approximate this unifying
ple, but these terms entirely lack the energy and vigor of the
ıus ages. The image of the earth from a satellite may unify us
blue planet, but it reduces us to tiny replaceable specks. That
these specks may be a Newton, a Shakespeare, a Rembrandt, is
scernible to the satellite, nor is it within the range of its parameters
der such a judgment possible.
as the witness swears to tell the whole truth, the philosopher is
ed to seek the truth of the whole. This truth cannot be the mere

abstract one achieved by adding on the reminder that all the images really are a part of one world. For we do not want to know that saints and sinners live on the same block—we know that—rather we want to know how to think about them in terms of each other, for the limits of each image threaten to become the limits of any intelligibility whatsoever, and once we lose the capacity to think these images together we lose the capacity to think at all.

Our earlier discovery that truth is of essences may thus be misleading. For it suggests that truth is a plurality of separate and disjoined essences, each of which can be 'thought' with a total disregard of the others. But we do not want merely to understand the essence of a mother *and* the essence of language, we want to understand what it means to speak as a child of a mother. Unity is a demand of reasoned truth.

Why then is the history of philosophy one vast series of ever more refined distinctions? We pay people professors' salaries to draw distinctions so fine that only graduate students can appreciate their subtleties. We distinguish material from formal implication, *de re* from *de dicto* necessity, equivalence from equality, legality from justice, the sublime from the beautiful, the true from the truth. Every time a philosopher gets backed into a corner by critical argumentation, he makes a new distinction. The webs spread out on finer and finer threads, spinning out further and further from the center until the very intricacy becomes as puzzling as the problem the original distinction was made to solve.

Distinctions, of course, are not just made up. They are discoveries of reason, and without them all thought would come to an end. The danger lies not in making distinctions, but in failing to account for their dual function. For a reasoned distinction serves not only to separate, but to conjoin. Human acts, undistinguished, are not meaningful; but when we distinguish the good from the bad, the acts of men become *conduct,* and hence morally significant. The mistake would be to assume that the distinction between good and bad somehow removes the latter from the realm of the intelligible. To be able to think about acts as moral is to unify them under the coalescing principle of morality; the division between good acts and bad acts does not separate acts from nonacts, but provides a single, unifying principle with which to think about acts as meaningful. To distinguish love from lust does not render the two notions incompatible, but rather shows us how to think about both, for love need not be entirely lust-free, nor lust loveless; the distinction makes a loving lust and a lustful love possible.

We make distinctions to avoid contradictions; we seek the unity in a

ıction to achieve coherence. We must make a distinction between
and mind in order to be able to think successfully about who we
But if we press the distinction beyond its limits, and disjoin body
nind as two distinct metaphysical entities, the difference no longer
s our thinking but impedes it. Descartes is correct in noting the
ence; he is incorrect in rendering the distinction beyond all pos-
unity.

ıe most dangerous distinction may also be the most necessary. We
note the difference between appearance and reality, yet this distinc-
seems to seduce all lesser thinkers to a reductionism, in which
arance' is seen as mere 'illusion'. Because I can "reduce" Abraham
ɔln to his molecules and atoms, it is claimed that Lincoln "really" is
ıng else. Everything beyond these primary bits of matter is mere
arance. The foolishness of such a judgment is insufficient to deter
grim insistence: we must distinguish what is real from how the
y manifests itself. But this is bad metaphysics—and most meta-
ics is bad metaphysics—and with such poor reasoning, no truth is
ble.

ıt if we need all of these refined and metaphysically dangerous
ıctions, and yet also insist on a unity, how are we to achieve any
ss? Obviously the passion for distinction must be tempered, and
unger for unity must be measured, but these are but pious adages
s we know how to temper and to measure. The distinctions must be
with such care that in distinguishing they reveal the underlying
.

ıe five images listed at the heading of this chapter are not merely
ɔm examples. They were chosen for the purpose of this analysis.
ider the first image. On the one hand our instincts as sensitive and
g beings are offended by the depiction of the unnecessary and
ɔle suffering of an innocent animal. Yet the description includes
imple clause "but the organism continues to function." And of
e, there is the rub. To have dogs at all we must affirm the natural
ioning of the organism. We do not *blame* the organism for continu-
ɔ function even when all observers, and perhaps even the dog,
erately would wish it to cease. So our anguish becomes a mere
ctive, perhaps even romantic and sentimental, indulgence. The
ıism is supposed to function that way, and if the dog is in pain, so
? And yet, to think this way is to embrace a huge insensitivity, and
make a distinction. We distinguish 'ought' from 'is', and in so

doing ease the mental anguish by relieving ourselves of a contradiction. The dog is suffering (the organism continues to function): we can affirm that as a fact. The dog ought not to suffer: we can affirm that as a moral or pseudomoral judgment. Since morality is separate from metaphysics or science, we do not contradict. Intellectually we heave a sigh of relief; once more the tactic of distinguishing entire systems of thought has saved the mind.

But such relief is illusory. It is precisely because we *can* think of both without contradiction that we seek to understand how they belong together in the same world of meaning. A tension is created by two true judgments: it is, but it ought not be. We think that a young man who loves to paint ought to do so; but if his artistry is bad, we wonder. Nasty people who spill ink on fine drawings out of meanness or spite do exist, but so do great musicians and beautiful people. These judgments also create tension, and the very tension is not eased but exacerbated by the distinctions which render them noncontradictory. If they were contradictory one would be false, and we could dismiss it. But since both can be true, their differences plague the mind with equal demands for acceptance.

How, then, do we think these various images together? What unifies them without destroying their uniqueness or their difference? And how can their appalling differences be rendered compatible? We are outraged by the petty meanness of the ink-spiller, aghast at the unnecessary suffering of the dog, delighted by the violinist, stunned by our smallness and our greatness. But most of all we are overwhelmed that our existence is assaulted by such diverse demands on our thinking. The temptation is simply to distinguish and walk away; but our deepest anguish is that such walking away is cowardly self-deceit. We must confront our existence as ample enough to endure them all, the dog who wants to die but cannot, the girl who dreams of playing and can, the vile toad who spills the ink, the boy who wants to paint but cannot. It is our existence which must endure these diverse tractions and bring them together.

Thus it is the meaningfulness of existence which provides the fundamental unity presupposed by all thought. The meaning of existence is both prior to the distinctions and posterior to their formulation. Who I am matters as a condition of the dog's suffering mattering or the greatness of the violin sonata mattering. I matter just because these are paradoxical modes of existence. Were I not both body and soul I would not be who I am—and if this body wars against the hegemony of this

ıl, well then the battle is my meaning. For two points must be made:
: meaningfulness of existence is the only notion wide enough, ample
ɔugh, vast enough, to enclose all the diverse and conflicting modalities
ich spread out before me like an endless desert. And second, such
'erse modalities in turn become the sole resource for the intelligibil-
of the question about the meaning of my existence. The very para-
ɛ and vastness entailed in these differences is how I think about the
ity. This is what it means to think.

So how does this work? Truth, we say, is of essences, yet truth also
ıst seek the essential unity of existence. To seek the essence of a
ther is to ask: what does it mean to be a mother? This, however,
'supposes the greater question: what does it mean to be *at all?* But I
rn what it means to be at all by understanding what it means to be a
, a father, a speaker, a moral agent, an artistic observer, a philosopher.
ıat it means to be at all is revealed in being a father or a son; to reveal
at it means to be a son is to frame the question in terms of what it
ans to be at all. The unity of essential being is illuminated by the
ersity of essences; the different essential ways of being are in truth
y when they are framed in terms of the ultimate unification: being.

This is not as obfuscated as it may seem. The terms 'daughter' and
her' are possible only because of the more fundamental term 'family'
et, the family is impossible without the family members. This is
thesis and analysis, and reflection reveals that synthesis is more
damental. A proper understanding (that is, the truth) of an essence
chieved only when it is seen in terms of its uniqueness (what makes it
uliar), but its uniqueness is possible only because of where and how
its into the ultimate picture: what it means to be at all. Because
ɔng the various ways in which I exist are ways which conflict, the
ıamic tension created by accepting these opposing modalities pro-
es illumination by which the whole can be seen. If there were no
ɜions, there would be no passion to think, and in the absence of such
sionate thinking, there would be no meaning. Thus, the unity pro-
ɐd by truth cannot be a resolution or defusing of the tension, but can
y be a celebration of it. Truth is an active, not a passive, phenomenon.
s, after all, an active unfolding of the unifying story, the tension
veen home and tribunal, between yielding to and resisting the allure.
son must make distinctions because, paradoxically, distinctions make
ty possible.

f the 'ultimate picture' which provides the fundamental unity for

thought and truth is the meaning of existence, then any way of thinking which distracts us from this integrity is a threat. It does not take a genius to recognize that the variety of misological persuasions which surround the cultural body like a disease function by separating and alienating the multitude of human interests from any centralized focus. We can always see the trees, but not the forest. The danger to any philosophy, or any society for that matter, is always separation, isolation, and alienation. It is an essential part of this inquiry, then, to consider the intellectual forces of disunity. If the above reflections are correct, two major principles must be kept in mind: (1) reason and truth must be harmonized, though not identified; (2) the ultimate harmony or unity is provided only by the meaningfulness of existence. Nihilism, then, is the supreme danger for both truth and reason, since in denying any meaning to existence the nihilist ultimately sunders any connection between the two.

But how are we to understand this nihilistic separation? Consider Plato's comic dialogue *Euthydemus,* in which reasoning is sundered from any concern for truth. The infamous tag team of brothers dazzles its audience, particularly the young and vulnerable for whom Socrates shows protectivist concern, with clever and cunning arguments that seem to show the wise are really stupid and the honorable dishonorable. Who would not be persuaded by these antics of the carnival, which use the somber dictates of reason to make us laugh at the reasoner? Socratic humor may save the reader in this case, but the underlying contagion is still sinister, and Socrates knows it. Today the descendants of Euthydemus continue to dazzle us by having so much fun with uncoupled concepts, creating a playground of intellectualism, where ideas float like bubbles and pop when touched. They foist these unanchored concepts on us in various ways—"conceptual art," for one, in which works can be appreciated merely by being described, and hence need not be seen at all; deconstructionism in both literature and philosophy, for another, where reading becomes a source of self-expression rather than learning or ennoblement; indeed any and all disciplines where the "new" outranks the true, or the zany and bizarre is confused with originality. Reason unlinked to truth is but silliness, the dreaded kind of silliness which is a fecund cancer of the spirit, not because it makes us laugh—for great comic art can achieve this as well—but because it debases all seriousness whatsoever. Plato, and comic artists, may indeed take the playful seriously, but they never make the serious playful.

ut if reason without truth is foolish, then truth without reason is
or. For unreasoned truth is simply bigotry. A bigot need not always
alse in his judgment: one is a bigot when one adheres to a belief
iout due cause or justification. Whether in philosophy or in statecraft,
›try is totalitarian. Terrorism on behalf of an ideology—even if the
›logy contains some truth and is inspired, as it often is, by legitimate
'age against social ills—is fundamentally destructive because it is
ccompanied by the checks of thought and support of reason. It is
'itable once one surrenders the need to conjoin critical reasoning
ı what is believed to be true. To appeal to truth in itself without the
'oach to truth (reason) is to regress back into darkness. It is for this
on that truth, in earlier chapters, was described as an arrest that
oses, not one that terminates. Once again the supreme commitment
› the integrity of the truth-seeker, not the establishment of an
.odoxy.

ess frightening, but no less fatal, is the separation of truth from
on through an appeal to the irrational as a source of benign mystery.
s appalling how many persuaders espouse contempt for reason
›ehalf of privileged access to secret, mystical, or artistic illumina-
. "There is more to heaven and earth than is dreamt of in your
.osophy, Horatio." Hamlet's remark is so often quoted against
philosopher that one might almost think Shakespeare was an
y deconstructionist. Horatio may well have been a rather dull, if
l, spirit; but philosophy itself has never denied the rich variety of
urces for the understanding, it has merely insisted that reasoned
uation of such resources is more truthworthy than frenzied and
ritical acceptance. Perhaps ghosts do return to urge their sons to
nge, but even Hamlet insists on testing with his own reason the
h of the ghosts' claim.

et the ghosts tell us what they will, as long as we are willing to
n with both an open *and* a critical ear. Truth without reason is
some privileged access, it is simply dictatorial stupidity. That it
unds where most it is denied with only lip service is by no means
›rising.

Metaphysical speculation with no regard for truth or reason—or
er, an *equating* of truth and reason with the sheer pleasure of
:ulating—is a form of intellectual egalitarianism, which is inevitable
e the seriousness and urgency of truth and reason are denied. There
those who would build up 'systems' on weekends, or playfully hop

from creed to creed, or seriously urge us to accept a pluralism of doctrines on the plea of tolerance. "All religions are good," they say, and perhaps they are right, but it does not follow that all are *true*. That this last does not *matter* to them is a sign of spiritual prostitution. They want the fun of the thing and are willing to pay for it. Nothing debases like egalitarianism or indifferentism; she may get paid, and he may get laid, but there is nothing worth remembering about it except the minor shame.

On the other hand, an *overly* intimate relationship between the truth and the reasons allowed to support it can be found in almost all closed systems. This type of thinking finds the truth in the system and the system determining the reasons for it. In its negative form, it denies any openness or adventure to the mind; in its most blatant positive form it is merely an elaborate *petitio principii*. Karl Popper has pointed out that systems which include both their own reasons and their own truth cannot be falsified. He mentions Freudian psychology and Marxist political theory as two systems which admit of no falsification. This is bad enough, but such thinking deserves a deeper censure because it produces an inevitable misology. One learns, in the use of such thinking, to hate both truth and reason.

It was noted in Chapter 1 that the false has a thousand names, the truth but one. Perhaps 'thousand' is a hyperbole—it usually is, to no one's dismay—but our reflection on the various ways in which the union between reason and truth may go astray has opened up the seriousness of this final concern. How do we understand the false? Or rather—if we wish to retain the distinction between the true and truth, and therefore restrict the false to propositions or beliefs—how do we understand untruth?

Do you seek the untruth? It is ubiquitous. We see it all around us. The above paragraphs have provided examples sufficient to show us how prolific untruth is. But what is its essence?

We do not equate untruth with error, or even with ignorance. We are finite, and with this realization we must and can endure our limits. Making errors or being ignorant is a part of who we are, and can be incorporated into our reasoning and our love for truth. What we fear, however, is not our ignorance but our being misled; not our errors of judgment but our deception, especially self-deception. This is one of the grounds for our appeal to reason. When the Duke suggests Isabella may be mad, she says:

O gracious duke!
Harp not on that; nor do not banish reason
For inequality; but let your reason serve
To make the truth appear where it seems hid,
And hide the False seems true.
Measure for Measure, V.1

"Let your reason serve to make the truth appear." In this appeal, abella is not merely saying that reasons support our claims to believe, ıt that *being* reasonable (that is, not being mad) is essential for truth to appen. For untruth is like madness; it is a way of *being* irrational. ntruth is not what is false, but *being* in a false way. It is nihilism. For to isregard the worth of truth is to say that truth does not matter, and to y that is to deny meaning. And so the variant ways we can deceive ırselves about who we are become important resources for understand-g both truth and untruth. Nihilism rejects not only truth but reason as ell, and so showing how truth and reason belong together is essential r this inquiry.

At the beginning of this chapter five images were presented. For the ost part they were rather ordinary kinds of phenomena which occur equently enough in our everyday experience. But listed together they esent us with a question: how do these various phenomena fit into a heme broad enough to provide that unity which is so fundamental for ought and truth? It was noted that each of the images was quite intelligible ıen considered singly, and this insight forced us to focus critically on e philosophical passion for making distinctions. When it was uncov-ed that distinctions unify by making seeming conflicts noncontradictory, e dangers as well as the redemption in such diversity were also vealed. There is the improper use of distinctions which simply leaves e world fragmented, and hence without thinkability as a whole. And ere is the proper use which recognizes in distinctions the fundamental ge of reason to find a unity. In the case of the five images the only tion broad enough to render them unified was that of existence itself. ıd so the great unifier is the question of the meaning of existence.

In spite of its formidable opponent, nihilism, truth retains a curious bustness which renders it oddly but remarkably resistant to its enemies. ıe ways of deviation may outnumber the way of success, but the lure of ıth is powerful. When we reflect on the elements which make up the ucture of being in truth, there is much to commend it. Pleasure, fate,

guilt, and submission to the allure are what make us open to truth; the world's history, dwelling, tribunal, and seduction account for the unfolding of reality which is what truth means; and reason's achievements of unity and ideality show us how. Now that we are instructed in the armament which is ours by the inheritance of great thinkers, the battle with untruth, though formidable and threatening, is by no means hopeless. We simply must understand what it means to confront the truth in order to be able to resist its enemies.