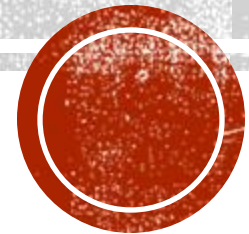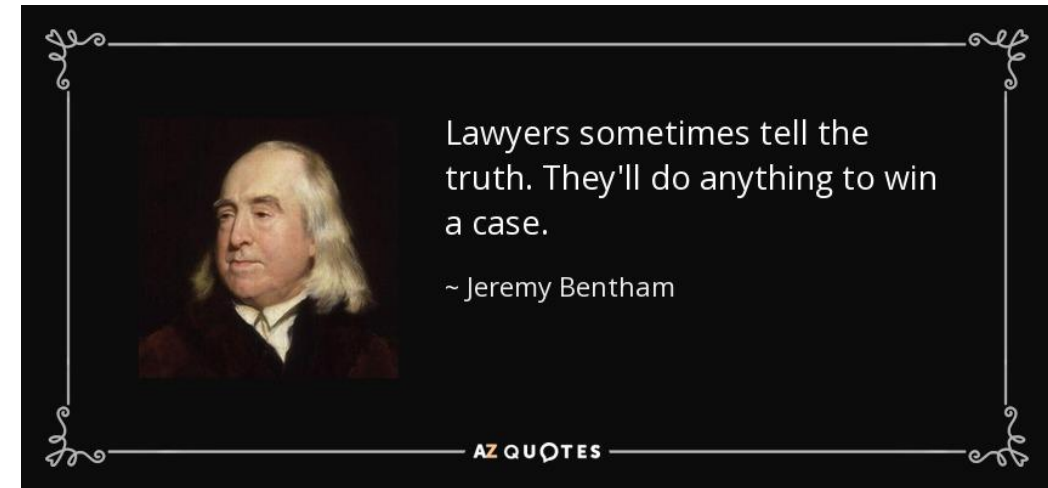# UNIT D

Principle of Charity

PRINCIPLE OF CHARITY

- Recall: Contradiction (the automatic gainsaying of whatever the other is saying) is **not** an argument.

- An argument is to **discover or establish truth**, not a contest of wills.

- Upshot: be willing to concede if the other has a superior argument

- How? Be **charitable**!

- i.e. construct **as strong a case for, and preserve as much truth as possible**, for the position under investigation, even if it is not your own.

Lawyers sometimes tell the truth. They'll do anything to win a case.

~ Jeremy Bentham

AZ QUOTES

PRINCIPLE OF CHARITY: EXAMPLE 1

- Suppose someone is protesting outside an abortion clinic, and shouts, "Abortion kills a human being, therefore it is wrong."

- How should we reconstruct the argument?

- At least, we need to add the missing premise:

P1. Abortion is an act that kills a human being.

P2. If abortion is an act that kills a human being, then abortion is morally wrong.

C. Abortion is morally wrong. (P1, P2)

- **But is this a charitable reconstruction? Or it is too easy to knock down?**

PRINCIPLE OF CHARITY: EXAMPLE 2

- (more sophisticated version)

P1. Abortion is an act that kills an **innocent** human being.

P2. If abortion is an act that kills an **innocent** human being, then abortion is morally wrong.

C. Abortion is morally wrong. (P1, P2)

- A more defensible version of the position, but still pretty flimsy

PRINCIPLE OF CHARITY: PRINCIPLE

- Principle: always address the **best possible version** of the argument, <u>even if it is arguing for a position that is contrary to yours</u>.

- Otherwise, your 'victory' over your opponent is not a true one; you have not dismissed his argument in a **philosophically responsible way**

"A defeat learned from is more important than an empty victory"

PRINCIPLE OF CHARITY: APPLICATION

- Reconstruct the argument in a <u>logically valid</u> form as far as possible

- (not possible if the author intends an inductive argument)

- Such reconstruction can be done even if it is *not* a literal reconstruction of the passage

PRINCIPLE OF CHARITY: EXAMPLE 3

- "Total pacifism might be a good principle if everyone were to follow it. But not everyone does, so it isn't" (Gilbert Harman, The Nature of Morality).

- If reconstructed literally:

P1. If everyone follows total pacifism, then total pacifism would be a good idea.

P2. Not everyone follows total pacifism.

C. Total pacifism is not a good idea (P1, P2)

- Problem: Invalid! (If p then q, not p, therefore not q)

- But this isn't probably what he meant

PRINCIPLE OF CHARITY: EXAMPLE 3

▪ Instead, he probably meant something like this:

P1. Total pacifism is a good idea **if and only if** everyone follows total pacifism.

P2. Not everyone follows total pacifism.

C. Total pacifism is not a good idea. (P1, P2)

▪ This version is valid.

▪ Now you can focus on whether the premises are true.