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Oct 14, 2008

Roundtable of Ideology

## CAN WE KNOW TRUTH?

### What is Truth?

#### Coherence View of Truth (Skeptics 260)

Truth is a system of internally coherent statements. They don't necessarily correspond to reality, but they are in themselves logically consistent. They are like a web in which each part helps hold the whole system together.

However, there is no absolute reference point for that web; each statement is relative to another, making truth relative, which I demonstrate is not possible (cf. "Common arguments" below). Also, in the coherence view of truth, every truth claim is held up by another claim, causing an infinite regress, which is impossible.

#### Correspondence View of Truth (Decay 86ff)

Truth is what corresponds to reality, i.e. something is called "as it is," agreeing with factual reality.

The illustration of the blind men examining the elephant as an example of how perceptions of reality are different, though the underlying reality is the same (Foundations 36f), is misleading. It's not an example of pluralism but one for the necessity of a correct foundation in one's worldview, because all the blind men were wrong. It's neither a tree trunk, a wall, a snake, a spear, a rope, or a leaf; it's an elephant. Neither belief corresponded with reality and as such was untrue.

#### Dictionary

(1): the state of being the case : fact

(2): the body of real things, events, and facts : actuality

(3) a.) transcendent fundamental or spiritual reality b.) a judgment, proposition, or idea that is true or accepted as true

The definition mentioned in 3b is not accurate. Something that is accepted as true is not necessarily true. The other question is how many people need to accept something as true to make it so. Everyone? 51%? Who decides?

Notice how truth is defined as "the state of being the case," which describes the correspondence view of truth explained above.

### Can we know truth? (Skeptics 265, Foundations 48)

It is usually self-evident that to make any statement about anything, we must know at least something about it. If I want to say something about an elephant, I need to know what an elephant is. To say mathematics is difficult only makes sense if I know what mathematics is in principle. To further demonstrate the point, it makes no sense to say anything about "Superschnapsautos," especially whether we can know anything about it.

In particular, if truth is unknowable, we know at least that truth has the attribute of unknowability.

### What does the Bible say about truth? (Decay 60ff)

Jesus has a very high view of truth. In John 14:6 He says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Truth is by which we are sanctified, and God's Word is not just true but truth (John 17:17). Jesus often begins his statements with "I tell you the truth," again indicating the importance of truth. It's the way we must worship God, per John 4:24: "God is spirit, and the people who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

The Holy Spirit is the spirit of truth (John 14:17; 16:13) and Jesus came to testify to truth (John 18:37). Romans 1 shows how we all move away from God and truth. We "exchanged the truth for a lie" and "suppress [it] by [our] unrighteousness" (Romans 1:25, 1:18)

Try searching for "truth" in your favorite electronic bible version to see how prevalent it is.

## How do we know truth?

### Faith or Authoritarianism (Philosophy 104)

Since we are limited to and by time and space, we must accept some things by faith or some authority. Examples are historic events we weren't able to witness and facts of places we haven't visited ourselves. These kind of claims are not sufficient though, because different authorities can conflict and repeatedly quoting an authority to establish another authority creates an infinite regress. However, if there is an ultimate authority, such as God, faith would be the best way to arrive at truth.

Christians are often attacked for holding certain things by faith, but so do atheists and others. This is an important point to level the playing field at.

### Subjectivism (Philosophy 106)

We gain knowledge by intuition and immediate contact with the object or belief, as opposed to sense or data. However, appeals to experience are not self-authenticating and can result in relativism. Subjectivism is useful for matters of taste and aesthetics, or our sense of beauty.

### Rationalism (Philosophy 110)

We can arrive at knowledge using reason by developing mathematical models. It's a negative test for knowledge in the sense that if a statement or belief defies reason, it is false, but something that is reasonable, i.e. makes sense, is not necessarily true. For example, "the moon is made of cheese" makes sense and explains its appearance, but is obviously false. It's a fallacy to make an argument based on explanatory power alone.

Reason is the prime method to knowing logic, mathematics, and universals (= universal ideas as opposed to particulars. "Man" and "color" are universals, "Christoph" and "blue" are particulars)

### Empiricism (Philosophy 113)

Knowledge comes from experience, i.e. our five senses. Strong forms of empiricism hold that *all* knowledge comes from our senses. This doesn't hold, since some ideas can never be found by experience, such as "equal" or "parallel," or universals in general. Science today is defined to exclude everything but natural causes.

### Pragmatism (Philosophy 115)

Pragmatism is using methods of natural sciences to gain knowledge and find solutions to problems, knowledge being dynamic and not static. Since our environment is constantly changing, no one method is final. Unlike rationalism, pragmatism applies the scientific method to gain knowledge.

Pragmatism can lose objectivity, and its view of truth makes everything true that works, so a lie can bring the desired outcome, but is obviously false.

All five ways to learn truth have merit in their respective fields. No single one is sufficient to determine truth by itself.

## Common arguments against certain, true knowledge

### "All truth is relative"

To say that truth is relative is self-defeating. The statement "all truth is relative," is either absolutely true and applies to everyone, in which case it contradicts itself, or it's relative as it claims, in which case it is meaningless; after all, it may be different for me.

### "We can't know truth"

The statement makes a knowledge claim about truth, namely that we know that we cannot know truth. This is self-defeating and more an argument against knowledge in general than truth specifically; it can be applied to many other things.

### "We should doubt everything"

...except for this statement, of course. Self-defeating.

### "Truth is relative because it changes with time"

For example, to say that Reagan is president is false now but wasn't in 1986; truth changes.

Not at all. Truth has temporal and spatial facets, but it is still absolute. To make the truth claim "Reagan is president now" in 1986 is true. To say the same thing now actually makes a *different* truth claim; it claims that Reagan is president in 2008, which is clearly false. However, it will always be true that Reagan was president in 1986.

**“Truth depends on location”**

For example, saying “the pencil is to the left of the pad” may be true for A, but if B stands on the opposite side of the pad, the pencil is to the right of the pad for B.

The truth claim “the pencil is to the left of the pad” is dependent on the location of the A. It will always be true that from that location, the pencil is to the left of the pad. Context is part of the truth claim.

**“‘I am cold’ may be true for me but false for you”**

Context is part of the truth claim. It’s absolutely true that A is cold (if that is indeed the case). For B to say the same thing changes the truth claim because of a different context.

**What is a worldview?**

“A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true, or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being.” (Universe 17)

In other words, a worldview determines how we perceive reality, making the phrase “perception is reality” inaccurate and a clumsy way of saying that we react to our perception of reality and not reality itself.

A worldview defines the glasses we use to look at our world, if you will. That means that some worldviews are superior to others. We can see the world red if we wear red glasses and blue if we wear blue glasses, but the world is neither red nor blue and just like the elephant argument mentioned above, both perceptions of reality are flawed. We need clear glasses that make the world look sharp and accurate.

**Questions a worldview answers (Universe 20)**

1. What is prime reality?
  - a. Is it God, or material cosmos, or something else entirely? This is the most important question because its answer determines the answer to the other questions to a great extent.
2. What is the nature of external reality?
  - a. Is it created or eternal, orderly or chaotic, material or spirit?
3. What is a human being?
  - a. Created in the image of God, god itself, a machine?
4. What happens to a person at death?
  - a. Annihilation, heaven or hell, reincarnation?
5. Why is it possible to know anything?
  - a. Because we are made in the image of an all knowing and true God and our world exhibits attributes found in God’s character because He designed it, e.g. logic. Or because rationality evolved in us?
6. How do we know right from wrong?
  - a. Morality is rooted in God’s character; or right is what feels good or what works, or what society determines?
7. What is the purpose of human history?
  - a. God’s glory, personal satisfaction?

**Main worldviews (Foundations 57)**

- Theism: there exists a god. Examples are Islam, Christianity, Judaism.
- Atheism: there exists no god. An example is naturalism.
- Pantheism: god is all and all is god. New Age paganism.
- Panentheism: god is *in* everything.
- Deism: god exists but is not involved in the world post creation.
- Polytheism: there are many gods. Hinduism is an example.

Any philosophical view fits into one of these worldviews.

**How to engage a different worldview**

Not everyone is well versed in every discipline, like science, so it may be more beneficial to engage on the worldview level. There are a few aspects of worldviews that are good to target.

**Logical cohesiveness.**

Some worldviews are simply not logically coherent. Take pluralism and its view that all religious views are true. Because of the Law of Noncontradiction, that isn’t possible. First Principles are the main tool to evaluate logical coherence.

**Take it to its logical conclusion.**

"Then I learned that all moral judgments are 'value judgments,' that all value judgments are subjective, and that none can be proved to be either 'right' or 'wrong.' I even read somewhere that the Chief Justice of the United States had written that the American Constitution expressed nothing more than collective value judgments. Believe it or not, I figured out for myself—what apparently the Chief Justice couldn't figure out for himself—that if the rationality of one value judgment was zero, multiplying it by millions would not make it one whit more rational. Nor is there any 'reason' to obey the law for anyone, like myself, who has the boldness and daring—the strength of character—to throw off its shackles. . . . I discovered that to become truly free, truly unfettered, I had to become truly uninhibited. And I quickly discovered that the greatest obstacle to my freedom, the greatest block and limitation to it, consists in the insupportable 'value judgment' that I was bound to respect the rights of others. I asked myself, who were these 'others?' Other human beings, with human rights? Why is it more wrong to kill a human animal than any other animal, a pig or a sheep or a steer? Is your life more than a hog's life to a hog? Why should I be willing to sacrifice my pleasure more for the one than for the other? Surely, you would not, in this age of scientific enlightenment, declare that God or nature has marked some pleasures as 'moral' or 'good' and others as 'immoral' or 'bad'? In any case, let me assure you, my dear young lady, that there is absolutely no comparison between the pleasure that I might take in eating ham and the pleasure I anticipate in raping and murdering you. That is the honest conclusion to which my education has led me—after the most conscientious examination of my spontaneous and inhibited self. —Ted Bundy, Quoted from *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong*, 5th edition, p.30" (<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2008/06/how-non-religion-poisons-everything.html#c3002101758689784010>)

Most people will not go this far and not take their worldview to its logical conclusion when confronted with it. Explaining what consequences one's beliefs have can cause further reflection on the topic and create an entry point to share the Christian worldview and the gospel.

**Summary**

- Beware of absolutes.
- Level the playing field, especially in regard to holding certain beliefs by faith.
- Use counterexamples to show logical problems.
- Think worldviews through and walk people through the logical conclusions, e.g. with morality, then shift to explain Christianity and share the gospel.

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