

What is truth?

Part 1 - Philosophical Truth

Pilate was not looking for a reply when he responded to a statement by Jesus with the question “What is truth?” (John 18:38) He was scoffing at the idea that this lowly Galilean might actually have the correct view of the world. Pilate could consult numerous schools of philosophy about the nature of truth, and he had plenty of supplicants who were willing to twist any situation to gain his favor. Pilate had heard all the hype and the distortions, and he was cynical. We can deride him for his attitude, but his question still deserves an answer for our sakes, if not for his.

If we think about it, however, formulating a satisfactory definition of truth is not easy. A former United States Supreme Court justice said, “I can’t define pornography, but I sure know it when I see it.” Many people feel the same way about truth; they think they can recognize it when they encounter it, but its precise definition eludes them. This is shown by the oath administered in many courts. People are asked to swear “to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth” in an effort to bracket what might be the actual truth in the matter. Unfortunately, if one does not have a reliable definition of truth, one cannot avoid being deceived by false statements that only have the appearance of truth. This is a grave danger in religious matters.

We can perhaps understand the issue better if we consider a few examples. A major Russian newspaper is called *Pravda*, which means “truth.” Most people would not agree that everything printed in *Pravda* is true; in fact, it has often been used as a propaganda organ to greatly distort the truth. In the Declaration of Independence Thomas Jefferson wrote that “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are....” Many Americans are willing to believe Jefferson’s words, even though his standard of truth was murky at best. Jefferson was not a Christian and believed that truth was formed directly in the human mind. Because the Bible did not meet his standard of truth, he edited it with a scissors, producing what is called the Jefferson Bible.

In searching for the truth, we engage in a process called reasoning. There are two components to reasoning, what we start with and what we get as the product of our reasoning. We call what we start with “assumptions,” “premises” or “propositions.” We call what we end up with “conclusions” or “consequents.” In order to get truth from the reasoning process, the reasoning must be “sound.” To be sound the assumptions or premises must be true (i.e., “well-grounded”) and the path of argument between premises and conclusion must be free of inconsistencies (i.e., “valid”). But we cannot take it for granted that what is offered up as “truth” these days is either well-grounded or the result of valid reasoning.

For example, politicians, editorialists, humanists, religious gurus and others whom we see and hear in the media are, in effect, philosophers, and their statements are often inaccurate abstractions or overstatements of what is known. These speakers are not so much interested in convincing us with evidence as they are hoping to strike an emotional chord that will cause us to respond in the manner which they desire. This is called “philosophical reasoning” because the speaker is trying to get us to accept his philosophy, and therefore the truthfulness, of his arguments without well-grounded evidence or valid reasoning. Philosophical reasoning is particularly dangerous when applied to religious and moral matters. Let us look at the premises of some well-known philosophers.

Zeno of Citium (founder of Stoicism) claimed that emotions result in errors of judgment. The path to happiness for humans was therefore not to allow oneself to be controlled by desires for pleasure or fears of pain.

Epicurus (founder of Epicureanism) taught that the happy life resulted from living in peace with one's neighbors and avoiding fear and pain through a self-sufficient and self-indulgent life surrounded by friends.

Thomas Aquinas, a proponent of natural theology, tried to prove the existence of God based on reason and the ordinary experiences of nature. He argued that everything that moves has a mover, so the first mover had to be God.

René Descartes said, "I think, therefore I am." He then argued that the existence of God could be demonstrated philosophically, an assertion that most philosophers even at his time rejected.

John Locke claimed human nature was characterized by reason and tolerance. Believing that Christianity represented the highest form of religion, he tried to ground it in reason as presented in *The Reasonableness of Christianity*.

Voltaire (François-Marie Arouet) argued that God existed and created the universe, but that He does not meddle in its operation. This concept of deism became popular among the leaders of the American Revolution but led to Voltaire being condemned by the Roman Catholic Church.

David Hume said, "Reason is and ought only to be the slave of passions." He rejected the idea of abstract moral principles given to man from a divine being.

Immanuel Kant argued that all our knowledge, including that of God, comes from experience, but that we must be active reasoners, using our minds to organize our impressions, to grasp the truth because it would not come to us in a passive manner.

Karl Marx proclaimed that religion was a form of false consciousness through which people deluded themselves into accepting less than what they deserved from society. Religion effectively drugged them.

Friedrich Nietzsche wrote that religion had its roots in weakness and sickness and serves as a means to keep power away from the strong and healthy. He believed that God was no longer the source of morality.

While numerous other philosophers could be cited, it is clear that philosophical ideas of truth always come from within the philosophers themselves, from their hearts which the LORD describes in Jeremiah as "deceitful above all things and desperately sick" (17:9). It is therefore not surprising that the ideas of various philosophers do not agree with each other, for they are built on egocentric foundations. The Christian must reject rather than be taken in by the "cleverly devised tales" (2 Peter 1:16) that such philosophers spin. Sadly, despite its inherent lack of soundness, philosophical reasoning is widely used in searching for the truth by most people today, because it gives them a feeling of power to proclaim their own ideas of truth without having to support it with verifiable evidence.

But if all of the above searchers for truth with their use of philosophical reasoning fail to find truth, how and where should we look for truth with the certainty of finding it? The Bible uses the word "truth" in different ways. Consider three statements of Jesus in John's gospel. In 8:32, the word "truth" is used to designate knowledge – "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." In 17:17, it includes the whole revelation of God – "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth." In 14:6, Jesus equates himself to truth – "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." We will return to the Biblical concepts of truth in part four of this series.