

PHILOSOPHY – LITE: TRUTH AND KNOWING

Paul Morris

You shall know the truth, and the truth will make you free.
John 8:32

To be persuasive, we must be believable; to be believable,
we must be credible; to be credible, we must be truthful.
Edward R. Morrow

As we know, there are known knowns. There are things we know we
know. We also know there are known unknowns. That is to say, we
know there are some things we do not know. But there are also
unknown unknowns, the ones we don't know we don't know.
Donald Rumsfeld

I INTRODUCTION

Jesus: "Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

Pilate: "What is truth?"¹

Pilate does not voice this as a genuine question - it is rhetorical. Pilate then tells the crowd that he finds no fault with this man. Nonetheless Jesus is crucified; Pilate easily dismisses the question without seeking an answer. I believe that the primary end of a university is to educate students for truth - Harvard University's motto is *Veritas* ("Truth"). So, unlike Pilate, we must seriously strive for an answer to the question. The idea of *truth* is perhaps the ultimate problem, and from it follows others. How do we know the truth? What is knowledge? What are the sources of knowledge? Why does truth matter? This article is a survey of some of the more important answers to these queries.²

II WHAT IS TRUTH?

Consider the following sentence:

"I am six feet tall."

This sentence is true if the 'I' refers to me, Paul Morris. However, it is false if the 'I' refers to my daughter Claire. Philosophers find it problematic to deal with something that can be both true *and* false, so rather than giving a sentence truth values (true or false), they deal with a proposition. A *proposition* is what the sentence *refers* to. In the sentence above if the 'I' refers to me then the proposition is true, if the 'I' refers to Claire then the proposition is false. Now this may seem a bit strange and propositions are, in fact, strange entities – very abstract.³

For a proposition to be true, it must have a certain kind of connection or relationship to how things are in the world. What is this connection or relationship? Many answers have been posited - I will discuss the two most important.

The *correspondence theory* is closest to a commonsense view. Consider the proposition presented by the sentence

“The cat is on the mat.”

This proposition is true if it *corresponds* to a state of affairs in the world in which the *cat is on the mat*, otherwise the proposition is false. This theory seems to work well as long as we are talking about actual physical facts and events.

“The Eiffel Tower is in Paris.”

The proposition behind this statement is true because it corresponds to the actual spatial location of the Eiffel Tower.

Difficulties arise when we talk not about entities and events in the world but about objects only of human thought, e.g., in mathematics, logic, ethics, and aesthetics. Examples include the number ‘1’ (as discussed previously), justice, and beauty. With these concepts, we cannot directly compare our judgments with the world as it is. Suppose we ask if ideas *cohere*, in the sense of logical consistency, with all the other ideas that we accept to be true; if they do, then the system of ideas is considered *true*. This is the *coherence theory*. At the risk of resurrecting, what might have been for you, an unpleasant high school experience, a simple example is Euclidean geometry. In geometry, the definitions, axioms, theories, and corollaries are all logically consistent with no contradictions. The coherence theory is valuable because we are continually trying, throughout our lives, to make new discoveries or beliefs fit in consistently with our old system of beliefs. [See Section IV on inference to the best explanation.] The primary difficulty with this theory is that it is possible to have a coherent set of beliefs that are abhorrent, e.g., the doctrines behind Hitler’s Germany, and we do not want to say that they are true.

To simplify the discussion, we may use the definition put forward by the philosopher Dallas Willard, “An idea or statement or belief is true if what it is about is as it is presented.” An even more plainly commonsensical formulation is, “[T]ruth is always that matching up of an idea to reality.” In Section IV we get to the really difficult job of how we do the ‘matching.’⁴

DOES YOUR HEAD HURT YET?

III WHAT IS KNOWLEDGE?

What does it mean to *know*? The word ‘know’ can be used in several ways. Consider the following:

- 1 I know that Barack Obama is the President of the United States.
- 2 I know how to ride a bicycle.
- 3 I know Albert Einstein very well.

Case 1 is an instance of *propositional* knowledge or, we can say, *knowing that*. Case 2 is an example of *knowing how*. Case 3 might be called “knowledge by acquaintance.” I am only interested in exploring the type of knowledge exhibited by Case 1.

Suppose you are a contestant on *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*; this is your question for \$1,000,000: “In the film, *Back to the Future*, Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox) plays guitar at the high school prom. He does the ‘duck-walk’ made famous by a Rock ‘n’ Roll singer/guitarist. Who is this famous guitarist? Is it: A. Bo Diddley B. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar C. Chuck Berry D. Little Richard?”

Here is possible scenario of your thinking. “I don’t know! I will pursue a process of elimination. I seem to remember that Kareem Abdul-Jabar was a basketball star, not a musician, so remove Abdul-Jabbar as a possibility. If I recall correctly, every time I have seen Little Richard – which is seldom – he has been playing the piano; so, I eliminate him. But what do I do now? I believe it is Chuck Berry, but I do not *know* for sure.” What is the difference between ‘believing’ and ‘knowing’? We tend to think that if a person knows something, she cannot be wrong, whereas if she believes something, she can be right or she can be wrong. Twelfth century Europeans believed that the earth was at the center of the universe, but they were wrong. It appears as though knowing has to be connected in some way to the truth. *Believing* is easy, while *knowing* is much more difficult. Is believing what is true then knowledge? Back to your thoughts on the ‘duck-walker.’ “I am inclined to say Chuck Berry, but I do not know for sure. How can I choose between Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley? I will flip a coin. Heads Berry, tails Diddley – it is heads.” Regis: “What is your final answer?” “Uh, Chuck Berry??” Regis: “That is correct for \$1,000,000!”

You answered the question correctly, but does that mean that you *knew* the answer before it was revealed? You *believed* the answer was Berry, you *had a true belief* that it was Berry, but did you *know* it was Chuck Berry? In his dialogues *Theaetetus* and *Meno*, Plato (427-347 BCE) discussed this problem and claimed that belief is not enough and even true belief is not enough; the true belief must also be adequately justified. *To justify a proposition or action is to provide reasons for believing the proposition to be true or the action to be right*. Most people would not accept that tossing a coin is a sufficiently adequate justification of your true belief. Therefore, at

least according to Plato, you did not *know* that Chuck Berry was the correct answer to the question.

Through the voice of Socrates, Plato explains:

Acquiring an untied work of Daedalus (statue) is not worth much; it's like a runaway slave – for it won't stay put. A statue that is tied down, though, is very valuable, because the man's works are very beautiful. What am I driving at here? True opinions. True opinions, for as long as they remain, are fine things and do nothing but good. But they don't hang around for long; they escape from a man's mind, so that they are not worth much until one tethers them with chains of reasons why. And these, Meno my friend, are threads of memory, as previously agreed. After opinions are tied down, in the first place they become knowledge; secondly, they remain in place. That is why knowledge is prized more highly than correct opinion; knowledge differs from correct opinion in being tied down.⁵

In summary, believing is very easy, while believing what is true is more difficult; justifying your true belief is even more problematic. In the Sections III-V I discuss *epistemology*, the branch of philosophy that explores the source, the nature, and the limits of our knowledge. I will continue examining *some* paths of justification, hoping your college experience will fill out even more of those methods.

Our mantra for our beliefs should always be:

JUSTIFY! JUSTIFY! JUSTIFY!

IV HOW DO WE KNOW?

Narcissus was a beautiful Greek lad, who looked into a pool of drinking water and fell in love with his reflection – not realizing it was a mirror image. In our scientific age this seems utterly ridiculous. I want to explore how we come to know – how we arrive at knowledge.

Plato and René Descartes (1596-1650) belong to a school of thinkers who believe that we have innate knowledge or that substantial knowledge can arise simply through the process of reason; these philosophers are called *rationalists*. In *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes applies a method of thoroughgoing intellectual doubt to try, paradoxically, to arrive at *certain* knowledge. In the course of the analysis, he recognizes that he cannot *doubt* that he *doubts*. Doubting exists with certainty, therefore there is thought, and then there must be a thinker. His deduction, *cogito ergo sum*, “I think, therefore I exist.” Descartes arrives at this conclusion simply by *thinking*! The ‘I’ here is not material substance; it is an immaterial thinking ‘thing.’ He goes on to produce a dubious ‘proof’ for the existence of God, again by reason. With the ‘I’ and God as ‘certain’ foundations, Descartes goes on to argue for the certainty of our knowledge of the existence of the rest of the universe. *Voilà*, certainty! Descartes has some egregious errors and you do not find many philosophers who are pure rationalists in the sense above.⁶

When we reflect on how we begin to learn as children, we make the following observations. I learn not to touch a hot stove because it hurts (Ouch!). I learn to like double chocolate chip ice cream because it tastes good (Yummy!). We learn most of what we know (of a non-intellectual sort) through our senses.⁷ On contemplating these experiences, the English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) claimed that *all* knowledge was based on data supplied by the five senses; Locke was an *empiricist*. Locke maintained that the brain at birth is like a blank slate, a *tabula rasa*, and that the data from the senses take residence on the slate. We can move those impressions around in various ways but nothing other than sense experiences can be present on the slate. Empiricism too has its difficulties.

All of you have been deceived by your senses. Take three containers of water:

HOT

TEPID

COLD

Place your left hand in the hot water and your right hand in the cold water, leaving them there for one minute. Quickly dry both hands and put them in the tepid water. Your left hand ‘tells you’ that the water is cold while the right ‘tells you’ it is hot – the same container of water feels both hot and cold. A major difficulty with empiricism is trying to recognize the illusions we can experience *and* to know when we *are* or *are not* experiencing them.

Those who believe in God do not have sensory experience of God. Moral principles cannot be seen, heard, felt, tasted, or smelled. Some empiricists try to argue for moral principles through experience, but they seem to succumb to the *naturalistic fallacy* – “You cannot get an *ought* from an *is*.” A thoroughgoing empiricism is very sterile and does not seem to conform to the richness of our lived experience.

David Hume (1711-1776) from Scotland took empiricism to its logical conclusion. We cannot help living our lives without the concept of ‘cause and effect.’ Imagine that a plane crash has occurred and a panel is selected to determine what happened. A year later the panel comes back and reports that there was absolutely no cause for the crash – not that no cause could be found, but *there was no cause*. We would think the finding absurd because everything has a cause – doesn’t it? Hume argued that we are not rationally justified in using this concept because we never experience ‘cause’ through our senses – we do not see, hear, feel, taste, or smell it. Without an empirical warrant for cause, it appears that we cannot claim to know anything – a totally skeptical position.

So, where are we? Descartes was able to be certain of an ‘I,’ but rationalism does not seem to get us much further than that. A thoroughgoing empiricism seems to lead us to skepticism. Where do we go from here?

Let us return to Narcissus and consider a plausible story. Let us call *who* Narcissus sees N2 (for Narcissus₂). After spending a lot of time with N2, Narcissus becomes bored with him since all N2 does is ape what Narcissus does (except that right and left are reversed). Narcissus spends some time with his friend Pandora and brings her to meet N2. Pandora sees N2 as an almost exact clone of Narcissus and tells him so; Narcissus sees that N2 has brought a friend with him – an almost exact copy of Pandora. We will call her P2 (for Pandora₂). P2 also imitates Pandora. N2 and P2 appear to live in a really uninteresting parallel universe.

After some time Narcissus and Pandora wed one another. They continue their weird friendship with N2 and P2. At one point Narcissus gets so angry with the copycat N2 that he throws a stone at him. Obviously N2 also throws at Narcissus but the stone does not hit him. N2 gets smashed in the face but does not scream. Narcissus is so angry he reaches into the pool to grab N2 by the neck but there is nothing but water. Why would such a world exist? Is there a better explanation for the existence of N2 and P2 than that of the languorous parallel universe?

Through the years the descendents of Narcissus and Pandora are told the story and keep looking for a better explanation. Questions are asked, hypotheses are suggested, new data is gathered. Finally, more than 2000 years later, in the 19th century, a theory is developed that explains light, its properties, and associated phenomena - including reflection. N2 and P2 are reflections! There are still questions that remain, but this seems to be a more satisfactory explanation than that of the *boring* parallel universe.

The process just described is very much like the way we solve many of our problems or arrive at new understandings; it is called *inference to the best explanation*. Many of the advances of science are achieved through this type of process. For a popular example of the process, consider a murder trial. The prosecution and the defense put forward two rival explanations and hope to convince the jury of their story; as new evidence comes to light, the attorneys (*a la* Perry Mason) must revise their explanations to incorporate the new information. Consider this joke:

A defendant was on trial for murder. There was strong evidence indicating his guilt, but there was no corpse. In his closing statement, the defense attorney resorted to a trick. "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury. I have a surprise for you all – within one minute, the person presumed dead will walk into this courtroom."

He looked toward the courtroom door. The jurors, stunned, all looked eagerly. A minute passed. Nothing happened. Finally the lawyer said, "Actually, I made up the business about the dead man walking in. But you all looked at the door in anticipation. I therefore put it to you that there is reasonable doubt in this case as to whether anyone was killed, and I must insist that you return a verdict of not 'guilty.'"

The jury retired to deliberate. A few minutes later, they returned and pronounced a verdict of "guilty."

“But how could you do that?” bellowed the lawyer. “You must have had some doubt. I saw you all stare at the door.”

The jury foreman replied, “Oh, we looked, but your client didn’t.”⁸

This illustrates the impact that one small piece of ‘evidence’ can have on the truth of an explanation as it is incorporated into the proposed accounts.

The truth is often hard to come by. What are some other obstacles to arriving at truth? Prejudice is a mental bias that causes us to either underemphasize or overemphasize evidence concerning a particular question. We may be influenced by propaganda, information that is slanted toward the benefit of the person issuing the propaganda, as in some advertising. Authoritarianism is the uncritical acceptance of authority from sources such as professors, books, films, churches, governments, families, and mass media. Informal fallacies⁹ in logic tend to redirect our concerns to issues that have nothing to do with the matter in question. Our minds may be closed; we have already convinced ourselves of the truth and ignore any contradictory information in our thought processes.

Francis Bacon (1561-1626) classified four errors in thinking in his *Idols of the Mind*. The first of these, *Idols of the Tribe*, is our tendency to accept arguments favorable to our own side, whether it is our family, religion, nation, etc. The *Idols of the Cave* is to see our limited outlooks and us as the center of the universe. The *Idols of the Marketplace* are the words and names we encounter in everyday life and how we are uncritically influenced by them; some words get a very emotional connotation, e.g., the word *liberal*. The *Idols of the Theater* is the “various dogmas of philosophies”, e.g., religious, political, and social theories leading us into ‘false’ worlds if we do not carefully analyze the ideas.¹⁰

Many truths are extremely difficult to justify and others impossible. So achieving truth is complicated enough without making it even harder by not eliminating these obstacles. Critical thinking helps us do this by recognizing the problems in our own thought processes.

TRUTH NEVER PENETRATES AN UNWILLING MIND. JORGE LUIS BORGES

V OTHER ATTITUDES TOWARD KNOWING

This Section will explore some attitudes toward knowing. Relativism maintains that knowledge is easy while skepticism claims that it is so difficult as to be impossible. Postmodernism is a movement that argues, among other things, that the Enlightenment project of finding truth was unsuccessful and is now dead. Scientism asserts that knowledge is hard and that science is the only way to get access to the truth. Finally, we will discuss the question of the relationship

between religious faith and reason. [A very interesting question is whether or not we can actually live as extreme relativists, skeptics, or postmodernists – Section D.]

A *Relativism*

“I have the right to my opinion, and you have a right to yours!” This is a common refrain heard in classrooms around this country and on talk radio. It may be paraphrased as the true statement, “This is a free country and I have the right to be wrong!” Or it may be restated, and sadly what is usually meant, as the false statement, “I have my truth and you have your truth!” [See ‘truthiness’ in Section VI.] Since it removes the need for any justification, this is a very easy position to take about truth – whatever I believe is true. This is a simple statement of *relativism*. Is it a viable position to hold?

First we need to classify various relativisms. The *ontological relativist* believes that whatever he holds to be true of reality *is* true of reality. This seems to me to be patently absurd! Consider that Bob (ontological relativist) and I are standing at the edge of a ten-story building having a philosophical argument about his relativism. What is true for me is if I remove myself from the building I will fall. What is true for Bob, let’s say, is if he jumps from the building he will float (without the aid of a parachute, jet-pack, or other levitating device). Bob decides to demonstrate the truth of his position by removing himself from the building. Although Bob and I have never done this, I have a strong belief that our discussion will end decisively in my favor (and permanently, unfortunately for Bob) after the 2.2 seconds it takes Bob to reach the ground. [For further discussion see Section VD.]

Let’s dispense with a *boring relativism*. “Paul loves Ben’s double chocolate chip cookies.” “Kyle hates Ben’s double chocolate chip cookies.” We all know that we have different tastes and in a sense this is relative to the individual in a very innocuous way.

The more common (and interesting) kind of relativism is of the *moral/ethical* variety. Most of us do not believe taste and morality have much in common. I will limit my discussion here to *cultural relativism*, the belief that moral values are relative to, or determined by, a culture. E.g., adultery might be right in one culture and wrong in another. Why would someone hold to such a belief? We look at different cultures and see different ethical rules and *mores* and rather than criticizing one or the other culture, we take the effortless position that they are both right. Most philosophers are very uncomfortable with this kind of relativism. As diverse as cultures are, when we look at them closely, we do see some commonalities. Most cultures value human life. Even those that practice infanticide or kill the elderly at a certain age tend to do so because they value quality of life in some form.

If one objective moral principle is discovered, then relativism is defeated. The classic example put forward is, “It is *never* right to torture a child just for the fun of it?” Most people have a very strong intuition that torturing a child in this way is abhorrent. If you accept this as an objective moral principle, then you are not an ethical relativist.

Do you find it plausible that oppression of people, e.g. in slavery, is right in one culture and wrong in another culture? According to cultural relativism, those who do not follow the norms of a society are bad people. This would mean that reformers like Jesus, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr., who want to change cultural values they see as repugnant, are bad people, a difficult proposition for me to accept.

The rejection of relativism does not mean that moral decisions are uncomplicated. Moral absolutes can collide, and only one can come out the ‘winner.’ Consider the Anne Frank dilemma. We are told *not to lie* and also *not to be responsible for another’s death*. Suppose you have a house in Amsterdam and are hiding a young Jewish girl, Anne Frank, in 1944. An SS officer comes to the door and asks if there are any Jews in the house. What do you say? If you lie, you have broken that prohibition; if you tell the truth, Anne will in all probability be killed. Most people would pick the lying option, I hope.

B Skepticism

Our brains have sensory inputs and conscious state outputs. Philosophers and science fiction writers have taken advantage of this to create some thought experiments of alternative realities. In his *Meditations*, Descartes introduced an ‘evil demon’ who could gain control of a human brain and make the brain feel certain about ideas that are totally false.

The film *The Matrix* depicts a world in which we are all connected to a computer. The computer sends sensory signals directly to our brains, making us believe that we live in *this* world. Neo (Keanu Reeves) discovers that the real world (outside the computer connection) is nothing like the physical world we assume we live in; gravity, trees, football games are all constructs of the computer program. We could even go a step further and consider the possibility that you are the only one plugged into the Matrix – you alone exist in the universe. Philosophers agree that this scenario is at least logically possible, and they also argue that it is impossible to prove it wrong; but, they also think that we have very good reasons for believing that the world is ‘something like’ the way we experience it.¹¹

These are contemporary popular culture examples of an old tradition in philosophy that argues that knowledge is impossible - *skepticism*; knowing is a process that is too hard. Can a person live her life as a skeptic? (See Section VD.) Skeptics do not offer us a positive way of life,

but skepticism can be important as a corrective to our becoming too comfortable with the knowledge we have.

It would be the height of arrogance to claim that we know all there is to know about the world. Birds have the ability to see in the ultraviolet region of the electromagnetic spectrum, while humans can see only the violet. What are the ‘colors’ birds can see that we cannot? We will probably never know. Bats navigate primarily by *echolocation*; they send out sound waves and the reflections (echoes) that they experience guide them. What, in fact, does the bat experience through echolocation? Again we will probably never know. I give these examples to illustrate that the sensory experience of humans is limited in its scope. But, although we are fallible beings, a strong objection to skepticism is that we do seem to make our way in the world pretty well.

C *Post-Modernism*

If you have not already heard it, you will probably come across the term *post-modernism* sometime during your college life. Postmodernism is an ambiguous concept – it can refer to post-modern architecture, literature, film, theater, etc. Postmodernism’s application to each of these fields is fairly specific in that there are agreed on conventions in modern architecture, literature, film, theater, etc. that are broken, resulting in the post-modernism of these arts. The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (Spain) is an example of post-modern architecture. I do not see post-modernism in this sense as problematic. There is, however, a form of post-modernism that makes some extreme philosophical claims most philosophers find difficult to buy; this type of post-modernism usually is an attack upon, a repudiation of, the Enlightenment project. Some of the more egregious examples are: “There is no Truth, there are only truths.” “Everything is about power.” “All knowledge is socially constructed.”

Consider “There is *no* Truth, there are only truths” and a similar statement from German philosopher and philologist Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), “There are *no* truths, only interpretations.” These statements are logically absurd! Are they true? Only if there is no truth (or ‘Truth’ as in the first quote). Another way to say this is that it is true only if it is not true. That is what is called a logical contradiction and contradictions are fatal to our reasoning processes.¹² These statements, in a sense, destroy themselves; the philosophical positions are self-annihilating. In this example, skepticism seems to degenerate into relativism.

“*Everything* is about power.” No doubt a lot is about power, e.g., the American Revolution, Hitler and the Holocaust, and Stalin’s Russia. What about Mother Theresa? Are acts of goodness about power? Maybe an argument can be made to this effect, although I cannot think of a good one. My point is to say Hitler’s and Mother Theresa actions are “all about power” trivializes the

notion of power so as to make the comparison meaningless. [Are Tony Soprano and Mr. Rogers both about power in the same way?] Surely what is most important about Mother Theresa is *not* her power. I am not claiming that power is not important because, as they say, “The winners write history.” The truth about women is definitely distorted in a patriarchal society, as was the truth about blacks in Jim Crow America.

“All knowledge is socially constructed.” It is a ‘no-brainer’ that knowledge has a social component. The radical claim here, though, is that knowledge is socially constructed “all the way down,” i.e., knowledge has no ‘contact’ with *reality*. A friend of mine uses the example of a missile being called a *Peacemaker* rather than a *Baby Killer* as an example of *social construction*, our society would probably not support a missile called *Baby Killer*. However, there is no way that social construction, save the establishment of absolute peace, can disassociate the *Peacemaker* from the killing of babies. Again, I do not want to deny that social construction occurs. The idea of *gender* (feminine and masculine) is usually considered, by everyone, to be a social construction, while *sex* (female and male) is typically seen as having some basis in reality.

As with all skeptical movements through history, there is a good side to postmodernism¹³; it can make us aware of hidden assumptions that can distort our view of the world. As John Milton (1608-1674) says in *Paradise Lost*, “And oft, though Wisdom wake, Suspicion sleeps At Wisdom's gate.” My suggestion is to look critically at claims of truth and analyze power structures to find unwarranted assumptions about the oppressed, but also to be wary of *absolute* statements like the three above. [Notice, I did not say to *reject* all absolute statements – that would be another example of self-annihilation.] As Milton implies, “Be suspicious!”

D Digression: The Existential Impossibility of Skepticism and Ontological Relativism

We can have much fun thinking about alternative realities, but it seems impossible to take seriously the idea that what we take to be important components of the world might not *really* exist. Our belief in an external world as something like we perceive is very powerful and compelling and we cannot rid ourselves of those beliefs by philosophical arguments.

. . . [W]e know skepticism and relativism are false. Consider a thought-experiment to illustrate the point. An anthropologist has returned home after a year of field-work . . . walking down the street absorbed in conversation with a shaman who, wanting to see the world, accompanied her to London. They are discussing the interesting fact that the shaman has taught her, that large solid objects moving above a certain speed turn into a magical substance that conveys spiritual insight on contact and feels like expensive massage oil. The anthropologist, listening intently, steps off the pavement and the shaman does too; the anthropologist belatedly looks to her left and sees a bus almost on top of them; she leaps backward, yanking the shaman with her by the arm, as the bus roars over the spot where

they had been. . . . The anthropologist stands there with her mouth open, gazing at her baffled companion and wondering what on earth she is going to write in that article now.¹⁴

It seems impossible to believe, and act on that belief, that a truck bearing down on me at a high speed could be immaterial and pass right through me. In a city as I step from a curb to cross the street, if I am prudent and not suicidal, I always look both ways – and for good reason!

E Scientism

One argument against both skepticism and relativism is the success of science and the fecundity of the resulting technologies, including iPods, iPhones, iPads, all kinds of computers, synthetic drugs, lasers, plasma televisions, bombs that allow us to destroy the life on earth – well maybe we should not consider that a success. The point is that we have done very well in using science to try to control the natural world. This success has led some people to view science as the only source of knowledge; this position is called *scientism*. But most of us value beauty, religion, and morality and science cannot tell us about these. Science cannot tell us about any reality outside of the physical and cannot tell us that such a reality does not exist. Science as the *only* avenue to knowledge appears to be self-annihilating as well, since this belief cannot be arrived at by scientific methods. Can science explain my religious experience or my reaction to a great work of art? I don't think so!

F Reason and Religious Faith

Some of the strongest intellectual disagreements occur in questions about God and religion; in fact, the disputes are so vehement that they have led to disastrous consequences, e.g., religious wars (the Crusades and the Thirty Years War), the Inquisition, and pogroms against the Jewish people. This violent heritage entails that we take our religious beliefs and their connection to truth seriously.

It is generally accepted that faith and reason are both sources of authority upon which religious beliefs are based. I take 'reason' to mean the application of logical principles to the available evidence. On the other hand, I define 'faith' to be a stance toward some claim, e.g., God exists, that is not demonstrable by reason.

At one end of the spectrum is the *fideist*; the fideist holds that reason is unnecessary and even inappropriate for the exercise and justification of religious belief. This position opens itself to the criticism of Plato's example of the Daedalus statue, that without the 'tethering' of our religious faith by some rational justification our religious faith might 'run away.'

Personally, I recommend a method that incorporates both faith and reason – a version of inference to the best explanation applied to religion.¹⁵ [I will use Christianity as my example.] The

idea is to take all *data* – revelation (*The Bible*), experiences of nature (natural theology), rituals (baptism and communion/Eucharist), view of morality, theological ideas (God become human), problems (evil), positives and negatives from other world religions – and develop a view that I find intellectually coherent and existentially satisfactory. New *data* is constantly presenting itself and I am continually revising (correcting) my views. Most of these corrections are small, though a conversion experience probably requires a radical revision. This will be a lifelong process.

What about the other extreme? Atheists usually criticize the notion of religious faith. So, does a completely rational approach to the questions raised by religion get at all that religion is supposed to give? It seems to me that any attempt to explain religion in a solely rational way robs it of its richness and vitality. [See Section VE.] My good friend Albert Einstein¹⁶ stated it well, “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead.” Enough said.

G Section Summary

Certainty is a very comforting psychological state. Unfortunately, there are very few things that we can *know* with absolute certainty. Two examples are: (1) ‘1 + 1 = 2’ because of logic and (2) ‘All bachelors are unmarried men’ by definition. Uncertainty arises primarily do to the difficulty of justifying our beliefs. Knowledge is hard to achieve because we are all fallible and finite beings. That does not mean that we should give up (skepticism) or fool ourselves that it is easy (relativism) or think that we have it (scientism and other fundamentalisms). We must constantly strive for truth because it is fundamentally important!

BEING FIRST VIRTUES OF HUMAN ACTIVITIES, TRUTH AND JUSTICE ARE UNCOMPROMISING.
JOHN RAWLS

VI WHY DOES TRUTH MATTER?

A Truth in Trouble

Truth is in trouble! We live in an age when truth is not always valued as a ‘first virtue.’ Many people would rather have their beliefs perceived to be true rather than them actually being true. Why is this the case?

The truth can be unpleasant; we have a tendency to avoid all that is distasteful. All we have to do is look at the Holocaust, Stalin’s Russia, Hiroshima/Nagasaki, Rwanda, 30,000 children dying every day of starvation and water-borne and other disease (preventable with minimal expenditure). However, we must remember that we have responsibilities to others and we must repeatedly

remind ourselves of George Santayana's warning, "Those who cannot remember the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them." The truth can be very disturbing, but we must never try to escape it, lest similar events reoccur.

There is a lot of truth in Ralph Waldo Emerson's (1803-1882) claim, "God offers to every mind its choice between truth and repose. Take which you please; you can never have both." Many of us choose repose because the truth carries with it responsibilities that we deem burdens. Often those who opt for the easy way, paradoxically, view people like Jesus, Harriet Tubman, Mahatma Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mother Theresa with great admiration. A survey of movie-goers revealed Atticus Finch (played by Gregory Peck in *To Kill a Mockingbird*), who did not take the easy road, to be the most respected protagonist in American film. These examples suggest to me that we recognize the importance of truth, even though we may not want to commit ourselves to it.

These are not just problems of our age. Twenty-four hundred years ago Plato recounted many of them in the "Allegory of the Cave," *The Republic* (Book VII). Lifelong prisoners are bound in a cave and for them reality consists only of shadows on the cave's walls. One prisoner is released and, with great difficulty, makes his way out of the cave – thus learning the truth about reality. Plato describes this journey to the truth as very tough and painful. The prisoner is ecstatic upon his enlightenment, but also wants the other prisoners to be *free* of the chains of ignorance. He sees a duty to return and expose to the other prisoners the true nature of reality. However, the other prisoners resist – they are happy in their ignorance. In this short, simple, profound allegory, Plato reveals, among other things, the difficulty of the road to truth, the joy at achieving truth, but also the resistance human beings have to the truth.

Earlier I ventured into moral theory and religion and now I really put the red laser dot on my forehead by exploring truth and politics, not really contradictory terms as some believe. As I see it, one of the primary goals of government is to 'provide for the general welfare' or to secure social justice (what each of us are due). To achieve these goals, truth must be a priority.

Many political figures across the right/left spectrum have earned disrespect among the citizens of this country. A primary reason for that is their lack of reverence for the truth. We see instances of this in both the personal lives and the public statements. Unfortunately, President Bill Clinton's sexual indiscretions were not unique among politicians nor his lie in denial, "I did not have sex with that woman."

Even more unfortunate are the lies, half-truths, and 'spins' (that make their true positions, at least a bit, opaque) about public policy positions that cause trust to fly out the window. Those

policy positions can and do determine the fate of the citizens of this country – in many cases determining the quality of life and death. Presidents have taken us into wars, Viet Nam and Iraq, justifying those wars with lies and half-truths – the results are the lost and ruined lives of tens of thousands of our young people.¹⁷ As citizens, we who are affected by these lies and half-truths deserve honesty and forthrightness. In a democracy, we are governable only if we trust our politicians. Too many politicians are more concerned with votes than the truth; we need more statesmen – people in the public sphere concerned with truth.

A *free press* (media) is necessary for the promulgation of truth. 24-hour so-called “news” channels on television present so many stories of varying significance that all stories seem to be equal in importance; the short amount of time given to each story, frequently, does not allow for a check on its veracity and the reporters seem to have spent no time in reflection. ‘Sound bites’ pass for wisdom. This is correlated with the explosion of information and opinion on the internet. We appear to have a democracy of ideas, but fortunately, not all ideas and opinions are “created equal.”

It is a sad commentary on the state of free media when ‘fake news’ shows, e.g., Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show* and Stephen Colbert’s *The Colbert Report*, do a better job of informing us about news and the shortcomings of the media, through satire and critical analysis, than do the cable news outlets. In his first show Colbert said (tongue-firmly-in-cheek):

We’re not talking about truth, we’re talking about something that seems like truth – the truth we want to exist. . . . Truthiness is “What I say is right, and nothing anyone else says could possibly be true.” It’s not only that I *feel* it to be true, but that I *feel* it to be true. There’s not only an emotional quality, but there’s a selfish quality.

Example: White House Press Secretary Tony Snow suggested that one difficulty with the occupation of Iraq is, “so far, we have very few visuals that confirm what Americans *want to believe*.” Another Colbert definition *apropos* to our discussion, “Wikiality is the idea that an idea *becomes* true if enough people say it.” These notions seem absurd, yet there is in our culture an uncritical, non-thinking reaction that exemplifies these kinds of thought processes – they are very destructive to our world.¹⁸

B Truth, Learning, Wonder

What is the meaning of life? Does God exist? How should we treat one another? Does he(he) love me? Truth lies behind our cosmic and existential questions in a fundamentally important way. The truth is difficult to get at, but

. . . one intrinsic reason for thinking we ought to respect the truth, and to try to find out what it is, which entails not fudging it whenever we don’t like what we find, which entails deciding firmly *in advance* that we will put it first and all other considerations second – one

reason for all this is simply that we can, and that as far as we know we are the only ones who can. We can, so we ought to. It would be such a waste not to.¹⁹

We live our practical lives dependent upon the regularity of the truth of God's creation. Truth enables us to deal with our reality and it seems that truth is necessary – in moral action, in religion, in politics, and in simply making our way around the world.

Thus far, I have focused explicitly on the 'public' aspect of truth, i.e., the relationships that we have with other people through our moral codes, religious beliefs, and governmental institutions. But there is an equally important connection that has been only implicit so far and that is the relationship we have with our own selves. This is the 'private' or inner realm of our being, the Cartesian 'I' – no one else has access to that part of you. The truth here is fundamentally important because it not only tells you who you are but can help you determine what you *can* and *should* become.

As college freshmen, you are embarking on a very exciting portion of your life's journey. You will be acquiring resources to help you answer *your* ultimate question, "What is the meaning of *my* life?" As educators, we hope you will take advantage of the successes and wisdom of great truth seekers to mold your life into that of a flourishing *person*. To name just a few: mathematics (Euclid, Archimedes), science (Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein), music (Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Miles Davis), visual art (Michelangelo, Pablo Picasso), theater (William Shakespeare, Tom Stoppard), literature (William Wordsworth, Fyodor Dostoyevsky), philosophy (Plato, Immanuel Kant), political theory (Niccolo Machiavelli, John Locke), religion (Siddhartha Guatama, Jesus), theology (Anselm, Karl Barth), architecture (the Egyptians and the pyramids, Frank Lloyd Wright), psychology (Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung), economics (Adam Smith, Karl Marx).

As far as we know, human beings are the only species with a reflective curiosity. When my daughter was four, she and I were stuck in a traffic jam in Houston. Here is something like her part of the conversation: "Why are we going so slow? . . . What is a traffic jam? . . . How . . . ? . . . Why . . . ? . . . Who is the first guy? Why is *he* going so slow? . . . ?" In children that curiosity is insatiable.

In a wonderfully moving scene from the film *The Shawshank Redemption*, Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins) locks himself in the warden's office and *blasts* an aria from Mozart's *The Marriage Of Figaro* ("Canzonetta sull'aria") on a loudspeaker to the inmates in the yard. For a few seconds the prisoners stand in amazement at the beauty of the aria – for a short time they are free from the confines of their spatial prison.

The anecdote and the scene have an important element in common – *wonder*. For a child, nothing is yet ordinary; there is a fascination with everything. Too soon, however, these things become mundane and we tend to ignore them. As we grow older there are still moments of wonder, as in the film, but they are too few and too far between. Bob Dylan’s line from *My Back Pages*, “I was so much older then, I’m younger than that now” evokes the thought of returning to a time of less certainty and greater wonder. I believe that in the search for truth and knowledge wonder is an extremely important virtue. The naturalist Rachel Carson wrote:

It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood. If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children, I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life.²⁰

The movie *Avatar* is truly amazing! But, even more amazing is the real world in which we live, the laws that govern it, and the creative people who inhabit it. The Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh expresses it nicely, “Every day we are engaged in a miracle which we don’t even recognize: a blue sky, white clouds, green leaves, the black, curious eyes of a child - our own two eyes. All is a miracle.” The ultimate question is “Why is there *anything* rather than *nothing*?” Think about it!

A college education helps us to try to answer other important questions we face in life: “Is there a God?” “If so, what is that God like?” “What is the meaning of life?” “What should my life be like to fully flourish as a human being?” “What is the human condition?” “What are my moral duties?” “What are my duties to ameliorate the sufferings of the world?” “What is the beautiful?” “How can the beautiful enrich my life?” Openness to the possible answers to these questions is aided by wonder.

Wonder is similar to interest in its ability to animate and enliven the mind. Wonder, like heightened interest, momentarily suspends habitual ways of looking at the world and instead lures people into new and creative engagement with their surroundings. Rather than encouraging behaviors that distance us from our environment, wonder induces receptivity and openness. . . . Wonder prompts us to consider life from new perspectives. It helps us get in touch with the unitary and relational aspects of reality. In this way wonder gives us a vision of our relatedness to the world, to other human beings, and to the ultimate source from which existence emerges.²¹

The ultimate personal, existential question for each one of us is “What am I to do with *my* life?” Some seek the ‘meaning of life’ in pleasure, some in money, some in fame. John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) saw these as baseless for a meaningful existence, “. . . better a dissatisfied Socrates than a satisfied pig.” I think Socrates is trying to get at the same thing when he said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Likewise, Aristotle, “Philosophy begins in wonder” or said another way, “The search for the answers to the important questions of life commences with

wonder.” Look at yourself - stand in wonder at who you are and what you can become. You are a magnificent, unique being. Do you want to become a ‘copy’ of some other person or do you want to realize the mystery of *you* and become a truly flourishing, inimitable person? Wonder can stimulate us to seek our intrinsic value and it excites us to develop a richer life. There are things that give meaning to our lives that go beyond pleasure. I have tried to suggest several in this discussion: religion, morality, love, justice, art, wonder – all depend in some way on truth.

May your life be filled with wonder in your lifelong seeking for the truth!

THE WORLD IS TOO DANGEROUS FOR ANYTHING BUT TRUTH
AND TOO SMALL FOR ANYTHING BUT LOVE.
WILLIAM SLOANE COFFIN

ENDNOTES

¹ John 18:37-38.

² These questions are notoriously difficult and impossible in this limited space to give comprehensive coverage to. My goal is to introduce (to college freshmen) some of the basic concepts and philosophies relating to the questions. I hope that in the course of a liberal arts education the students will be able to fill out some of the ‘spaces’ and to develop a more nuanced appreciation to some of the difficulties. I also trust that these issues will become apparent in your chosen discipline and that you will appreciate their importance throughout your life.

³ As an analogy consider the number ‘1.’ What you see in the previous sentence is a numeral that we use to represent ‘1.’ No one has ever seen a ‘1.’ You have seen 1 egg or 1 horse or 1 football game, but you have never seen a plain old ‘1.’ In the same way that ‘1’ is not 1 a proposition is not the corresponding sentence.

⁴ Dallas Willard, “Truth: Can We Do Without It?” in *Christian Ethics Today*, Volume 5, #2, April 1999, 13.

⁵ *Reason and Persuasion, Three Dialogues by Plato*, Belle Waring (translator) (Prentice Hall, 2010), *Meno*: 97d-98a.

⁶ If we take Descartes’ project of *doubt* seriously, he can only be certain that a *thought* exists – not a continually existing person or ‘I.’ An old cartoon has Descartes sitting at a bar and the bartender asks if he would like another drink. Descartes replies, “I think not.” In the last frame, Descartes has disappeared.

⁷ Most of our intellectual knowledge comes from communication, testimony, and authority. Think about everything you learned in elementary and secondary school; it comes from the authority of your teachers and your textbooks. What is the source of the original knowledge you learn in school?

⁸ Thomas Cathcart and Daniel Klein, *Plato and a Platypus Walk Into a Bar – Understanding Philosophy Through Jokes* (Penguin, 2007), 53-54.

⁹ Discussion of examples, *ad hominem*, red herring, straw man, slippery slope, begging the question, etc., can be found in M. Neil Browne and Stuart M. Keeley, *Asking the Right Questions: A Guide to Critical Thinking*, Seventh Edition (Prentice Hall, 2007) and Alec Fisher, *Critical Thinking* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹⁰ Harold Titus, et al., *Living Issues in Philosophy* (Wadsworth, 1995), 171, 174-5.

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- 11 Other films exploring these concepts include *The Sixteenth Floor*, *Total Recall*, *Vanilla Sky*, and
its more critically acclaimed Spanish predecessor *Open Your Eyes*.
- 12 Let p be some proposition. The law of non-contradiction holds that it is impossible for p and
not- p to be true in the same sense. This is the basic law of logic and without it reasoning and
communication would not be possible. If you deny this law, you can ‘prove’ anything you
want, e.g., “God both exists and does not exist in exactly the same sense.”
- 13 The radical post-modernism that I am describing here makes, I believe, some very strong and
unwarranted metaphysical claims. Some post-modernists advocate a milder form that makes
primarily epistemological claims. I think they would agree, for the most part with what I have
said here. However, I wonder why the term post-modern is *apropos* to this weaker version; it
seems that people like Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), Francis Bacon, John Milton, Blaise
Pascal (1623-1662), and David Hume explored most of these ideas many, many years ago.
- 14 Ophelia Benson and Jeremy Stangroom, *Why Truth Matters* (Continuum Press, 2006), 42.
- 15 John Rawls (*A Theory of Justice*) uses a similar theory in deciding moral positions and calls it
reflective equilibrium. My friend Fred Aquino (*Communities of Informed Judgment*) has
developed a process for religious knowledge called *informed judgment*.
- 16 *I never met him, but I know him very well!*
- 17 Two excellent documentary films demonstrating this are *The Fog of War* and *The Most
Dangerous Man in America*.
- 18 The information in this paragraph comes from: Geoffrey Bahm, “Stephen Colbert’s Parody of
the Postmodern,” 138 in Jonathan Gray, et al. (eds.), *Satire TV* (NYU Press, 2009) and Ethan
Mills, “Truthiness of the Appearances,” 78, 105 in Aaron Schiller, *Stephen Colbert and
Philosophy* (Open Court, 2009).
- 19 See Benson, 21.
- 20 Rachel Carson, *A Sense of Wonder* (Harper and Row, 1956), 42-43.
- 21 Robert C. Fuller, *Wonder: From Emotion to Spirituality* (The University of North Carolina Press,
2006), 12.