

Session 1: What is Truth?

This question is the foundation for all the other questions. Although my claim may seem strange, let me explain. The reason why anyone asks a question is to get a response. Even a rhetorical question expects a response, namely, no response or for the person to think about their point. Our goal in asking questions is to get responses. More than just a response, we strive to get at the best responses, hence, the truth. Therefore in asking these question we strive to go beyond exploring the intricacies of the issues inherent in these questions to an answer, and not an answer but a good answer, hopefully, the best answer. Every good answer is founded on reason, logic, sound arguments, and good evidence. The better our arguments, evidence, and the more sound our logic and arguments, the closer we get to finding the truth.

Truth is a rather complicated word. In order to avoid equivocation (using the same word with different meanings see footnote for an example)¹, I will give a definition that we will use for discussing truth. According to Wikipedia, the word **“truth” is defined as that which is in accord with reality.**

Truth throughout history:

In the ancient Greek and Roman societies truth was based on the philosophical notions of the time. The two dominant philosophical movements of the ancient Greek era were that of Plato (Socrates) and Aristotle. Every Greek philosopher sought to make sense of the world through reason. Plato deduced that everything is a reflection of the things contained in the realm of the forms. This gets a little complicated. Plato reasoned that all things have a perfect form or “image” to which they participate in. For example, a pine tree that we would see in the forest is a material form of the perfect form of tree that exists in the realm of the forms. Since the realm of the forms is unchangeable, everything that relates to the realm of the forms is true because it corresponds to it in its perfect form. Therefore, for Plato, truth is defined as that which directly relates to those things in the realm of the forms. Aristotle took a different approach. His reasoning was based more on empiricism – related to things that you can touch, taste, see, hear. This scientific approach became the foundation of his quest for the truth. Aristotle reasoned that the more accurately that something reflected the world, the more that would reflect truth. In other words, that which is true unveils the reality of that which it is. In conclusion, the Greek philosophers sought to make sense of the world through reason. Reason led them to seek to unveil the world and find the truth within/ behind all things.

In eastern thought, especially Buddhism, truth is that which corresponds to life. Truth in Buddhism is not questionable or provable. Instead truth is simply what is. For example, Buddhism teaches about the “Four Noble Truths”: The truth of suffering (*dukkha*), the truth of the cause of suffering (*samudaya*), the truth of the end of suffering (*nirhodha*), the truth of the path that frees us from suffering (*magga*). Some scholars compare western and eastern thought on truth in the following way: whereas the western world proves truth, the eastern world accepts truth.

¹ He put the money in the bank. (does this imply a monetary establishment or the side of a river)

The middle ages are characterized by the spread and development of Christianity. Christianity took the Greek and Roman quest for truth and put it in light of Jesus, the Son of God. Truth moved from a philosophical concept to a relational concept. In other words, truth went from a quest of reason to a quest to know a person. In the words of John's Gospel, truth became a person ("I am the way, the truth, and the life" John 14:6). Therefore the middle ages and into the modern era defined truth as that which corresponds to God. The new quest began to see all of creation, all reason, and everything in light of God. Anything that is defined as truth is that which directly relates to God.

Starting with Descartes in the 17th century, the focus of education, philosophy, and the quest for truth went a very different direction. The early modern philosophers like Descartes and Spinoza desired to seek the truth much like the Greek and Roman philosophers. Unlike the ancient philosophers the modern philosophers rejected the religious claims of the medieval philosophers and tried to forge a new path based on reason alone. For the first century of the modern philosophical movement the idea of truth remained a dim concept in the shadows of the new philosophy. The high focus on reason led them to ignore the age-old quest to seek truth and instead to base everything on reason alone. Therefore truth for a modern philosopher could be defined as that which conforms to reason. As the movement grew the quest for truth faded quickly into the background and was replaced by reason. By the middle of the 20th century the idea of truth became a source of mockery. Great thinkers like Immanuel Kant and John Paul Sartre would laugh at the idea that there could be truth, that the world could be based on immovable and unchangeable ideas and concepts. Immanuel Kant based his entire system on reason alone. For example, an action is considered moral if it conforms to reason. If I lie, then no one would trust me. Therefore lying is immoral. John Paul Sartre thought in the same vein as Kant. He reasoned that every action that I perform directly related to who I am as a person. Therefore I can constantly be changed based on my actions. Two other movements of the modern era help characterize that enormous shift between the pre-modern era and our current era. The deconstructionists claimed that everything is a product of something else that influenced it. Therefore if you removed any influence from other sources, then you would find that at the core of reality is nothing. For example, if I take a book and take out all the parts of the book that relate to another author, thinker, or is influenced by another person or source, the book would have nothing in it. The second movement is called the Phenomenological movement. The Phenomenological movement focused on reason based on phenomena – the things of the world. Phenomenology only makes sense if there is a concrete reality in which phenomena exists. Thus this movement took up the mantle to seek truth from the pre-modern era. Although the modern era is rather diverse with many different and vastly different viewpoints, I hope that this quick overview of some of the basic movements will help you understand our modern-day dilemma: no one speaks about truth.

Truth:

To conclude this session on truth, I am going to take the spectrum of how truth is understood and break it into three main groups of which I will explore in more depth: truth as non-existent, truth as relative, and truth as unchangeable principles. Although these three labels limit the scope of

thinking that can be found in each group, these labels will give us some boundaries from which to understand more fully the core issues.

Truth as non-existent:

The idea that truth is non-existent, or doesn't exist, should be fairly easy to understand: there is no such thing as truth. The implication of this claim is that the universe – all laws, governance, systems, causality – is random. At the core of everything is nothing - no unchangeable facts, no laws, no direction. This type of thinking lends us to make several conclusions. 1. We have no grounds for morality, law, or governance. The further implication is that there is no such thing as good and evil. 2. Our lives are largely meaningless and random. The further implication is that what happens to people is simply bad luck. 3. The order of the universe has no firm principles from which we can stand. 4. This series would be over since we could never answer any of these questions. Go home, be free, do whatever you like.

Truth as relative:

This idea is much more complicated than the other two ideas. Truth as relative can take many different forms and nuances depending on the circumstances. Stated briefly, truth depends on the circumstances; there are no unchangeable truths instead every truth is based on a set of circumstances. This idea ranges from there are no truths but some things seem more common than others to there are some set principles and the rest is based on circumstances. Here are some common examples. In America it would be wrong to take a knife and kill a two-year old child. In Japan it would be wrong to financially support a child when your parents are in desperate need of money. In general killing another human is considered wrong. Yet, during a war it is acceptable. The movie *Le Miserable* gave a great example of stealing food to feed a starving family. A relativistic mindset lends to more conflict concerning moral decisions than the other two ideas. Truth as relative lends to the following conclusions. 1. Truth is not based on principles but on the people who decide the rules. 2. My truth is good for me and your truth is good for you. 3. Everything is moral or immoral given the circumstances. 4. Every question in this series will not have a correct or best answer. Moral quests and issues will be dependent on the people who discuss them and are subject to change.

Truth as unchangeable principles:

This idea is the easiest to understand but usually the least appreciated. Truth as unchangeable principles states that truth is defined as principles that are not relative to circumstances, peoples, places, or time; these principles were written into the fabric of the universe and are unchangeable. Thus the universe has principles, order, direction, laws that govern it. We are part of that universe and are therefore governed as well by these laws. If we wish to do what it right, we will follow these laws. Here are some conclusions based on this idea. 1. The foundation of truth is not found within my rationalization but in the universe. 2. The whole universe is ordered and thus unchangeable (aka. Determinism – everything is set/ determined and cannot be changed). 3. All moral principles can be based on the universal principles. 4. Certain actions are always considered immoral. 5. Every question in this series will have a best answer.

The main reason why I started this series with this question, as I alluded to in the opening paragraph, is that we need to seek something different than simply making arguments and going home; we want conclusions. We want to know what to do and how to act. At the core of answering these questions – what should I do, how should I act – is the quest for truth. In the subsequent sessions I seek to help guide you to answer these questions by seeking the truth, seeking that which corresponds to reality, that which is beyond personal perceptions and personal agenda.

Principles for seeking the truth:

1. Open minded: the most difficult factor to overcome when trying to make a reasoned argument or develop a good argument is ourselves. We come to discussions with lots of experiences and emotional connections to concepts and ideas. Some of these can be very useful in expanding upon the argument. Others can be very detrimental. If our goal is the truth, then we could be wrong. Being wrong hurts.
2. Good arguments: I created a separate video to address this point. I sense that we have lost the art of creating good arguments. Part of this is due to commercials who use every form of bad argumentation they can to sell their product. Thus, if you want to see bad forms of argumentation, watch TV. Good arguments are based on reason, logic, and the good examples. Also, good arguments build off the preceding arguments and bring the conversation forward. See the video on argumentation for more information on forming good arguments.
3. Good examples: Good examples are very difficult and, I would surmise, the most difficult part of any good argument. Good examples accurately reflect the issue at hand. Let me give you some examples to help solidify my point. *The claim is the prostitution should be legalized because it would provide health benefits to the women who would ordinarily not receive any medical treatments. I counter by saying giving prostitutes medical care for their work would be like giving immigrants free health care.* Are these two examples comparable? Do immigrants and prostitutes share something that would make this example another way of approaching the issue? I argue no, prostitutes are citizens are perform a job which would require health benefits whereas illegal immigrants are neither of those. A better argument would be *giving prostitutes medical care would be like giving medical care to those impoverished people who pick fruit on farms for a living.* This example is closer because they both perform a job that would lead to needing medical care yet are both forgotten by society. Finding good examples is an art. Give yourself the freedom to make mistakes and be corrected. Challenge yourself: what do I think of my example? Is it a good comparison?
4. Follow the logic: where is the argument going? Does it veer from the main point or does it stay with the original question? Is the argument trying to answer too many questions at once? Is the principle question specific or vague? Do I understand all the terms and definitions for key words? Is the argument progressing? These are all great questions to ask as the argument continues.