

# What is truth?

Almost two thousand years ago, Truth was put on trial and judged by people who were devoted to lies. In fact, Truth faced six trials in less than one full day, three of which were religious, and three that were legal. In the end, few people involved in those events could answer the question, "What is truth?"

## Read John 18:33-38

Pilate's question, "What is truth?" has reverberated down through history. Was it a melancholy desire to know what no one else could tell him, a cynical insult, or perhaps an irritated, indifferent reply to Jesus' words?

In a postmodern world that denies that truth can be known, the question is more important than ever to answer. **What is truth?**

## A Proposed Definition of Truth

In defining truth, it is first helpful to note what truth is not:

- Truth is *not* simply whatever works. This is the philosophy of pragmatism—an ends-vs.-means-type approach. In reality, lies can appear to "work," but they are still lies and not the truth.
- Truth is *not* simply what is coherent or understandable. A group of people can get together and form a conspiracy based on a set of falsehoods where they all agree to tell the same false story, but it does not make their presentation true.
- Truth is *not* what makes people feel good. Unfortunately, bad news can be true.
- Truth is *not* what the majority says is true. Fifty-one percent of a group can reach a wrong conclusion.
- Truth is *not* what is comprehensive. A lengthy, detailed presentation can still result in a false conclusion.
- Truth is *not* defined by sincerity. Sincere intentions can still be wrong.
- Truth is *not* simply what is believed. A lie believed is still a lie.

The Greek word for "truth" is *aletheia*, which literally means to "un-hide" or "hiding nothing." It conveys the thought that truth is always there, always open and available for all to see, with nothing being hidden or obscured. The Hebrew word for "truth" is *emeth*, which means "firmness," "constancy" and "duration." Such a definition implies an everlasting substance and something that can be relied upon.

From a philosophical perspective, there are three simple ways to define truth:

1. Truth is that which corresponds to reality.
2. Truth is that which matches its object.
3. Truth is simply telling it like it is.

First, truth corresponds to reality or “what is.” It is real. Truth is also correspondent in nature. In other words, it matches its object and is known by its referent.

Truth also matches its object. It may be absolutely true that a certain person may need so many milligrams of a certain medication, but another person may need more or less of the same medication to produce the desired effect. This is not relative truth, but just an example of how truth must match its object. It would be wrong (and potentially dangerous) for a patient to request that their doctor give them an inappropriate amount of a particular medication, or to say that any medicine for their specific ailment will do.

In short, truth is simply telling it like it is; it is the way things really are, and any other viewpoint is wrong. A foundational principle of philosophy is being able to discern between truth and error. This is also called the law of noncontradiction which states that two contradictory statements can't both be true and why all truth claims about God, humanity, morality, etc. are not all equally true and valid.

## **Challenges to Truth**

Making distinctions seems to be out of fashion in a postmodern era of relativism. It is acceptable today to say, “This is true,” as long as it is not followed by, “and therefore that is false.” This is especially observable in matters of faith and religion where every belief system is supposed to be on equal footing where truth is concerned.

There are a number of philosophies and worldviews that challenge the concept of truth, yet, when each is critically examined it turns out to be self-defeating in nature.

The philosophy of relativism says that all truth is relative and that there is no such thing as absolute truth. But one has to ask: is the claim “all truth is relative” a relative truth or an absolute truth? If it is a relative truth, then it really is meaningless; how do we know when and where it applies? If it is an absolute truth, then absolute truth exists. Moreover, the relativist betrays his own position when he states that the position of the absolutist is wrong—why can't those who say absolute truth exists be correct too? In essence, when the relativist says, “There is no truth,” he is asking you not to believe him, and the best thing to do is follow his advice.

Those who follow the philosophy of skepticism simply doubt all truth. But is the skeptic

skeptical of skepticism; does he doubt his own truth claim? If so, then why pay attention to skepticism? If not, then we can be sure of at least one thing (in other words, absolute truth exists)—skepticism, which, ironically, becomes absolute truth in that case. The agnostic says you can't know the truth. Yet the mindset is self-defeating because it claims to know at least one truth: that you can't know truth.

The disciples of postmodernism simply affirm no particular truth. The patron saint of postmodernism—Frederick Nietzsche—described truth like this: "What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms ... truths are illusions ... coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins." Ironically, although the postmodernist holds coins in his hand that are now "mere metal," he affirms at least one absolute truth: the truth that no truth should be affirmed. Like the other worldviews, postmodernism is self-defeating and cannot stand up under its own claim.

A popular worldview is pluralism, which says that all truth claims are equally valid. Of course, this is impossible. Can two claims—one that says a woman is now pregnant and another that says she is not now pregnant—both be true at the same time? Pluralism unravels at the feet of the law of non-contradiction, which says that something cannot be both "A" and "Non-A" at the same time and in the same sense. As one philosopher quipped, anyone who believes that the law of non-contradiction is not true (and, by default, pluralism is true) should be beaten and burned until they admit that to be beaten and burned is not the same thing as to not be beaten and burned. Also, note that pluralism says that it is true and anything opposed to it is false, which is a claim that denies its own foundational tenet.

The spirit behind pluralism is an open-armed attitude of tolerance. However, pluralism confuses the idea of everyone having equal value with every truth claim being equally valid. More simply, all people may be equal, but not all truth claims are. Pluralism fails to understand the difference between opinion and truth, a distinction Mortimer Adler notes: "Pluralism is desirable and tolerable only in those areas that are matters of taste rather than matters of truth."

### **Why Truth Is Important**

Why is it so important to understand and embrace the concept of absolute truth in all areas of life (including faith and religion)? Simply because life has consequences for being wrong. Giving someone the wrong amount of a medication can kill them; having an investment manager make the wrong monetary decisions can impoverish a family; boarding the wrong plane will take you where you do not wish to go; and dealing with an unfaithful marriage partner can result in the destruction of a family and, potentially, disease. Nowhere are the consequences more important than in the area of faith and

religion. Eternity is an awfully long time to be wrong.

### **What Is Truth? - Conclusion**

The question Pontius Pilate asked centuries ago needs to be rephrased in order to be completely accurate. The Roman governor's remark "What is truth?" overlooks the fact that many things can have truth, but only one thing can actually be the Truth. Truth must originate from somewhere.

The stark reality is that Pilate was looking directly at the Origin of all Truth on that early morning almost two thousand years ago. Not long before being arrested and brought to the governor, Jesus had made the simple statement "I am the truth" ([John 14:6](#)), which was a rather incredible statement. How could a mere man be the truth? He couldn't be, unless He was more than a man, which is actually what He claimed to be. The fact is, Jesus' claim was validated when He rose from the dead ([Romans 1:4](#)).

There's a story about a man who lived in Paris who had a stranger from the country come see him. Wanting to show the stranger the magnificence of Paris, he took him to the Louvre to see the great art and then to a concert at a majestic symphony hall to hear a great symphony orchestra play. At the end of the day, the stranger from the country commented that he didn't particularly like either the art or the music. To which his host replied, "They aren't on trial, you are." Pilate and the Jewish leaders thought they were judging Christ, when, in reality, they were the ones being judged. Moreover, the One they convicted will actually serve as their Judge one day, as He will for all who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.

Pilate evidently never came to a knowledge of the truth. Eusebius, the historian and Bishop of Caesarea, records the fact that Pilate ultimately committed suicide sometime during the reign of the emperor Caligula—a sad ending and a reminder for everyone that ignoring the truth always leads to undesired consequences.