

## WHAT IS TRUTH?

Have you ever wondered if anything is true these days, or even if we know anything? What is knowledge, anyway? Is anything true, and does that even matter? Actually at an everyday level we all live our lives confident in our ability to know things. Without this working assumption, human life would be chaos. What use would it be learning a skill like plumbing or the ability to do algebra if we could never truly anything? The question of truth is just as important to our lives. Sure, it's open to question, especially when we are rapping with friends about this and that. Social media and so-called "alternative facts" we can encounter there remind us that we sometimes believe things that are not true. But if there were no truth, there would also be no falsehood: just opinions. Although it would be nice if someone came with some fool-proof way of telling when something is true, we're unlikely to hear "there's an app for that" anytime soon. The reason is simple; truth is complicated.

Philosophy has been asking about knowledge and truth since togas were considered high fashion. As questions go, "What is knowledge?" and "What is truth?" are about as basic and as challenging as anything in philosophy. For example, think about reading something on social media that seems both plausible and probable. You believe it. You might even pass on the information in full confidence that it is

true. Then one day, you find out the whole thing is a fabrication. You believed it, it seemed true, and it felt like you knew it. But did you? Can a person "know" something false?

In philosophy we work to grasp and follow the ever-deepening circles of inquiry that bring us to understanding. Because of this, philosophical inquiry does not stop with "Did he tell me the truth?" but moves on to "What do we *mean* by 'truth' anyway?" And questioning truth, like questioning authority, is a very old idea. One famous story from the life of Jesus finds him arrested and taken before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, who, during the interrogation, asks him, "What is truth?" (John 18:37-38). But Pilate was certainly not the first person to meet a truth claim with doubt and irony. The philosophical movement known as **Skepticism** is one of the most ancient schools of philosophy, and it is famous for generating some ideas we now consider postmodern. Take, for example, *Pyrrho the Sceptic* (360 BC–c. 270 BC), who lived in ancient Greece centuries before Pontius Pilate. He traveled to India with the armies of Alexander the Great and learned a great deal from Indian philosophers. He was a quick study and brought these ideas home to Greece. Pyrrho began to teach that reality simply cannot be known. Full stop. And since there's nothing we can do about it, we need to give up the quest for truth. If we are incapable of ever knowing reality, what does that say about truth claims people make? For Pyrrho and his companions, what we think of as good and evil, or truth and falsehood, are only based on custom, tradition, and human rules. Assertions of truth are merely the way the world happens to look to us. There is no *certain* truth to be had. There is no independent truth at all; it is "your" truth or "my" truth, which leaves truth as no more than glorified opinion. His followers, who were part of classical Skepticism, thought this was just fine—we could live a tranquil life in the world of appearances, not worrying so much about these kinds of theoretical questions, only acting and reacting to the world as it seems to us.

Think of it this way. If I am driving on the road and there is a giant pothole in front of the car, I can navigate my way around it without worrying too much about the *real truth* of the situation. I drive around it and move on. The Skeptical attitude is that we need to drop

impossible questions to do what must be done. This is where we look rather than concerning ourselves with philosophical problems that can have no definitive answer. While questions such as "Is there life on other planets?" or "Is the death penalty actually right or wrong?" may be fascinating to think about, the Skeptic will not consider them but instead will answer, "Maybe, maybe not; no one actually knows for sure. Why worry?" The wise Skeptic can be content either way, not claiming that anything is really true, but only acting and responding in the moment to the immediate world as experienced in everyday life.

The classical Skeptics were respected in their time, but over the centuries their ideas have been less than attractive to most philosophers. But Skeptical views of truth have become more common today than they were in the past. We encounter attitudes like this in all walks of life. Strike up a conversation with someone in a philosophy class, and you may find someone who is in fact a classical Skeptic without knowing it! It happens, and to be fair, there is no doubt some truth in this ancient philosophy. We are certain of few things in this life, and we can prove even less to others. Is it possible that the so-called truth is nothing more than the opinion shared by the most people, or whatever supports the dominant group?

After all, groups of people have often embraced ideas that turn out to be false from later points of view. Centuries ago everyone believed that the sun orbits the Earth. It turns out that was wrong. At one point people thought that owning a human being as property was morally acceptable. Now the vast majority of people reject slavery as evil. Points of view differ, and everyone brings their own perspective to the question of truth.

One response to the social fact of a pluralism of viewpoints is to adopt the ancient Skeptical attitude we know today as **relativism**. Relativism teaches that there is no truth that is true for everyone—no truth with a capital *T*. There is only truth that is *relative* to an individual or group: our truth and your truth. Relativists believe that in the end, truth claims are only true within their context; there is no universal truth but only local truths.

However, there are other ways forward even in light of perspectives and opinions that change across time or culture. It may be that

truth, if it is to be known, is only found *in the whole*. Truth is a big picture kind of thing. No one of us has the whole picture, but in pooling our perceptions together in light of reason, we can get closer to what is true. This is what philosophers call the **coherence theory of truth**. The philosophers who embraced this theory of truth most fully were the **Idealists**, and the lead thinker of this movement was the German Lutheran philosopher *Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel*.

On the coherence theory, every human has an embodied mind, with different stories, different bodies, different languages and cultures. If truth is going to be for everyone, it will need to be holistic, and include contrasting points of view. Yet even those contrasting points of view will have to have some reason behind them. Just having an opinion about what is true does not count. Philosophy requires a *reason-based* opinion, an idea that must be backed up by a good argument. But of course our human situation is like this: reasonable ideas still differ!

The Idealist answer is to look to a whole system of ideas, each having some sound reason for it, and then to seek a kind of coherence within the system. The truth will be found when we are able to bring all our reasonable ideas together into harmony. The Idealists were interested in looking at the whole picture and seeking a beautiful elegance in the variety of ideas creating a harmonious whole. Thus the coherence theorist seeks to combine truths in some way to create a greater whole—the Truth. For example, a single flower can be studied in many ways. We could look at it from the point of view of botany, economics, ecology, literature, chemistry, physics, art history, and so on. It is possible, although very difficult, to bring these together in some elegant way. The truth of the flower will come out when we find a coherent, elegant system of reasonable ideas about the flower. Here, “fits with other truths” becomes a major sign of the truth for this theory. So now imagine we can bring together *all of humanity's* reasonable ideas and then seek a coherent whole. If we could possibly bring all these ideas and discoveries together, like a giant jigsaw puzzle, then we would have a Truth that every rational person could and should believe.

This notion is attractive to the mind. Yet few thinkers today hold on to the coherence theory of truth, at least by itself. Is coherence really a reliable definition of truth? Many philosophers think that

truth can be known in specific and concrete ways, not just in the whole. For example, if my kid has no shoes and I buy her four pairs of shoes, is it not true that she now has eight shoes? Do I need to see everything from the whole system of shoe facts to know that two shoes times four equals eight shoes? Could I not just count the shoes instead, and then *know* the true proposition: “Lindsey owns eight shoes”? This kind of objection is based upon a very old idea of truth, one we will call “relational-realist.”

The label of relational-realist is just a convenient way to introduce the **minimal-realist theory for propositions** and the **disclosure theory of truth**. Both of these are **realist** theories. Other kinds of theories are usually called **antirealist** or **nonrealist**. What we have here, then, are two broad *types* of truth theory, realist and nonrealist. These terms cover over a good deal of dissimilarity, and are more like two families of theories. Realist theories of truth or knowledge, in contrast to antirealist or nonrealist paradigms, argue that truth is defined by a relationship to what is real. Sorry that is a bit vague and general, but it has to cover a number of differences within each term.

According to realist philosophers, despite differences, what is real simply is. Outside of expressing our own beliefs, feelings, or experience, what is real is not created or changed by what we experience. For the realist, even when I am thinking about my own feelings or experiences I might just be wrong: what I *really* feel at a deep level may not actually be known to me right at this moment. We can and do make mistakes when we are remembering our own past or trying to make sense of our feelings. As we have observed, people think they “know” so-called truths that turn out to be false. This is because reality is not the same as our experience of it.

Let’s say you can finally afford the car of your dreams. You pick it up, drive it home, and park it in the garage. Your view of the car as it lies inside the garage is created by your experience. The fact that the car is in the garage is not created by your experience. The realist holds that facts like this, independent of our experience, make up most all of reality. Despite loose and popular talk about “your reality” or “my reality,” very little of reality is real just for you or just for me. The attractive part of this theory of truth is that facts end up being

independent of your or my opinion about them. This ensures that humans can always be wrong, for we do not in fact create what is true or real. Realism does allow for reality to be known in different ways, and truth to be expressed in different ways, but also for people to be wrong about things. This helps us see why relational-realist theories of different kinds have endured over thousands of years.

Now we can explore what we have called relational-realist theories. As mentioned above, we will explore two of them in this book, minimal-realist theory and disclosure theory. Why are they *relational* versions of realism? Both of these theories share a belief in realism, and a concern for relating to this reality in order to know the truth. What is it that makes an idea or sentence true or false? For relational-realism, it is because the idea has a right relationship to what is the case. It has a right relationship to facts or events.

The oldest relational-realist view is the minimal-realist view that focuses on words, or in more technical language, **propositions**. A proposition is simply an idea or sentence that can be true or false; it's the kind of thing that can have a truth value. The great Greek philosopher *Aristotle* (384–322 BC) came up with a definition for when a proposition is true. He held that a true proposition will “say of what is that it is, and to say of what is not that it is not.” Notice what Aristotle was saying here: truth, when we manage to express it in words, has something to do both with what *is* and *is not*. If we speak in a sentence that says of what is *that* it is, we speak the truth. Likewise, if we say of what is not *that* it is not, we also speak the truth.

You can probably think of many examples yourself. Here are two of them: “English is a natural language,” and “You are reading English right now.” We also speak the truth when we say that something is false when it is false. You tell the truth when you claim that the moon is not made of green cheese. Both ways of talking, positive and negative, can be true propositions. This theory is often called the correspondence theory in many articles and textbooks. You should know the meaning of this term “correspondence theory” because it gets used so much. We believe this phrase can be as confusing as it is helpful. It's not at all clear how a proposition can “correspond,” or to what it is supposed to correspond. Still, you do need to know that

what we call the minimal-realist theory for propositions is often called the **correspondence theory of truth**. This theory is particularly popular with philosophers who, like Aristotle, are interested in language and logic.

The disclosure theory of truth is also a realist approach, but in quite a different, though complementary, manner. Truth may be expressed in words, and that's the part minimal-realist philosophers focus on. However, realists who embrace the disclosure theory argue that truth is a larger thing than words. Truth can also be expressed in fiction, poetry, painting, or an experience, not just in propositions.

The disclosure theory holds that truth is a kind of *event*. Truth can come to us in many guises and through many means, or *media*. When what is real discloses itself in some event, and when this is known through some *medium*, what we have is truth. So in this theory, truth is not the same as reality or just whatever exists. Truth happens when a glimpse of reality *is opened up to us* in an event. Truth is different from reality because truth is always *mediated* by something like words, images, or feelings. In these cases, reality is disclosed and truth is discovered. At the very same time, for this theory of truth, all truths are always partial if for no other reason than it always comes to us in different ways, through different experiences and media.

We often talk about learning through experience. When people share their views with others, they may begin by saying, “In my experience” to indicate the origin of their ideas. In my experience of teaching philosophy, for example, I have discovered that students today are often shy about speaking up in a philosophy class. However true this is, expressed as a proposition it applies to a limited degree and extent; it's not universally the case in all philosophy classes. This truth can be expressed in a sentence, but I did not learn it by reading or hearing language about contemporary students. I learned it directly from them, listening to them and spending time with them. Body language and *not* speaking were important, rather than hearing or reading sentences. This historical and embodied experience in my work with students is in this case the *medium* for truth to happen—that is, an aspect of reality disclosed itself. I discovered something through experience, and truth happened. But if truth is *only* a proposition,

and propositions can be expressed to other people only in sentences, how can we learn the truth through nonpropositional experiences like this one?

In addition to experience over time with other people, another important medium of truth for this view is art. Great paintings, poems, or novels can disclose aspects of reality and reveal truth to us, without being expressed in true propositions. A great movie or novel can speak to us about our human situation and can illumine the reality in which we live without being a factually true story. One reason Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is a great work of fantasy is because there is truth about the world and about ourselves in it, even though its world was never real. Great art can and does provide us with insight into human life and meaning. Movies, poems, paintings and plays are often works of pure imagination; nevertheless, they speak the truth to us about who we are and the kind of world we struggle in. This is the kind of claim that makes the disclosure theory of truth attractive—because it allows for truth to come to us in various ways and means. It allows for you to learn something true, something about our human reality, from your favorite movie or music. Some truth may well be expressed through propositions, but the disclosure theory sees the so-called coherence theory as too limited to be a robust definition of truth. Truth in this view is an event that opens up reality to us through some medium, be it a proposition, a painting, a play, or a song.

So far we have looked at a large variety of theories about what truth is. All of them see truth as *different* from reality, since by “reality” we just mean the way things are independent of our experience of them, or our thinking about them. But what if truth were much more human, embodied, and social than any realist would allow? What if truth is not objective but simply *ideas that fit with and work in the world*? This view is called the **pragmatic theory of truth**, and it is an American contribution to the discussion.

For the practically minded philosopher, all these debates about the definition of truth seem over the top. Pragmatists argue that we know the truth when we find out that our idea or theory *actually works for us in practice*. In our highly technological and scientific age, “practice” includes both scientific and technological practices as well as everyday

ones. So for the pragmatist, the proposition that the sun orbits the Earth *becomes false* if it no longer works in our exploration of space or when making calculations in astronomy. It may have worked and been true for some in the past, but now we “know” that in fact the Earth goes around the sun. When astronomers found that was the theory that worked best, given what they were up to in their studies, they did not merely discover that the Earth circles the sun. The truth of “the Earth orbits around the sun” *became* true for that specific group of scholars when it worked better for them than older, more established views.

For the pragmatist, truth or falsity happens to an idea, a proposition, or a theory when it works or fails to work in practice. For the classical pragmatists in America, this view was understood in a realist way. In contrast to other realist theories, pragmatists believe that the relationship between ideas and reality has to do with usefulness, or with what works in practice. True ideas work in the world because they are useful; that's how we know they are true. Contemporary postmodern pragmatists may not be realists, but both realist and nonrealist pragmatists hold that what makes an idea true is that it is useful for a particular group of people.

The attractive part of this kind of practical theory of truth is its usefulness. Let us say that we gather a bunch of wealthy soccer fans in a room and ask, “Which country has the best national team?” They could go on and on in endless debate about the best ones, or they could hold a global play-off. They might even invite a bunch of the best teams from around the world and just let them play. Which process makes more sense to you? If you pick the play-off, you may be a pragmatist—at least for sports. And a pragmatic test of truth often makes sense in life. Pragmatism turns this practical test idea into a general theory of truth. It's as if they were saying: Let the so-called “best idea” about anything at all have a play-off with rivals! Then we will just see who is best by which team (or truth claim) works the best.

#### IS TRUTH UNIVERSAL?

We have covered a lot of the territory regarding theories of truth. The truth about truth seems to be a hard thing to get a handle on. What

if none of them are true? Wouldn't that be ironic? What if the truth about truth is there is no actual, certain truth? One last theory we will look at is a pretty straightforward answer to this problem: **social constructionism**. This approach to truth is a popular kind of nonrealist theory, but with a twist toward the group. In social constructionism the truth is not mere individual opinion but only what a significant group thinks it is. "My group" is the one I am most attached to and most a part of. It is the group that is a major part of my life. Call it my community. Such communities construct the truth socially and over time, according to constructionism. They do not do so by conscious engineering or arbitrary choice but through subtle means of social convention, tradition, and agreement. This view draws its plausibility from two facts about humans: (1) what we think of as true is often what we rely on our community to tell us is true, and (2) various communities or groups have very different ideas of what is true.

Now both of these empirical facts about our human, embodied learning over time should be accepted. We do learn almost everything simply because of what we are told; we learn to doubt much later in life, and even then we never in practice are skeptical of everything. Even the most cynical and skeptical person you know (and that might be you, after all!) believes some things just on the basis of testimony—that is, because someone trustworthy taught it. Have you ever even doubted for one second that you are a person, or that you are reading these words right now, or that the sun is at the center of our solar system? Even if you loved the movie *The Matrix* and sometimes wonder if everything we experience daily is just an illusion, to survive in the world and know any amount of important knowledge, we naturally learn from others. Who could be skeptical and doubt everything as a practical matter of everyday life?

Even if we do know some basic and simple things, are we certain that they are true? This quest for certainty has animated philosophers since *Socrates* himself, and continues to be an issue. The question of truth is intimately connected to the question of knowledge, and what we learned earlier will help us now. Much of this quest for knowledge has been motivated by a kind of math envy. The reasoning process in geometry, say, seems certain and sure. The logical steps follow with certainty, one from another, until the conclusion is proven.

Philosophers in the Western tradition have, in many cases, sought out this kind of geometrical certainty and solid rational proof.

Others have rejected this quest as an illusion, a kind of philosophical dead end. Can we know anything for certain? As we have seen already, the Skeptics will say no. The pragmatists will agree but then move on to argue that we can truly know things that work in practice while also rejecting the quest for anything like absolutely certain knowledge. While both of these points of view have some validity to them, pragmatism is less popular today among philosophers as a whole than the second option: the rejection of certainty. This need not mean pragmatism is wrong, but it does mean we need to look into the question of certainty more fully.

#### DESCARTES

An alternative viewpoint is still alive in various forms today. That viewpoint is **rationalism**, a perspective defended by *René Descartes* (1596–1650). Descartes was a brilliant mathematician, scientist, and philosopher whose ideas and methods changed Western culture. He is typically thought of as the father of modern philosophy. In school we still learn Cartesian geometry, which he first discovered. His quest for certainty and a mathematical approach to philosophy and science has shaped our thinking profoundly. While in some ways we may be postmodern, we still live in a Cartesian age, an age shaped by his work.

Descartes was a Catholic believer all of his life who nevertheless rejected tradition, authority, and our direct experience of the world around us when it came to the foundational truths of science, mathematics, and philosophy. His deep questioning of the status quo was controversial with both king and pope. Yet when he left France for the more tolerant (and Protestant) Holland and Sweden, he remained a practicing Catholic even while, like Galileo, disagreeing with some things taught by the church. Unlike Galileo, Descartes never published his most controversial ideas, such as his belief that the earth was not the center of the universe. They were published after his death, at his own instigation.

While he had problems with religious and political authorities of his day, Descartes still put belief in a single, perfect God as a key

basis of his theory of knowledge (epistemology). Many theologians and philosophers of his day found his work persuasive in the long run and joined in the new Cartesian revolution we now call the Enlightenment. While Descartes was in many ways a late medieval scholar, his reliance on reason, science, and the individual were foundational for modern thought. He felt that at some point in the maturing life of educated people we should question our received beliefs in all areas of life and not simply believe things on the basis of authorities from the past. Descartes' method was to approach the problems of philosophy from the mathematical and scientific point of view.

Descartes assumed that there was one scientific method and one universal science. He argued that mere authority, tradition, memories, or experiences could not provide the clear and precise truth of mathematics. A key reason that Descartes' views were so radical and revolutionary was his insistence that our reason alone, independent of church doctrines or prior philosophy, can provide clear, distinct, and certain knowledge as a new foundation for belief. He thus set out to base his philosophy on this kind of clarity and certainty, beginning with doubt as a test for what should count as knowledge and working his way toward what could be as certain as the proofs in mathematics. "Anything which admits of the slightest doubt I will set aside just as if I had found it to be wholly false; and I will proceed in this way until I recognize something certain." But he went further.

Even if his senses could mislead him to believe that he was awake while sleeping, mathematical truths were true whether he was awake or asleep. They are true even if there are no physical realities that correspond to them. Now while we know today that even geometry and arithmetic rest upon unproven and unnecessary axioms, this was not known to Descartes. Today we often think that the thing most certain to us is our immediate experience: the things around us we can see and feel. But, Descartes argued, these are often mistaken. For example, the eyes can be fooled by optical illusions, and a dream can seem very real in the midst of it. The thing to do is to doubt everything that can reasonably be doubted, and start our philosophy from rock-solid foundations.

Memories, experiences, sensations, and outside authorities do not provide the mind with certain truth. Following his method of doubt so as to include even his beloved mathematical reasoning, he resorted to an extreme possibility: to imagine a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is constantly deceiving us. It is at least *possible* that such an evil, powerful genius exists and deceives us all the time. (Descartes would have loved the movie *The Matrix*!) So we cannot even be certain of our reasoning about abstract shapes and geometrical proofs. Is there any bit of supposed knowledge that is beyond a doubt?

What he found to be certain was that he was a thinking thing, a mind. For even in the very act of doubting, he was still thinking! If I can imagine and reason about an evil genius, I must be the kind of thing that can think, or doubt itself would be impossible. And his famous "I think therefore I am" (*Cogito ergo sum*) provided just that foundation for him and, he believed, for all the rest of us. God now takes a central place in the argument. After proving that God must exist, he argued that God cannot be a liar and so cannot be a deceiver. Because a perfect and good God is the creator of all things, including you and me, our souls and bodies, he would never set up a deceptive system of experience. For if a God who is perfectly good made all things, including myself, then I have reason to trust—within limits—my experience. God would not deceive us, and so would not allow an evil genius to radically influence our experience and reasoning; therefore we can trust our reason and experience, knowing all the while that as limited humans we are not perfect and will make mistakes. Thus it must be that our human mind, however fallible and limited it may be, gets some truth from "clear and distinct ideas" along with logical reasoning.

So it turns out that Descartes never really doubted everything, like the idea of God as a perfect, personal being. Rather, he proposed a questioning of what we think we know until our reason can settle on things that are certain. Descartes' argument presupposed that a few key ideas, like that of a perfect God, are implanted in all of us by our Creator. This is one example of what he meant by clear and distinct ideas. Today we could call some of these ideas *a priori*

knowledge; their quality as knowledge is, in some sense, independent of experience alone. Most philosophers accept that knowledge entails justified true belief, at a minimum. The justification here is some type of reason, warrant, or ground for a claim to know something.

For Descartes, some of our basic ideas are *a priori* knowledge because they are innate, placed already in all of our minds. He also assumes that we know, for example, what knowledge is, what doubt is, what bodies are, what a perfect personal being is, and what it means to exist. Still, the trend had been started by his work, a trend toward Reason (and we need to use a capital here) as a basis for sound philosophy and all sorts of other things. These include the good life, science, and the reform of society. Reason is the key authority: not the past, not experience, and not authorities like our teachers, the state, or the Church. Modern philosophy had been born.

As noted above, Descartes is a rationalist. Now in a broad sense of the word, all good philosophy wants to think hard about who we are, what reality is like, what is really good, and matters related. In this broad and loose sense, almost every philosopher would qualify as a "rationalist"—but that's not the way we use this word in philosophy. To clarify what we mean by rationalism in epistemology, we need to dig deeper. The rationalist school of epistemology believes that reason or the mind is the ultimate source of many types of things that we know. Central truths (like mathematical truths or the nature of God for Descartes) are known because of rational reflection and not merely by experience.

We call these ideas *a priori*, a term meaning "that which is prior." Now it is always possible to learn an *a priori* proposition from experience or from expert testimony. This is important to note, since many philosophy students think that *a priori* truths are *always* prior in time to all experience. Being prior in time to experience may or may not apply, but *a priori* knowledge gets beyond experience in some way. In particular, the justification for knowing it is true must come also, and crucially, from rational insight or reflection. *A priori* knowledge is never based upon mere experience alone—no matter how many times we confirm it by empirical tests.

In fact, most of us learn *a priori* truths through some other means than reasoning from first principles. That does not mean such truths have no *a priori* justification. If someone (usually a lot smarter than us) could in theory know it through rational reflection upon the proposition and could (again in theory!) demonstrate its truth through deductive proof, then it counts as *a priori* for everyone. Other kinds of propositions are empirical, or *a posteriori*. Their justification comes through experience, by which we include things like memory, testimony, and written evidence. To know *a posteriori* propositions we need to know about some matters of fact. An example will help us see the difference between *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge, and for this we will turn to Descartes' favorite: mathematics.

We all learn at some time that  $2 + 2 = 4$ . Let us call this proposition F. Now we may well learn F over time and through experience (two cookies plus two cookies make three cookies. Wait, who ate my other cookie?). Yet the fact that it is true comes from the meaning of these symbols in arithmetic, plus the rules of mathematical proof. Now we should also add one clarification: the fact an *a priori* proposition is true or false does not change its character as *a priori*. This has nothing to do with whether it is true or false. There are *a priori* falsehoods: propositions known to be false through abstract reasoning. On the other hand, if the justification or warrant wholly comes through experience alone, those propositions will be *a posteriori*.

Like  $2 + 2 = 4$ , the best examples of *a priori* truths seem to be those that are known by the definitions of the words (or symbols) in the proposition. To understand this point, we need one more distinction, this time between **analytic** and **synthetic propositions**. Analytic propositions are those that can be shown by deductive argument to be true or false based on the meaning of the symbols (including words) used to express them. If I know the meaning of "2" and "+" and "=" and "4," then I can construct a mathematical proof to show that F must be true. So it is with any analytic truth. Thus "red is a color" or "all bachelors are unmarried" are analytic. Now a synthetic proposition, whether true or false, wants to tell us about some matter of fact. It wants to describe the way things happen to be. "My car is red" or "Susan is married" or even "the moon is made of green cheese"

are therefore synthetic propositions. Now to be sure, our moon is not made of cheese, but that only makes it a false synthetic proposition. This cannot be known by the meaning of the words alone; we have to find out somehow, maybe by flying there!

Almost all philosophers can come up with examples of analytic *a priori* knowledge. If it really is an analytic truth, like F, then we ought to be able to prove it by abstract reasoning. We may not in fact be able to do this, but it should be possible in theory. The same can be said about a synthetic *a posteriori* knowledge. We all know lots of these, like "Susan is married" or "Pluto is no longer a planet." These are both synthetic *a posteriori* propositions.

After all these definitions, we are finally ready to give a modern definition of rationalism. A rationalist holds that humans have some synthetic *a priori* knowledge. This would be knowledge about some matter of fact whose justification goes beyond experience and is based upon rational insight and reflection rather than experience. One proposal for a synthetic *a priori* proposition is this: change requires time. Let us call this proposition C. Think about it and you will see that not only is C true in our world, but it must be true in any logically possible world. For example, agreeing that God is eternal, some Christian theologians argue that divine eternity is timeless and not merely everlasting. Reading the same Scriptures, they come up with different interpretations and different theologies. Yet all who hold that God is wholly timeless must also believe that God is wholly changeless if C is an *a priori* truth. On this classic Christian view, God "changes" for us only because we are creatures of time and change. The Godhead in itself cannot change if it is timeless.

At first glance this argument looks very rational and convincing. But some philosophers will disagree. Opposition to rationalism was championed by *John Locke* (1632–1704). Locke is called the father of the English Enlightenment, and his thought is highly influential in America. It still shapes our thinking, especially in political philosophy. Locke held, against Descartes, that all of our synthetic knowledge comes from experience. For him there are no innate ideas. His famous claim was that the mind was first a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate ready to be filled with new knowledge drawn from experience. We call this

viewpoint **empiricism**: the claim that all synthetic knowledge is *a posteriori*. Empiricists believe that there is no such thing as synthetic *a priori* knowledge. They have two options in the case of a supposed *a priori* synthetic truth. First, they might argue that C is actually synthetic: we learn it from experience but believe it so automatically that we feel it cannot possibly be false. The second option is to argue that C is analytic: the very idea of "change" already implies time in some way.

With these new terms in our vocabulary, and a little hard thinking, we have learned about the two major schools of epistemology, rationalism and empiricism. Are there any more? Sure, and we already know something about them. They are Pragmatism and Skepticism. Pragmatists, remember, think that truth happens to propositions when they are affirmed in our practical encounter with our study of the world. For them, all synthetic knowledge will gain its justification in this way. The skeptic will doubt that anything is "knowledge" in a universal sense; all claims of knowledge are relative, and many are merely subjective, merely what the speaker thinks they know. In this way many skeptics will also be social constructionists, and vice versa.

#### A CHRISTIAN VIEW OF KNOWLEDGE

There is no one thing we might rightly call a Christian theory of knowledge. But there are some attitudes that arise from Scripture and traditional Christian faith and thought which are at least relevant to the issues of epistemology today. For classic Christian thought, the God of the Bible is the creator of all things. So it is God who determines what is real overall. What is more, Christian faith has long thought that reason and language were gifts of the same God. The Christian God is a God of redemption and revelation, and so also a God of truth. As the creator of all things, the Blessed Trinity is the author of all truth we seek about the Creator or creation, including ourselves. For God creates those realities we seek to know. Christian thought has accordingly valued knowledge and learning, but it has also been critical of human reason apart from faith in Christ.

Human reason is corrupted due to our sin and can set itself up as a false god. Yet the Church founded all the great, ancient universities

of Europe and many of the private universities and colleges in the Americas. Christianity is not against reason as a good gift of God. But for traditional Christians, faith, hope, and love are more centrally important than human knowledge, especially when human Reason (note the capital again) sets itself up against Christ. On the other hand, faith, hope, and love can be aspects of knowledge, especially personal knowledge, like knowing God.

Thus, knowledge in and of itself is not an ultimate value for traditional Christians. Knowledge should not be sought for itself, independent of faith in and worship of God. So Paul the apostle went so far as to link a certain kind of knowledge with idolatry. This took place at the start of his argument against some Corinthians who overvalued *knowing* God (1 Cor 8–10; see 8:1 for the beginning of it). It is in this context that he wrote “knowledge makes one arrogant, but love builds up” (8:1, my translation). This does not mean that learning and knowing were unimportant to Paul, but that love, faith, and hope were greater (1 Cor 13). Paul does not reject knowledge or thinking. He was himself a powerful thinker who described discipleship, in part, as “bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor 10:5 KJV). This implies a discipleship of the mind, as well as of the rest of us. As he famously wrote, “If there is knowledge, it will pass away,” for only “faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor 13:8, 13 LEB).

So for the Christian disciple and the Church, knowledge is important. Christians should reject that anti-intellectualism that raises its ugly head now and again in our churches. The anti-intellectual brother or sister usually has good motives: they want us to keep a robust and biblical faith. But their methods and assumptions often lack a solid application of reason. We reject this view not in the name of Reason that sets itself up against God and revelation, but in the name of Jesus Christ, who is the very truth of God made flesh. Following him with all we are—mind included with heart, soul, and body—is the greatest commandment of all. Thus, our next chapter will extend this conversation about knowledge into the discussion of how we might understand the relationship between faith and reason.