

## The Basis of Truth

### What is Yours?

By

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I've never testified in court, but as a philosopher I'd have trouble swearing to "tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." I'd could swear to do my best to say what I think might be true and promise not to intentionally lie; but swearing I could tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth would itself be a lie. This is so because the art of philosophizing means questioning whatever is purported to be true. As philosopher Lou Marinoff says, "Well-intentioned and good-hearted layfolk, perplexed and perturbed by the philosopher's perennially if not reflexive disputatious stance, fail perforce to grasp the fundamental instrument in the quintessential philosophical toolkit—namely, doubt."<sup>1</sup> But doubting we know the whole truth and nothing but the truth does not prevent us from functioning or cause to be overly confused in daily living. We can still balance our checkbooks. "Thus, although I believe wholeheartedly and single-mindedly that one plus one equals two, and moreover know how to prove it," Marinoff says, "I also doubt fervently that I possess anything like a metaphysically adequate explanation of *why* it is true, and ontologically adequate conception of *what* is true, and an epistemically adequate account of what *makes* it true."<sup>2</sup>

Today I want us to consider this most challenging, but also liberating, philosophical question, *How do we know the truth?* But before we begin, I want to remind you this is part of a *Perennial Problem* series of sermons on fundamental philosophical questions. It is not meant to be an introduction to philosophy. My intention, rather, is to get you to consider the difficulty in answering these perennial problems for yourself and to question the basis of your own assumptions about them. Socrates famously said, "The unexamined life is not worth living," just as Thales of Miletus, the first known Western philosopher said, "Know thyself." Moving through life by rote may seem easy and safe, but, according to these philosophical exhortations, doing so is not living up to our fullest potential.

The branch of philosophy that deals with the problem of truth is called *epistemology*, from the Greek word meaning *knowledge*. How do we *know*? It's akin to *metaphysics*, the study of the underlying nature of reality, because both truth and reality are hard to ascertain with absolute certainty, leaving us in a position to continuously question our assumptions about them. But the problem of truth, or knowing, is fundamental to all perennial questions, including metaphysics. How do we know what we believe about reality is true? How do we know what we believe about ethics is true? How do we know what we believe is the meaning of our lives is true? How do we know anything that we believe is true?

Most of us, being untrained in philosophy, in addition to living in communities that are held together and defined by what we share in common, including conventional wisdom, arrive at our notions of truth without much thought and through a hodgepodge of means. There are a handful of usual ways in which we claim to know the truth. While some of us may favor one or two of them, most of us revert instinctively to whichever one best justifies our beliefs in the moment. I say this because more often than genuinely seeking the truth, we prefer to confirm what we already believe is true or feel is true at the time. We hear an idea, have an immediate feeling about it, then rationalize the feeling with explanations and arguments that convince us it must be true. When it comes to truth, we often put the cart before the horse. We feel we know what is true, then determine our reasons why it is true.

Common sense is one almost hallowed approach to unquestionable truth. This folksy avenue to knowledge presumes to base truth on what should already plain to everyone. Not long ago, however, most people knew the Earth was obviously flat. Just look out toward the horizon and see its edge as plain as the nose on your face. Some once believed so ferociously that the Sun revolves around the Earth that they were ready to condemn anyone who disagreed. Galileo and Copernicus would be safe discussing their heliocentric views today, yet to this day we all still speak of nonexistent sunrises and sunsets instead of earthrises and earthsets. Common sense beliefs about gender, skin pigmentation, religious beliefs, and birthplaces have also led to widespread prejudices, injustices, and cruelties that we are still struggling to outgrow and overcome. This isn't to say that going along with the crowd is always wrong, or that there isn't something to be said for our collective wisdom, but it should be enough to cast doubt on common sense as a reliable measure of truth.

Relying upon experts and expertise is closely akin to common sense. Experts are those in our society we believe should know what they are talking about even if most of us don't. That's why we go to a doctor when we're sick. But there's the old adage when it comes to serious health problems, "Always get a second opinion." The experts can get it wrong and don't always agree with each other. In the 1940s and 50s, corresponding with rising numbers of mothers going to work in factories and industries in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, physicians widely considered formula a safe and healthy substitute for breastmilk. But in 1990 the American Academy of Pediatrics discouraged the use of formula in light of new research indicating it can have negative health impacts. Similarly, I still recall the night seventeen years ago, in 2003, when Secretary of State General Colin Powell, our Nation's top military expert, sat on live TV to convince the U.N. Security Council and the American people that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and he knew where they were. "every statement I make today is backed up by sources, solid sources," he said. "These are not assertions. What we're giving you are facts and conclusions based on solid intelligence ... There is no doubt in my mind."<sup>3</sup> As it turns out, a little philosophical doubt from Powell, who got it completely wrong despite his assurances, may have prevented our nation's preemptive and retaliatory strike against Iraq, which had nothing to do with the terrorist attacks of 9/11 to begin with. So, again,

unequivocally trusting the experts, whether they are well-meaning or not, isn't a reliable measure of truth.

Another avenue toward truth is relying upon the proper authorities. It differs from expertise because authoritarians don't have to claim any expertise, just the power and the right to know and enforce and say what's true. Donald Trump gets away with it every day by making fact free assertions. Trying to get a bit of data from him to back up his, often, preposterous claims is harder than stealing a bar of gold from Fort Knox. In April, for example, he assured us the coming warmer weather would end the Coronavirus, that it would disappear "like a miracle." It hasn't. In June he told us it was "fading away." It wasn't. In July he told us the U.S. now has the lowest pandemic related mortality rate in the world. We don't. Simply believing whatever the authorities tell us, which may be worse than just going along with the crowd, is itself a type of authoritarian thinking, where mindless vassals willingly give up their ability to think for themselves. Whether the authorities are high priests claiming to speak for God, or Kings claiming the same divine right, dead scribes, or narcissistic Presidents who are so puffed up they believe all they need is to utter their own stream of consciousness and it becomes truth—"Let there be light"—the authorities are hardly a reliable avenue to claim one has a firm grasp on the truth. How do you know it's true? "Because President Trump said so." I don't think so.

Let's talk about data itself. While it is more convincing when experts and authorities provide us with hard evidence for their beliefs, such evidence, no matter how empirical, can be misinterpreted and misperceived. This avenue toward truth is based upon sensual experience, which ranges anywhere from we have seen and experienced ourselves, to what science has painstakingly worked to prove and ascertain. The problem with purely materialistic proofs, however, is that our experiences of the physical world is always subjective and relative to our limited perceptions. This is why Descartes famously argued we can't be sure of anything but the existence of our own minds. But, as Bertrand Russell points out, many philosophers believe our perceptions point to things that truly exist outside our minds, but our subjective interpretations of those things prevent us from fully comprehending them as they are. Ours, rather, is a mental interpretation of what he called *sense data*. "Thus, what we directly see and feel is merely 'appearance,'" he said, "which we believe to be a sign of some 'reality' behind [it]."<sup>4</sup> So even materialism, empiricism, physics, and science are not wholly adequate instruments of the truth.

Descartes didn't think we should rely upon these things at all, since all are dubious. He believed, rather, that the one thing he thought we cannot doubt, the mind, can arrive at the truth through reason alone, which I treat as synonymous with logic. There are two kinds of logic, deductive and inductive. Inductive logic is based on probability, the idea the more something occurs the more reasonable it is to presume it will keep occurring. An inductive argument is sound if what it infers will happen is more probable than not. I personally don't even consider it logic, however, because all creatures instinctively behave according to

consistent environmental stimulus and response. My dogs point at the back door when they want to go outside because I consistently respond by opening it for them.

Deductive reasoning, on the other hand, is based purely on form, like mathematical equations. If the terms of an argument, whether they refer to real things like “men” and “Socrates,” or symbols like “S” and “P,” as placeholders for any subject or predicate, are in the right place and proper relationship, then we have a logically valid argument. This doesn’t mean the argument is true, however, only that it is sound. For the conclusion of a valid argument to be true, its premises must be true. If the premises of a valid argument are true, then its conclusion must be true. But here’s the rub, there’s no way to guarantee the premises are true with absolute certainty, so deductive logic is not a wholly adequate avenue to truth either. Neither is inductive. Just because something has happened many times in the past doesn’t guarantee it will continue happening. Just because the Sun has risen every morning in the past—or should I say, just because the Earth continues spinning on its axis—is no guarantee it will do so tomorrow. Chances are it will, but there could always be an unforeseen calamity ahead of us.

The final avenue to truth we ought to consider is intuition, a word that etymologically means “inner look,” or “inner tutor,” and is most commonly considered a kind of gut instinct or feeling about what’s true that isn’t reliant upon any immediate external input—empirical data, expertise, logical analysis, or otherwise. Many of us have experienced instances where such knowledge has proven correct in our lives, but not always. Sometimes our hunches also proven completely wrong, which is itself enough to cause a proper degree of doubt when it comes to determining the truth based upon our instincts and feelings. It could be that intuition is based upon lots of experienced insight that doesn’t require us to think much about some matters, any more than an experienced athlete has to think about playing sports, or a musician music. But feeling sure one is right leads to much embarrassment when one turns out to be wrong, and sometimes to undo anger, conflict, and injustices against others. In his book, *On Being Certain*, neurologist Robert Burton tells us “Certainty and similar states of ‘knowing what we know arise out of involuntary brain mechanisms that, like love or anger, function independently of reason.”<sup>5</sup> He also says “the *feeling of knowing* and its kindred feelings should be considered as primary as the states of fear and anger”<sup>6</sup> If this so, then when we’re feeling certain, about the only thing we can really be certain of is that we’re having an emotional reaction.

So we’ve looked at the common avenues to truth—common sense, expertise, authorities, empirical data, reason, and intuition and have found reason to doubt them all. Even if doubt is the fundamental instrument in the philosopher’s toolkit, realizing we can’t know anything for certain can cause a degree of anxiety about making even the smallest of decisions in our lives. How do we choose if we can’t be sure of the outcome or if we’re making the right move?

No wonder so many people prefer to go on thinking they are absolutely right about their beliefs, and why most of them gravitate toward authoritarian thinking, because the authorities can't be questioned, therefore no doubts can be expressed. At times in human history, entire societies have been so authoritarian that thinking for oneself and expressing opposing opinions could be a death sentence. This series is on the perennial problems addressed by classical philosophy over the centuries, but did you know after Christianity became the official Roman religion in the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, most philosophical writings were destroyed? According to A.C. Grayling's *The History of Philosophy*:

It has been estimated that as much as 90 percent of the literature of antiquity perished in the onslaught. The Christians took the fallen stones of temples to build their churches, and overwrote the manuscripts of philosophers and poets with their scripture texts. It is hard to comprehend, still less to forgive, the immense loss of literature, philosophy, history and general culture this represented. Moreover, at the time Christianity existed in a time of mutually hostile and competing versions, and the effort—eventually successful—to achieve a degree of consensus on a “right” version required treating the others as heresies and aberrations requiring suppression, including violent suppression.<sup>7</sup>

By the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, Emperor Justinian put the Church authorities in charge of the Academy that Plato had begun centuries before, to prevent the teaching of what he considered “pagan” philosophy. That's about when the Dark Ages began, lasting nearly a millennium. There were some Christian philosophers during the Middle Ages—some great ones—including Augustine and Aquinas on its bookends, but they all had to philosophize in Church sanctioned terms. We've moved in and out of these periods of Endarkenment followed by periods of Renaissance and Enlightenment, but always seem to teeter on the edge of returning to authoritarianism, fascism, and groupthink, as we are doing today.

Today, in addition to the appeal of authoritarian populists on the far right who falsely promise to keep us safe in exchange for our unquestioning devotion, extremists on the far left are claiming, since there is no absolute truth, that all truths are equal, which means no truth can dominate. Protecting the opinions of others against questions, no matter how absurd, has become a matter of social justice. This perspective, known today as *postmodernism*, altogether rejects the truth of empirical data, reason, science, and human nature, meaning there is no objective truth and nothing any of us share in common—hence the additional fanatic emphasis on individual identity. But such thinking commits what's called the *existential fallacy*: Just because we can't know the truth with certainty doesn't mean there is no such thing as truth so we can make up whatever truth we want and consider it just as good as any other. It's like saying “there are no such things as unicorns, therefore my unicorn is just as good as yours.”

While it may be true that unicorns don't exist, furthermore, it is entirely possible that truth does exist. Just because we don't know something to be true, doesn't mean it isn't. As I have been arguing, we may not have an avenue for ascertaining absolute truth, but some avenues,

especially when combined, can make us feel more secure in our choices and beliefs. Agreement between science, reason, experience, expertise, topped with a little common, makes for a formidable argument. This is why I often say *base your next leap of faith upon your best educated guess*. Just because we can't be certain of anything, doesn't mean anything goes. All beliefs are not equal. A belief in unicorns is not equal to a belief in horses, for, unlike the former, there are many sound reasons to believe in horses, or at least in the sense data that appears to us as horses.

So that's my advice as you wrestle with the perennial problem of truth: consider the value of the avenues to truth you currently lean on. If they are heavy toward authoritarianism, emotionalism, and the false feeling of certainty, it may be time to focus more on empiricism, reason, and expertise to give your beliefs more weight. If you lean toward any single avenue, it may be good to mix it up with some others, also to give your beliefs more weight.

Finally, to be philosophical about truth, cherish your doubts, which is not the same as saying don't believe in anything. It just means to be dubious of your own beliefs as well as what others ask you to believe. Certainty may feel better, at least for those unaccustomed to routinely living in a state of doubt, but it is only a false sense of certainty, which doesn't really make us safe, causes us to deceive ourselves, and leads us to feel fearful and hostile toward those we disagree with. Remaining doubtful, on the other hand, doesn't lead to undo skepticism, nihilism, or existential crises, as some might think, but to a life of humility, open mindedness, acceptance, diverse friendships, awe, wonder, continuous growth, and self-examination, which a wise man once said is the only kind of life worth living.

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<sup>1</sup> Marinoff, Lou, *Philosophical Practice*, Academic Press, San Diego, CA, 2002, p. 334

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 335.

<sup>3</sup> <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/2003/17300.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Russell, Bertrand, *The Problem of Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Printed in U.S., 1912, 1959, p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> Burton, Robert, *On Being Certain*, St. Martin's Press, New York, NY, 2008, preface.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>7</sup> Grayling, A.C., *The History of Philosophy*, Penguin Press, New York, NY, 2019, p. 3.