

ABSOLUTE TRUTH AS CONTRASTED WITH RELATIVE TRUTH

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Introduction

In his book *Ideas Have Consequences*, professor and author Richard Weaver discusses the ‘modernism’ that engulfed the West in the mid-1900’s and proposes that the consequences of this trend were the result of unintelligent choices, so much so that, “modern man has become a moral idiot”.¹ The modernist view of his day had adopted the position that man is merely a prisoner of the moment. Published in 1948, this book is Weaver’s assessment of mankind in that he realized that a rational civilization depends on how we use our minds and on our view of foundational concepts such as truth. His declaration that, “The believer in truth . . . is bound to maintain that the things of highest value are not affected by the passage of time; otherwise the very concept of truth becomes impossible”² was a call for a re-evaluation of the concept of truth.

The nature of truth has been explored throughout the centuries but the concept that truth can be absolute has been under attack for some time now. Historically, biblical foundational beliefs centered American society even when external forces threatened a change in direction. Due to its nature, particularly in the area of absolute truth, this theological grounding gave great strength and resilience to the nation. The truths that the founding fathers held to be “self-evident” are now generally seen to be relative and confusion has crept into society, with a particularly deadly toll on the moral compass of our world. Apologist and author Ravi Zacharias states it even more bluntly: “A serious

¹ Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 52.

casualty of our time that defies comprehension is the death of truth. By denying absolutes and eradicating all points of reference by which we test veracity, our civilization has entered *terra incognita* on matters of the greatest importance even for survival.”³ How is it, then, that we understand what truth is?

It can be said that truth *is* something but also that it *does* something because of what it is. This paper will examine the nature of truth from which we form our belief system by means of contrasting the orthodox Christian view of absolute truth with its counter-view of relative truth. What truth is and is not will be explored by means of examining the thinking of Saints Anselm and Aquinas. Arguments for and against the correspondence theory of truth will be examined as will arguments for and against the view of deconstructionism, where absolute truth will be contrasted with relative truth. And finally, what truth does, or the consequences of how we view truth, will be explored via a contrast of the results of human actions due to our view of absolute or relative truth.

The Nature of Truth

1. Saint Anselm’s View of Truth

Saint Anselm of Canterbury, England, was born in 1033 and eventually became archbishop of Canterbury. His treatise *On Truth* discusses what truth is and where it is found. Our discussion will center around chapters one, eleven and thirteen. Anselm wrestled with the question of what truth *is*, and proposed a view that truth is eternal since it is impossible to think that truth would have a beginning or an end. A beginning or an end for truth could only be possible if there is truth to state that there is no truth,

³ Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 1994), 122.

which is a self-contradictory statement.⁴ Having established the eternal nature of truth, Anselm then defined truth “as a rectitude perceptible by mind alone.”⁵ In this way, he is saying that truth is a virtue or a principle that only the mind can understand. And finally, he proposed “That there is one truth in all true things.” He questioned whether “. . . there are as many truths as things called true.” In order to defend this view, Anselm related truth to everything true in the same way that time is related to everything that is temporal. And just as there is one time but yet we can speak of many ‘times’, there is one truth but at the same time, many true things are related to that one (absolute) truth. Anselm also recognized that correct meaning must have a direct correspondence between truth and reality when he said, “For signification is correct when what is is said to be or when what is not is said not to be.”⁶ Truth then must correspond with its object.

2. Aquinas’ View of Truth

Likewise, Saint Augustine very simply said, “The true is that which is.”⁷ Aristotle’s definition of what is true was, “That which affirms that existence of what is, and denies that existence of what is not.”⁸ Saint Thomas Aquinas, born in Italy in 1224, studied both Augustine and Aristotle and their influence on his thinking can be seen in his writings. Aquinas was a realist and so, rather than agreeing with Decartes, who said,

⁴ *Oxford World’s Classics, Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works, On Truth*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 152.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁷ *The Collected Works of Saint Thomas Aquinas, The Disputed Questions on Truth*, vol. 1, trans. Robert William Mulligan, S. J. (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1952), 3. URL = <http://alias.libraries.psu.edu/eresources/PASTMASTERS>.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

“I think, therefore, I am,” he said, “I am, therefore, I think.” For Aquinas, being is the foundation for everything else. Since everything that exists has being, “Thought cannot be separated from things or knowing from being.”⁹ In his work *Truth, Question 1*, he discussed the nature of truth in twelve different articles. For our purposes, we will discuss only four answers and one objection as found in the First and the Fourth Articles since his discussion in these two articles revolves around his actual definition of truth and whether there is only one standard for truth.

In the First Article, “What is truth?”, Aquinas discusses the general question of truth and non-truth. He proposes a threefold definition of truth here and begins with his basic premise of existence. In the first part of his definition of truth he states, “First of all, it is defined according to that which precedes truth and is the basis of truth.” Existence, or being, is foundational and must be a prerequisite for any truth. Secondly, “Truth is also defined in another way—according to that in which its intelligible determination is formally completed.” In other words, truth is what actually is or has actually happened. And thirdly, “The third way of defining truth is according to the effect following upon it.”¹⁰ Truth shows us what is in the realm of existence. In the Third Article, “Is Truth Only in the Intellect Joining and Separating?”, he added this commentary, “And the judgment is said to be true when it conforms to the external

⁹ Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 250.

¹⁰ *The Collected Works of Saint Thomas Aquinas, The Disputed Questions on Truth*, vol. 1, trans. Robert William Mulligan, S. J. (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1952), Q.1, A.1, 6-7. URL = <http://alias.libraries.psu.edu/eresources/PASTMASTERS>.

reality.”¹¹ Here, in talking about judgment, he is speaking of the intellect and how it views the truth as a correspondence to reality.

On the other hand, Aquinas taught that truth is *not*:

- 1) a state of being—It does not follow that: “This man is dead. Therefore, this is not a man.”
- 2) a state that limits— Again, it does not follow that: “. . . a thing is white simply because it has white teeth.”
- 3) interchangeable with being.—What is true and the state of being are not one and the same thing.¹²

Having established the definition of truth in the First Article, we may proceed to the Fourth Article where Aquinas asks the crucial question, “Is there only one truth by which all things are true?”¹³ In response, he proposed eight answers to questions regarding the existence of only one truth.

- 1) He believed that things are true if they conform to “the divine intellect” and so there must be one truth (the divine) by which everything is true.
- 2-5) Since truth is not a caused entity, but rather part of the divine intellect, it must be viewed differently than those things that are caused. In this way, for example, one light does not mean the same thing as one truth since light is a created thing, but truth comes from the eternal or the “divine intellect”.

¹¹ Ibid., Q.1, A.3, 13.

¹² Ibid., A.1, Obj.4, 3-4.

¹³ Ibid., Q.1, A.4, 14.

- 6) Things can be true by a single truth since truth is the standard itself.
- 7) There is one truth to which all things conform since all things conform to the “divine intellect”.
- 8) The truth of our mind is modeled after God’s mind and cannot help but reflect divine truth.¹⁴

Aquinas agreed with Anselm in thinking that truth is eternal and stated four proofs for his proposition:

- 1) “. . . no truth is circumscribed by a beginning or end, and, since anything like this is eternal, every truth is eternal.”
- 2) “. . . for, if truth is not, the fact that truth is not is true, and nothing can be true except by truth. Therefore, truth is eternal.”
- 3) If one can say that the truth of propositions does not exist, then the truth of propositions must exist in order to make such a statement and so it is not possible to say that that truth of propositions is not eternal.
- 4) “. . . when truth did not exist, it would have been true that it did not exist—which could not be unless there were truth. Therefore, truth is eternal.”¹⁵

3. An Examination of Truth

As we look at the nature of truth through the eyes of the ancient philosophers, it is also necessary to test truth ourselves in order to arrive at a proper understanding of what truth is and what it is not. Looking at our most commonly accepted contemporary

¹⁴ Ibid., Q.1, A.4, 19-20.

¹⁵ Ibid., Q.1, A.5, 20-21.

source, Webster's dictionary states that truth is "the true or actual state of a matter; conformity with fact or reality; verity; a verified or indisputable fact, proposition, principle, or the like." Two synonyms offered are: "fact; veracity" in contrast to the antonyms of "falsehood; falsity".¹⁶ In examining what truth is from ancient through contemporary times, one common thread traditionally woven throughout the discussion is that of truth as conforming with or corresponding to reality. Professor, author and Christian apologist Norman Geisler states, "This correspondence [to reality] applies to abstract realities as well as actual ones. There are mathematical truths. There are also truths about ideas. In each case there is a reality, and truth accurately expresses it."¹⁷

Another point to note is that the law of non-contradiction states that opposites cannot both be true at the same time and in the same sense. If opposites cannot both be true, then what is false cannot correspond to reality since by our definition above, true is the opposite (antonym) of false. As Geisler states, "A true system of thought . . . must correspond to reality, past, present, and future, natural and supernatural. And all major systems of thought contain key truth claims which are contrary to those of all other systems."¹⁸ Truth by nature is also narrow and exclusivist since, as stated above, a statement about reality must correspond to its object to fit the definition of truth. One plus one equals two, not three or four. We can then conclude that any claim that is broadly all-inclusive cannot be a truth claim.

¹⁶ *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* (1996), s.v. "truth."

¹⁷ Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 742.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 785.

What Truth Is Not

1. General Theories

On the other hand, truth can also be understood by what it is not. One theory regarding truth claims is that what is true is any truth claim that remains consistent, but there can be coherent empty statements that reveal nothing about reality. There can also be consistent statements made by a group who conspire to misrepresent the facts and so are in fact, false. And so the best that can be said of this theory is that statements may not be true even if they are consistent, but they are false if they are not consistent.

Moreover, the declaration that “what feels good” is the indicator of truth is also a subjective view of truth with serious flaws. The other side of this view would have to be that what feels bad must be false. Since feelings are personal and relative to individuals, truth then must be personal and relative. But one should be highly suspect of truth itself if the nature of truth were to depend on its resultant feeling.

Truth can sometimes be defended due to the intentions of the person making the claim, but many times the author of the statement is mistaken even though his intentions were to present a truth claim. Sincerity, then, cannot be the test of truth or all statements ever spoken in sincerity would be true. Some also believe that comprehensiveness is the definition of truth, but although it can be one test for truth, it fails as a definition of truth itself. In this case, concise statements of truth would automatically be considered false and all-inclusive statements would be true by default. All of the information presented must still conform with the reality of the situation.¹⁹

¹⁹ Ibid., 741-42.

2. William James' View of Truth

Philosopher William James, who held to an experiential point of view, did not believe that truth could be inherent in an idea and said, "Truth happens in an idea. It becomes true, is made true, by events."²⁰ In discussing what truth is, he stated, "A statement is known to be true if it brings the right results."²¹ This looks at the results of a proposition in deciding whether it were true or not true. But truth cannot be determined just because something brings the 'right results' and according to correspondence, if the initial statement did not correspond to the facts, then it was not true, despite the results.

3. Hegel's View of Truth

In the same vein, German philosopher, Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel theorized not the comprehensiveness of truth, but rather its synthesis. In his discussion of Hegel and the death of truth, Francis Schaeffer, author, evangelical thinker and founder of L'Abri Fellowship, included a summary by James Sire of Frederick Copleston's study of Hegel. This contains a revealing analysis of Hegel's view of truth. Sire said, "According to Hegel, . . . No single proposition about reality can truly reflect what is the case. Rather, in the heart of the truth of a given proposition one finds its opposite. . . . Yet there is truth in both thesis and antithesis, and when this is perceived a synthesis is formed and a new proposition states the truth of the newly recognized situation. . . . and the process goes on ad infinitum."²² Schaeffer comments that the result is that Hegel's position relativizes all

²⁰ Ibid., 375.

²¹ Ibid., 741.

²² Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1976), 162-3.

other positions. He analyzes it in this way: “Instead of antithesis (that some things are true and their opposite untrue), truth and moral rightness will be found in the flow of history, a synthesis of them. . . . Today not only in philosophy but in politics, government, and individual morality, our generation sees solutions in terms of synthesis and not absolutes. When this happens, truth, as people had always thought of truth, has died.”²³

4. Kierkegaard’s View of Truth

On the other hand, Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard believed that we cannot know or find truth without revelation from God. He portrayed life as having three stages: aesthetic, ethical, and religious and that there was objective truth in the essential realm but that the existential realm contained only subjective truth. Within our existence, life has meaning in the existential, or experiential, realm of our choices. Kierkegaard also denied that any religious truth can be objective. Unfortunately, this relegates all religious truth to the subjective realm, leaving the door open to a non-correspondence view of truth to reality. When he said, “Truth is subjectivity”, he placed only all things subjective into the camp of truth, but reality shows that not all truth is only relevant to our subjective existence such as, for example, mathematical or theoretical truths.²⁴ Kierkegaard further believed “that truth is what is relevant to our existence of life and false if it is not.”²⁵ The word processor I am using is relevant to my writing, but that does not make my writing

²³ Ibid., 163.

²⁴ Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 410.

²⁵ Ibid., 741-42.

true in and of itself. Having experiential relevance does not make something true or false, good or bad. It simply makes it relevant to our present experience.

Absolute Truth

1. The Correspondence Theory of Truth

Having studied what truth is and what it is not, it may be helpful to explore absolute truth before comparing it with relative truth. First, I will discuss the correspondence theory of truth along with two objections to this theory. To examine the validity of the correspondence theory, we first look to Webster for the accepted definition and we find that, philosophically speaking, it is defined as “the theory of truth that a statement is rendered true by the existence of a fact with corresponding elements and a similar structure.”²⁶ As discussed on page 3 above, Anselm proposed that in order for meaning to be achieved, truth must correspond with its object. We also discovered that Aquinas believed that truth must correspond to reality, and so truth demands that a thought (through the intellect) conform to reality and that a thing conform to a thought. Ancient philosopher Aristotle defined truth as, “To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true.”²⁷ We see then, that Aristotle also used a correspondence of ‘what is’ and ‘what is not’ to ‘reality’ in his definition of truth.

²⁶ Webster’s *New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* (1996), s.v. “correspondence theory.”

²⁷ Marian David, “The Correspondence Theory of Truth”, Pt. 1, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2005 ed., ed. Edward N. Zalta. URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2005/entries/truth-correspondence>.

Below are two simple forms of the correspondence theory of truth as outlined by Marian David where, “‘iff’ means ‘if and only if’ and ‘x’ refers to whatever truthbearers are taken as primary; . . . :

- a) x is true iff x corresponds to some fact;
x is false iff x does not correspond to any fact;
- b) x is true iff x corresponds to some state of affairs that obtains;
x is false iff x corresponds to some state of affairs that does not obtain.”²⁸

The main argument in support of this view is that it is so obvious. Descartes advocated its obviousness in believing that ‘truth’ means conformity of thought with object. Even the agnostic philosopher, Kant, defined truth as an assumption that an understanding of something must agree with its object.²⁹ William James concurred that, “Truth, as any dictionary will tell you, is a property of certain of our ideas. It means their ‘agreement’, as with falsity means their disagreement, with ‘reality’.”³⁰

Again we see a definition that conforms to the correspondence theory of truth. Geisler agrees when he states, “Not only does Christianity claim that there is absolute truth (truth for everyone, everywhere, at all times), but it insists that truth about the world (reality) is that which corresponds to the way things really are.”³¹ And so ancient, modern and contemporary thinkers along with those who define words for our societies

²⁸ Ibid., Pt. 3.

²⁹ Ibid., Pt. 4.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 741.

agree that truth involves a direct correspondence with reality. We can conclude then, that correspondence is that which has agreement or conformity with its object. It is interesting to note that any correspondence uses a direct comparison of words (a statement) to the things (facts) to which they refer. It would seem to follow, then that sensible communication depends on an actual correspondence of statements with the events they represent.

2. Subjective Truth and Objective Truth

This correspondence called truth can be expressed as subjective truth or as objective truth. The Greek noun for *truth* is *alētheia* and in the subjective sense means “sincerity and integrity of character”, but when used objectively, expresses “the reality lying at the basis of an appearance; the manifested, veritable essence of a matter.”³²

These were the meanings understood throughout the New Testament to express the noun *truth*, depending on whether it were a subjective or an objective truth claim. And so, a subjective truth makes a truth claim about the *subject* of the statement. If I were to say, “Spinach pesto is delicious on pasta,” it would be a true statement about the personal tastes of the subject—me. It is not a true statement about pesto, the object, since pesto cannot taste, but rather about my subjective opinion of the pesto since I am able to enjoy its taste when I eat pasta. This makes it a subjective truth claim. On the other hand, an objective truth is based on a reality in the external world that does not change with our preferences, such as mathematical facts. One plus one equals two cannot be subject

³² W. E. Vine, *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Lynchburg, Virginia: The Old Time Gospel Hour, 1952), s.v. “truth.”

to dispute since it is an external fact that does not change and so is an objective truth claim.³³

3. Objections to the Correspondence Theory of Truth

There are several objections to the correspondence theory of truth, but this paper will examine only two of these. The first objection is as follows:

1. Definitions such as the two stated on page 12 are broad and cannot apply to all discourse domains. For example, there are no moral facts.

This objection seems to affirm that there are different kinds of *truth*, rather than different kinds of *truths*. A summary of four possible answers to this objection is as follows:

- a) all such claims from the problem domain are false—this is a weak argument since it does not address the objection with facts;
- b) some of the claims from these domains are commands or emotions rather than truths and so cannot be evaluated in light of truth;
- c) truths from the problem domains are part of another domain that is not problematic—for example, “. . . moral truths correspond to social-behavioral facts”;
- d) refusing to back down from the claims of the problem domain. This last option seems to be the most valid since in affirming many kinds of *truth* not just many

³³ Francis J. Beckwith and Gregory Koukl, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 27.

kinds of *truths*, there is no explanation for why many arguments combine statements from problem and non-problematic domains.³⁴

The second objection is stated as:

2. God said He is truth, but He does not correspond to anything outside of Himself and so does not align with the correspondence theory of truth and is not true.

A response to this objection is: God's words do correspond to His thoughts, therefore God is true; His thoughts are identical to themselves and so correspond perfectly, showing Him to be true to himself; God is the ultimate reality, thus is the standard for all truth and so things must have some correspondence to Him. Since God lives in harmony with the authority He holds, He is also true to Himself and to His nature.³⁵

Relative Truth

What, then is *relative* truth? Webster defines *relative* as “something dependent upon external conditions for its specific nature . . . ; existing or having its specific nature only by relation to something else; not absolute or independent; depending for significance upon something else,”³⁶ and philosophical *relativism* as “any theory holding that criteria of judgment are relative, varying with individuals and their environments.”³⁷

According to this definition, we can say that a relative truth claim is a truth claim that is

³⁴ Marian David, “The Correspondence Theory of Truth”, Pt. 5, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2005 ed., ed. Edward N. Zalta. URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2005/entries/truth-correspondence>.

³⁵ Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 742-43.

³⁶ *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* (1996), s.v. “relative.”

³⁷ *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* (1996), s.v. “relativism.”

dependent upon the outlook of the individual making the claim, who would in turn be dependent upon their environment in their decision as to how to present that truth claim. The truth claim does not have the ability to function independently of the person or situation. Direct correspondence to actual reality is not a necessary condition in order to make a relative truth claim and opposites are not necessarily excluded within the claim. Societal attitudes today reflect Kierkegaard's line of reasoning regarding only that which is relevant to our personal existence as truth when they claim that truth is relative.

Following the arguments for correspondence to reality, it should be noted that the only way to express a non-correspondence view is to use the frame of reference for correspondence. For example, the statement "All truth is relative" is a narrow truth claim that this statement corresponds to reality. Furthermore, if truth is not dependent upon the facts as they correspond to reality, then any statement becomes acceptable under any condition and lying would not be possible. As stated on page 13, words compared to the thing to which they refer allow for either correspondence or non-correspondence and this allows for factual or false statements.³⁸

1. Deconstructionism

To expand on the contemporary view of relative truth, a brief examination of the movement known as deconstructionism will be helpful. This movement was founded by contemporary French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, who is an atheist regarding God and an agnostic regarding absolute truth. Derrida's focus has been on reconstructing the interpretation of a text in the form of criticism and a focus on new and deeper meanings.

³⁸ Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 742.

His movement adheres to the following six major points of view: a) *conventionalism* in which language comes before meaning and meaning is changeable in relation to a culture and a situation; b) *perspectivalism* where one's perspective colors all truth; c) *referentialism* where there is no one-to-one correspondence with words and their meanings; d) *differentialism* (every text has omitted something and that difference must be found by the reader); e) *semantic progressivism* (the complete meaning is never found and so it is always possible to deconstruct a text); and f) *solipsism* (language is limited).³⁹

As we focus on language within deconstructionism, we see that there has been a perversion in meaning of long-held foundational concepts and this perversion is especially noticeable in the sphere of language since language is the expression of our inner person in thought and belief. Besides being limited, language is no longer based in logic, but rather in rhetoric and so it is possible for ideas to vary with the circumstance. The history of Western philosophy is also rejected and is in a constant process of self-destruction and reconstruction. All meaning is dependent on the reality that life changes and difference is the key to meaning.⁴⁰ This line of Derrida's thinking can be seen to have the influence of Hegel insofar as he relativized truth. With this superstructure in place, there can be no logical foundation for reality itself. We see from the above description that language is limited allowing meaning to be changeable and subjective. This places human communication outside the possibility of completeness in the sense that no foundational meaning is possible, including the meaning of truth. In this context, relationships naturally fall into disarray since trust has been lost in an historical or

³⁹ Ibid., 192-93.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 193-94.

contemporary sense. Postmodernism is the popular term for this view and relativism is one of its major out workings.

2. Problems with the View of Relative Truth

Despite these views of the changing nature of meaning and therefore, of truth, it is important to remember that these are *descriptions* of truth, not *explanations* of the actual nature of truth. Geisler emphasizes that “Factual truth is that which corresponds to the facts.”⁴¹ There are popular claims that truth has and must change with the times since many historical truth statements have been proven wrong today. In such cases it can be seen that a false belief has been changed to a true one (i.e. the world is flat vs. the world is round). Likewise, some statements can be true for only one/some, but in these cases, those affected are in that particular statement’s universe of discourse. “I am tired this evening” is true only about me at this moment in time, but it is also true for everyone everywhere about me at this moment in time.⁴² Changing beliefs due to changing knowledge and truth within a universe of discourse notwithstanding, the actual nature of truth is that it must be absolute and unchanging in order to fall under the category of truth itself, in opposition to its antonym, falsity.

Where then, does that leave relative truth? One problem that relativists face is that they usually believe that relative truth is true for everyone everywhere. But this is a contradiction in itself and places them in the category of being an absolutist. Geisler puts it well when he says, “Either the claim that truth is relative is an absolute claim, which

⁴¹ Ibid., 743.

⁴² Ibid.

would falsify the relativist position, or it is an assertion that can never really be made, because every time you make it you have to add another 'relatively'. . . . The relativist stands on the pinnacle of an absolute truth and wants to relativize everything else."⁴³ The impossible would have to be actual in a world of relative truths since a statement may be true for me but false for you. Something could then be true for one religion but its opposite would still be true for another religion. But since opposites cannot both be true at the same time and in the same sense, this would be an impossible contradiction.

Likewise, in a relative world, nothing would ever be right or wrong. The individual would always be right, no matter the consequences to himself or society. Relativists however, object to absolute truth on several grounds including the charge that since there is no absolute knowledge of all truths then truth itself cannot be absolute. As stated on page 18 though, knowledge is always in the process of discovery and so understanding will also change with new discoveries. It is not the truth itself that changes but rather our understanding of the truth that changes. Another objection is that there is no new truth if truth is absolute. But as stated above, our discovery of new things, or even the arrival of new minutes and hours, make new 'truths' possible. Again, it is our understanding of truth that is incomplete and in change, not truth itself. The objection that truth is narrow is a necessary characteristic of truth, no matter what the subject matter. Tests for truth can be applied in many ways, but the nature of truth is such that it

⁴³ Ibid., 744.

can be understood in only one way, and that is the correspondence of a truth statement to its object.⁴⁴

3. Consequences of the View that Truth is Relative

A. Moral Relativism

Does it matter, then if we view truth as a correspondence to the reality of the object it describes or simply as changeable according to the circumstances in that it is personal and subjective? Is what truth *does* important? In an attempt to answer that question, we must look at the moral nature of truth, one spoke within the larger umbrella of the concept of truth. This spoke of truth tends to exhibit human attitudes and beliefs through external behavior and so the *do-ing* aspect of truth becomes more apparent here.

It can be seen that when truth itself becomes relative to the situation or person, it follows that morality also becomes relative, or changing, in nature. Webster defines the word *moral* as “of, pertaining to, or concerned with the principles or rules of right conduct or the distinction between right and wrong . . .”⁴⁵ and *morals* as “principles or habits with respect to right or wrong conduct.”⁴⁶ If we are to subscribe to the plain English meaning of the word then, the concepts of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ must be included even when we speak of the relative nature of moral knowledge. The inclusion of the word ‘relative’ with ‘moral’ or ‘morality’ must be defined then as right or wrong behavior dependent for its meaning of rightness or wrongness upon an external

⁴⁴ Ibid., 744-45.

⁴⁵ *Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* (1996), s.v. “moral.”

⁴⁶ Ibid., s.v. “morals.”

circumstance that will vary according to the individual and his *present* environment. It must also follow that “Instead of morality constraining pleasures . . . the pleasures define morality.”⁴⁷ A purely personal, changeable standard is called upon to define and then put into practice this individual spoke within the larger umbrella of truth, and the truth implied in this concept is relative truth, not absolute truth.

B. Problems Within the System

There are some inherent problems with this view of morality and one of the most prominent is, as stated above, due to the insistence that the moral issue in question must be true for everyone, and so the moral relativist is placed in the absolutist camp, which in turn falsifies the relativist position. Another problem is that it would be possible for two opposing moral views to be true, logical and livable at the same time and in the same sense, but if we subscribe to the logicity of the law of non-contradiction, that is an impossibility. And finally, moral relativism would disallow the notion of ‘wrongness’ since no one could ever be wrong if they are holding to and living out their own personal view of a moral situation.⁴⁸ Therefore, anarchy would rule the land since no law could be enforced to hold anyone personally accountable for their choices without an understanding of the meaning of ‘wrong’. This only leads to more confusion since the definition of moral relativism must include the concepts of both ‘rightness’ and ‘wrongness’ that are dependent upon an external circumstance and will vary with the individual and his

⁴⁷ Francis J. Beckwith and Gregory Koukl, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 21.

⁴⁸ Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 744.

particular environment. Who could be the judge of right or wrong in such a case since each individual has the right to believe what he chooses when he chooses to believe it?

A case in point of this dilemma is the Cincinnati trial of the pornographic ‘art-work’ of Robert Maplethorpe, a still-life photographer, who exhibited, among other provoking photographs, a man expelling a stream of urine into another man’s mouth. Each of his photographs was acquitted of the charge of pornography and judged to be fine art since the jury considered the composition and lighting contained in the works to be of more importance than the reality depicted. Social commentator and radio talk-show host Dennis Prager commented, “. . . if some of the leading artists in a civilization see a man urinating in another man’s mouth and see composition and lighting and do not see their civilization being pissed upon, we are in trouble.”⁴⁹ And so, if, as Zacharias and Schaeffer observed, truth has died in modern society, then it would follow that we cannot know anything for certain and without a foundation that is laid in reality and certainty, our civilization as we know it is indeed doomed.

C. The Seven Fatal Flaws of Moral Relativism

It may be enlightening to explore Gregory Koukl’s examination of the seven fatal flaws of moral relativism that ultimately expose it as an empty view of human morality.

1. “Relativists can’t accuse others of wrongdoing.”—This results in our inability to make moral judgment toward any action at all.
2. “Relativists can’t complain about the problem of evil.”—There must be an objective standard of moral good with which to compare moral evil if it is

⁴⁹ Francis J. Beckwith and Gregory Koukl, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 23.

admitted that evil exists. But such a standard is denied in relativism since morals are always personal in relation to the subject and so there will only be different opinions about what is good or bad.

3. “Relativists can’t place blame or accept praise.”—Since an objective standard to define what should be blamed or praised is disallowed, then the concepts are meaningless.
4. “Relativists can’t make charges of unfairness or injustice.”—As in the above, these concepts are meaningless without an objective standard of fair nor the possibility of blame.
5. “Relativists can’t improve their morality.”—Personal ethics can change, but without an objective standard of conduct, ‘better’ cannot be attained.
6. “Relativists can’t hold meaningful moral discussions.”—There must be a universal moral standard/value system guiding any ethical discussion.
7. “Relativists can’t promote the obligation of tolerance.”—Although a key virtue in relativism, tolerance is self-refuting since without objective rules, it is not possible to require tolerance equally of all people.⁵⁰

Conclusion

The question of what truth *is* was observed in the thinking of both Anselm and Aquinas and led them to the conclusion that a) truth is eternal, b) there is one truth upon which all truths are based, c) and that truth in meaning depends on whether the truth claim conforms with external reality. This led us to examine absolute truth through means of the correspondence theory of truth, put simply by Augustine, “The true is that

⁵⁰ Ibid., 61-69.

which is.”⁵¹ A truth statement conforms with its object in real space, time and history and its obviousness to the human mind is its strongest argument. There are various objections to this theory put forward by James, Hegel, and Kierkegaard but it was seen that using experience as a base for truth and eliminating the objective realm in truth leads to faulty thinking.

Relative truth, on the other hand, is a truth claim that is dependent on an individual and his environment and so cannot function independently of the person or situation. The contemporary view of relative truth relies heavily on the deconstructionist theory of Derrida, focusing on the view that texts must be deconstructed to find new and deeper meanings and that there is no one-to-one correspondence of words with their meanings. With this view in place, though, it was seen that there could be no base for reality and so no possibility for meaning to exist, eliminating truth in the final analysis.

What truth *does*, as viewed through the lens of relative morality exhibited a purely personal standard of morality where rightness and wrongness are individually determined. Many inherent problems were found in this system, with two of the most destructive being, 1) the fact that two opposing moral views could be true, which is in opposition to the law of non-contradiction, and 2) the concept of ‘wrongness’ would not be possible. Koukl’s seven fatal flaws to moral relativism also exposed the bankruptcy of this moral system.

⁵¹ *The Collected Works of Saint Thomas Aquinas, The Disputed Questions on Truth*, vol. 1, trans. Robert William Mulligan, S. J. (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1952), 3. URL = <http://alias.libraries.psu.edu/eresources/PASTMASTERS>.

With these arguments in mind, the logical conclusion to the question of what truth *is* can be answered again by Augustine, “The true is that which is.” A truth statement must correspond with its object/referent in order to allow for meaning and understanding to take place. It can be concluded too that what truth *does* is an important aspect of our belief in what truth *is* in that it is a belief that affects all human thought and actions.

And so we end as we began, with an observation by Weaver as he proposed a change in the direction that modern man of 1948 had chosen. “Now the return which the idealists propose is not a voyage backward through time but a return to center, which must be conceived metaphysically or theologically. They are seeking the one which endures and not the many which change and pass, and this search can be only described as looking for the truth.”⁵²

⁵² Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 52.

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