

THE CRITERION OF TRUTH

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THE STATED object of science is to discover truths about the natural world through strictly objective observation, experimental verification and theoretical explanations, free from all subjective biases. Testability and reproducibility of laws so discovered are the criterion of truth so far as modern science is concerned. Though science has made remarkable progress in unravelling laws of the physical world by empirical and inductive methods, and in their practical applications, leading scientists however confess that they have failed to develop a unified science with a single set of assumptions and terms to explain all observations as aspects of one coherent whole. In other words, they are still in search of one single universal principle, theoretical formulation of which will reconcile many different specialized observations resolvable into one grand synthetic whole which explains all the mysteries of the natural world. They admit that such a universal unifying principle alone is truth and that its discovery, by means of inductive method they adhere to, is still a far cry.

Each one of the many sects of the world religions, resting on "Revelation," lays claim to be the sole possessor of truth. Inasmuch as there is no other fertile source of mutual hatred and strife in the world than differences between the various religious sects, it is evident that none of them has the whole truth. Whatever truth they had originally possessed has been so mixed up with human error and superstitions over the centuries that they either repel and cause the reasoning and thinking portions of humanity to fall into agnosticism, or induce blind faith and superstitions in unthinking portions of the public who willingly submit to priestly authority.

Many a man and woman of the world, wearied of the endless seeking of pleasures of life which they have ascertained by long experience to be insatiable, begin to search for truth about the meaning and purpose of life. The first difficulty they encounter in their search is the confusion caused in their minds while deciding which of the many religions, religious practices and philosophies that are presented to them is true, and who among the many persons claiming to be teachers can be trusted. Not infrequently many among the seekers of truth lose their way in this maze because of the lack of knowledge on their part of the criterion of truth by which to judge genuineness or otherwise of the many systems of thought and practices presented to them.

Before we can form a clear conception of the criterion of truth, we must first understand what is Truth and where it is to be found. A clue to this profound question is suggested by the Teacher, H.P.B., in her monumental work, *Isis Unveiled* (II, 121):

Among thousands of exoteric or popular conflicting religions which have been propagated since the days when the first men were enabled to interchange their ideas, not a nation, not a people, nor the most abject tribe, but after their own fashion has believed in an Unseen God, the First Cause of unerring and immutable laws, and in the immortality of our spirit. No creed, no false philosophy, no religious exaggerations, could ever destroy that feeling. It must, therefore, be based upon an absolute truth. On the other hand, every one of the numberless religions and religious sects views the Deity after its own fashion; and, fathering on the unknown its own speculations, it enforces these purely human outgrowths of overheated imagination on the ignorant masses, and calls them "revelation." [Italics ours]

One has, therefore, to search for the Truth underlying the universe, the Unseen God, in the immortality of one's indwelling spirit, and not outside, nor in the distorted formulations of it as dogmas of every religion. Absolute Truth being boundless and Eternal is reflected in every atom and dwells in the hearts of all beings. "In proportion as our consciousness is elevated towards absolute truth, so do we men assimilate it more or less absolutely," writes H.P.B. (*U.L.T. Pamphlet No. 17*, p. 2). While average mortals are overshadowed by the divine SELF some rare individuals succeed in assimilating their purified consciousness with their immortal Spirit and become divine. Only such can be said to be in possession of absolute truth. Such are the great Adepts, Jivanmuktas. But even

the greatest Adepts can reveal only so much of the universal truth to the degree the mind of the seeker after truth is susceptible of being impressed upon by it. Hence, "In every age there have been Sages who had mastered the absolute and yet could teach but relative truths" (ibid.). For, it is the immutable law of spiritual evolution that each one has to find final knowledge in himself, by his own exertions, and that the Teacher can but point the way. Teachers say: "Man has to know himself, i.e., acquire the inner perceptions which never deceive, before he can master any absolute truth" (ibid. p. 4). The supreme sacrifice and unswerving love of Truth required on the part of the seeker to realize absolute Truth is stated by the Teacher thus :

On the plane of spirituality, to reach the Sun of Truth we must work in dead earnest for the development of our higher nature. We know that by paralyzing gradually within ourselves the appetites of the lower personality, and thereby deadening the voice of the purely physiological mind — that mind which depends upon, and is inseparable from, its medium or vehicle, the organic brain — the animal in us may make room for the spiritual; and once aroused from its latent state, the highest spiritual senses and perceptions grow in us in proportion, and develop *pari passu* with the "divine man." This is what the great adepts, the Yogis in the East and the Mystics in the West, have always done and are still doing. (U.L.T. Pamphlet No. 17, pp. 2-3)

But this is not easy. The great—almost insurmountable— difficulty, especially for the modern man, in the way of acquisition of absolute Truth is stated by the Teacher to be as difficult for the average mortal as trying to reach the moon on a bicycle. "The fair heavenly maiden descends only on a (to her) congenial soil—the soil of an impartial, unprejudiced mind, illuminated by pure Spiritual Consciousness." (ibid., p. 4)

Therefore, the first step in the long and arduous journey in the quest of truth is to assure oneself of the verity that one universal Eternal Wisdom-Religion has always existed, being the basis of all world religions, sciences and philosophies. A fraternity of great Adepts are its custodians, who impart as much of the Truth to different nations at various times, according to cyclic law, as the peoples of the times are fit to receive and assimilate it. The seeker must then seek that one universal unitary basis of them all, the synthesis of Science, Religion and Philosophy—now promulgated by Adepts, naming it Theosophy. It is only through comparative study of World Religions and Philosophies in the light of Theosophy that one can comprehend, with one's reasoning and intuitive faculties, the common basis of them all, and the criterion by which to judge and apprehend truth in all things.

The Great Master, the Maha-Chohan, struck the key-note of the criterion of Truth: "The true religion and philosophy offer the solution of every problem" (U.L.T. Pamphlet No. 33, p. 5). None of the existing religions, sciences and philosophies are capable of it, though in every one of them may be found scattered a few fragments of that one true religion and philosophy alluded to by the Master.

Mr. Judge shows in a comprehensive way, in his work, *An Epitome of Theosophy*, the vital questions which every truth seeker asks but answers to which cannot be found in any of the existing religions and science, and that satisfactory explanation can be found most reliably in the philosophy of Theosophy: The object, use, and inhabitation of other planets than the earth; geological cataclysms on the earth; absence of intermediate types of the fauna on it; the occurrence of architectural and other relics of races now lost, about which modern science has only vain conjecture; the nature of extinct civilizations and the cause of their extinction; the persistence of savagery and the unequal development of the existing civilizations; differences, physical and internal, between the various races of men; the line of future development; the contrasts and unisons of world's faiths, and the common foundation underlying them all; existence of evil, of suffering, and of sorrow, which bewilders alike the philanthropists and the theologians; inequalities of social condition and privilege; the sharp contrast between wealth and poverty, intelligence and stupidity, culture and ignorance, virtue and vileness; the appearance of geniuses in families destitute of it, and of other facts which conflict with the law of heredity; frequent cases of unfitness of environment around individuals, so sore as to embitter disposition, hamper aspiration, and paralyze endeavour; the violent antithesis between character and condition; the occurrence of accident, misfortune and untimely death; possession of extraordinary psychic and spiritual powers and knowledge by rare individuals, failure of conventional religions to bring about reform of social iniquities and abuses, and to instill the ideal of Brotherhood and elevate humanity.

To say that such puzzles of life are mere accidents of nature, as some of the leaders of science say, is untenable as it contradicts the basic proposition of science that universe is governed by natural laws, and it would be illogical to say that the universe is partly governed by law and partly by chance happenings. It will be equally pernicious to take the position as theologians do that all this is due to an inscrutable God's Will.

In the Theosophical doctrines of common origin of man and the universe, both constituted of one universal essence, evolving under one and the same Cosmic laws towards the common goal of universal divine perfection through planetary and racial cycles, all subservient to, and evolving under the Law of all laws—Karma and Reincarnation—and all bound together in an indissoluble bond of Universal Brotherhood: in this all-inclusive body of philosophical, scientific and ethical doctrine alone is found the solution to every problem of life and every mystery of nature. It is not a mere theory but all of it can be demonstrated to reason, and the means and the way by which anyone can ascertain the truths of the doctrine for oneself is shown. Says the Great Master of the criterion of Truth:

That the world is in such a bad condition, morally, is a conclusive evidence that none of its religions and philosophies—those of the civilized races less than any other—has ever possessed the TRUTH. The right and logical explanations on the subject of the problems of the great dual principles, right and wrong, good and evil, liberty and despotism, pain and pleasure, egotism and altruism, are as impossible to them now as they were 1886 years ago. They are as far from the solution as they ever were; but to these problems there must be somewhere a consistent solution, and if our doctrines will show their competence to offer it, then the world will be the first to confess that there must be the true philosophy, the true religion, the true light, which gives truth and nothing but the TRUTH. (U.L.T. Pamphlet No. 33, pp. 5-6)

OF WHATSOEVER teachings, Gotamid, thou canst assure thyself thus: “These doctrines conduce to passions, not to dispassion; to bondage, not to detachment; to increase of (worldly) gains, not to decrease of them; to covetousness, not to frugality; to discontent, and not to content; to company, not to solitude; to sluggishness, not to energy; to delight in evil, not to delight in good;” of such teachings thou mayest with certainty affirm, Gotamid, “This is not the Norm. This is not the Discipline. This is not the Master's Message.”

But of whatsoever teachings thou canst assure thyself (that they are the opposite of these things that I have told you)—of such teachings thou mayest with certainty affirm: “This is the Norm. This is the Discipline. This is the Master's Message.”

With complete intellectual detachment and freedom from preconception, he [Buddha] surveyed them [contemporary teachings]...and followed the Middle Path of accepting as part of his own Teaching whatever was conducive to the attainment of the...heights of Liberation, and rejecting as false and wrong whatever hindered, or retarded, or even merely did not help, in the process of spiritual ascent.

—A Survey of Buddhism

Criteria of truth

From Wikipedia, items for reflection and discussion:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criteria_of_truth

In **epistemology**, **criteria of truth** (or **tests of truth**) are standards and rules used to judge the accuracy of statements and claims. They are tools of verification. Understanding a **philosophy's** criteria of **truth** is fundamental to a clear evaluation of that philosophy. This necessity is driven by the varying, and conflicting, claims of different philosophies. The rules of **logic** have no ability to distinguish truth on their own. An individual must determine what standards distinguish truth from **falsehood**. Not all criteria are equally valid. Some standards are sufficient, while others are questionable.^[1]

The criteria listed represent those most commonly used by scholars and the general public.^[2] Jonathan Dolhenty states there seem to be only three functional, effective tests of truth. He lists these as the correspondence, coherence and pragmatic **theories of truth**.^[3]

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Authority[edit]

See also: *Appeal to authority*

The opinions of those with significant experience, highly trained or possessing an advanced degree are often considered a form of **proof**. Their **knowledge** and familiarity within a given field or area of knowledge command respect and allow their statements to be criteria of truth. A person may not simply declare themselves an authority, but rather must be properly qualified. Despite the wide respect given to **expert testimony**, it is not an infallible criterion. For example, multiple authorities may conflict in their claims and conclusions.[4]

Coherence[edit]

See also: *Coherence theory of truth*

Coherence refers to a consistent and overarching explanation for all facts. To be coherent, all pertinent facts must be arranged in a consistent and cohesive fashion as an integrated whole. The theory which most effectively reconciles all facts in this fashion may be considered most likely to be true. Coherence is the most potentially effective test of truth because it most adequately addresses all elements. The main limitation lies not in the standard, but in the **human inability** to acquire all facts of an experience. Only an **omniscient** mind could be aware of all of the relevant information. A scholar must accept this limitation and accept as true the most coherent explanation for the available facts. Coherence is difficult to dispute as a criterion of truth, since arguing against coherence is validating incoherence, which is inherently illogical.[5]

Consensus gentium[edit]

See also: *Argumentum ad populum*

Some view opinions held by all people to be valid criteria of truth. According to *consensus gentium*, the universal consent of all mankind, all humans holding a distinct belief proves it is true. There is some value in the criterion if it means innate truth, such as the laws of logic and **mathematics**. If it merely means agreement, as in a unanimous vote, its value is questionable. For example, general assent once held the **earth was flat** and that the **sun revolved about the earth**. [6]

Consistency (mere)[edit]

Mere **consistency** is when correct statements do not contradict, but are not necessarily related. Accordingly, an individual is consistent if he does not contradict himself. It is inadequate as a criterion because it treats facts in an isolated fashion without true cohesion and integration; nevertheless it remains a **necessary condition** for the truth of any argument, owing to the **law of noncontradiction**. The value of a proof largely lies in its ability to reconcile individual facts into a coherent whole.[7]

Consistency (strict)[edit]

Strict consistency is when claims are connected in such a fashion that one statement follows from another. **Formal logic** and mathematical rules are examples of rigorous consistency. An example would be: **if all As are Bs and all Bs are Cs, then all As are Cs**. While this standard is of high value, it is limited. For example, the premises are *a priori* (or

self-apparent), requiring another test of truth to employ this criterion. Additionally, strict consistency may produce results lacking coherence and completeness. While a philosophical system may demonstrate rigorous consistency with the facts it considers, all facts must be taken into consideration for an adequate criterion of truth, regardless of their detriment to any given system.[7]

Correspondence[edit]

See also: *Correspondence theory of truth*

See also: *Scientific method*

Correspondence is quite simply when a claim corresponds with its object. For example, the claim that the White House is in Washington, D.C. is true, if the White House is actually located in Washington. Correspondence is held by many philosophers to be the most valid of the criteria of truth. An idea which corresponds to its object is indeed true, but determining if the correspondence is perfect requires additional tests of truth. This indicates that correspondence is a perfectly valid *definition* of truth, but is not of itself a valid criterion of truth. An additional test beyond this "definition" is required to determine the precise degree of similarity between what is posited and what exists in [objective reality](#). [8]

Custom[edit]

Most people consciously or unknowingly employ [custom](#) as a criterion of truth, based on the assumption that doing what is customary will prevent error. It is particularly applied in the determination of moral truth and reflected in the statement "when in Rome, do as the Romans do". People stick closely to the principle of custom when they use common vernacular, wear common fashions and so forth; essentially, when they do what is [popular](#). Custom is not considered a serious, or valid, test of truth. For example, public opinion polls do not determine truth.[9]

Emotions[edit]

Many people allow feelings to determine judgment, often in the face of contrary evidence or without even attempting to collect evidence and facts. They are implicitly accepting [emotions](#) as a criterion of truth. Most people will admit that feelings are not an adequate test for truth. For example, a seasoned businessman will put aside his emotions and search for the best available facts when making an investment. Similarly, scholars are trained to put aside such [subjective](#) judgments when evaluating knowledge.[10] Emotions are real, however, and thus must be considered within any social scientific system of coherence.

Instinct[edit]

The existence of distinct [instincts](#) has long been debated. Proponents of instinct argue that we eat because of hunger, drink because of thirst, and so forth. Some have even argued for the existence of God based on this criterion, arguing that the object of every instinct has a referent in reality. The counterpoint of hunger is food; for thirst it is liquid; for the sex drive it is a mate. Instincts are not accepted as a reliable test because they are most often indistinct, variant and difficult to define. Additionally, universal instincts are so few that they offer little to the greater body of philosophy as a criterion.[11]

Intuition[[edit](#)]

Intuition is an assumed truth with an unknown, or possibly unexamined, source. It is a judgment that is not dependent on a **rational** examination of the facts. It is usually experienced as a sudden sensation and/or rush of thoughts that feel "right". Many persons experience intuitive epiphanies which later prove to be true. Scholars have sometimes come upon valid theories and proofs while daydreaming or otherwise mentally occupied with something bearing no apparent relationship to the truth they seek to reveal. Intuition is at best a source for truths, rather than a criterion with which to evaluate them. Intuitive knowledge requires testing by means of other criteria of truth in order to confirm its accuracy.[12]

Majority rule[[edit](#)]

Majority rule is a statistical method of accepting assertions and proposals. In **democratic systems**, majority rule is used to determine group decisions, particularly those relating to personal **morality** and **social behavior**. Some systems divided into several oppositional factions may depend on mere **plurality**. While majority rule may make for a good democratic system, it is a poor determinant of truth, subject to the criticisms of the broad version of *consensus gentium*. [6]

Naïve Realism[[edit](#)]

Naïve Realism posits that only that which is directly observable by the **human senses** is true. First-hand observation determines the truth or falsity of a given statement. Naïve Realism is an insufficient criterion of truth. A host of natural phenomena are demonstrably true, but not observable by the unaided sense. For example, Naïve Realism would deny the existence of **sounds beyond the range of human hearing** and the existence of **x-rays**. Similarly, there are a number of sense experiments which show a disconnect between the perceived sensation and the reality of its cause. [13]

Pragmatic[[edit](#)]

See also: [Pragmatic theory of truth](#)

See also: [Scientific method](#)

If an idea works then it must be true, to the Pragmatist. The consequences of applying a concept reveal its **truth value** upon examination of the results. The full meaning of an idea is self-apparent in its application. For example, the therapeutic value and effect of penicillin in relation to infections is proven in its administration. Although **Pragmatism** is considered a valuable criterion, it must be used with caution and reservation, due to its potential for false positives. For example, a doctor may prescribe a patient medication for an illness, but it could later turn out that a placebo is equally effective. Thus, untrue concepts could appear to be working contrary to the purpose of the pragmatic test. However, it has validity as a test, particularly in the form **William Ernest Hocking** called "Negative Pragmatism". In essence, it states that ideas that do not work cannot possibly be true, though ideas which do work may or may not be true. [14]

Revelation[[edit](#)]

The principal distinction between intuition and **revelation** is that revelation has an assumed source: **God** (or another higher power). Revelation may be defined as truth emanating from God. Many **religions** fundamentally rely on revelation as a test of truth. This criterion

is subject to the same criticisms as intuition. It may be a valid reference of truth for an individual, but it is inadequate for providing a coherent proof of the knowledge to others. [15]

Time[edit]

Time is a criterion commonly appealed to in debate, often referred to as "[the test of time](#)". This criterion posits that over time erroneous beliefs and logical errors will be revealed, while if the belief is true, the mere passage of time cannot adversely affect its [validity](#). Time is an inadequate test for truth, since it is subject to similar flaws as custom and tradition (which are simply specific variations of the time factor). Many demonstrably false beliefs have endured for centuries and even millennia (e.g. [vitalism](#)). It is commonly rejected as a valid criterion. For example, most people will not convert to another faith simply because the other religion is centuries (or even millennia) older than their current beliefs. [16]

Tradition[edit]

[Tradition](#), closely related to custom, is the standard stating that which is held for generations is true. Those accepting tradition argue that ideas gaining the loyalty multiple generations possesses a measure of credibility. Tradition possesses many of the same failings as custom. It is possible for falsehoods to be passed down from generation to generation, since tradition generally emphasizes repetition over [critical evaluation](#). [9]

Devotional Reading: The Gayatri mantra

The Gayatri Mantra, also known as the Savitri, is the most ancient mantra known to man. In Sanskrit, it is "Om bhur bhuvah svaha! Tat savitur varenyam, bhargo devasya dhimahi, dhiyo yo nah prachodayat." One English translation is "OM. We meditate on the effulgent glory of the true Divine Sun that pervades earth, sky, and the heavens, from whom all proceed and to whom all must return. Shine as the light of Consciousness in our intellects and burn away our ignorance with the wisdom of the highest Truth." another translation is "THAT which giveth sustenance to the Universe and to ourselves, from which all doth proceed, and unto which all must return — THAT THOU ART. In the golden vase of thine earthly body, may the pure Light of the Spiritual Sun shine forth, that thou may'st know the Truth, and do thy whole duty, on thy journey back to the Sacred Seat!"

In Devanagari:

ॐ भूर् भुवः स्वः । तत्सवितुर्वरेण्यं भर्गो देवस्य धीमहि । धियो यो नः प्रचोदयात् ॥