

Truth: How Do You Know When You've Found It?

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March 16, 2008

An explorer is seeking a secret city that no other of his kind has yet found. He struggles through a jungle inhabited by two tribes—one, which always tells the truth, and the other, which always lies. But since they dress alike, he cannot tell one tribe from the other. To make matters more difficult, both tribes are known to kill a person who asks more than one question. The explorer comes to a fork in the road. One way leads to the ancient city; the other leads deeper into the jungle from which no explorers has ever returned. A single native sits near the two paths. If the explorer asks him which road to take, how will he know if he has heard the truth?

How do you know when you have found the truth? Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, in his book *Truth: A History and a Guide for the Perplexed*, tells us we have, historically, relied on four methods of knowing truth. He calls them *The Truth You Feel* (intuition), *The Truth You Are Told* (authority), *The Truth of Reason* (rational thought), and *The Truth You Perceive Through Your Senses* (sensing). I confess I promptly chose my favorite and my least favorite without thought. *Scratch authority*, I told myself, *and trust intuition. Then think it through and don't believe everything you see.* I realized, almost as rapidly, that circumstances could change my choice and I might be happy to have a varied repertoire. So I did something wild and radical: I read the whole book.

This is not a book review. If you want to know what Fernandez-Armesto says, you'll have to read the book yourself. I simply took his framework and built into it stories I think I understand, and memories I have gathered as useful. I will quote him from time-to-time, but I take a different approach to the issue than he. He is looking for an historical record of truth-gathering. I contend that all four methods run parallel courses throughout an individual life – at least they have in my life.

I rather like Francis Bacon's take on the matter of truth-seeking when he wrote, "The inquiry of truth, which is the love-making or wooing of it, the knowledge of truth, which is the presence of it, and the belief of truth, which is the enjoying of it, is the sovereign good of human nature." Love it and woo it; know it and appreciate it; believe it and enjoy it. So let *us* proceed to woo truth, that we might know it and know we know it, and that we might enjoy it.

There was a time in my religious life when I was an avowed atheist. Not an agnostic, which I saw as wishy-washy; not a freethinker, which the deists were called; and not a nonbeliever, a name often given to those not raised as Christians. No, I was an out-and-proud atheist. It was during that cantankerous quadrant of my life that I heard a Catholic priest intone his own beliefs saying, "There are no atheists; there are only people who think they are."

Oh, I was angry. I thought I was angry because he disagreed with me and used his role authority to put me down. Later I realized I was angry because I couldn't mount any argument against him other than returning his own argument: "There are no believers; there are only people who think they are." But it was lame, and I knew it. I couldn't prove to him there was no god and he couldn't prove to me that there was. Where lay the truth?

Some years later, I had a minister who called himself a Buddhist and an atheist. Someone challenged him on the certainty of his statement. "Aren't you being just as doctrinaire as a theist in making such a bold claim that there is no god – none?" he was asked. "Yes," my minister replied. "But it is a belief I hold intuitively. It is a presence within me. I can only name it and live my life as if it were true."

I felt better about my own belief after that. My intuition in other matters was proving more and more reliable. Why not trust my instinctual reaction to religious truth as well?

Fernandez-Armesto insists it is not an uncommon way of approaching belief. He writes, "If our common metaphorical language is anything to go by, the recognition mechanism most generally used is feeling. Outside the symposium and the laboratory, people rarely suppose a more demanding test than that of their own emotional reactions."

Once I let go of my anger and the need to prove my intuition, I was much better equipped to move on to other ways of recognizing truth. But here is a caveat about intuition: truth-feeling can function as truth-recognition only in a society where a coherent world-view is widely shared. People who attend a particular church usually share a world view and intuitive belief is often sufficient for them. But the truth so received does not always translate outside its walls.

I want to tell you an ancient Sufi story about a school of fish.

Now once upon a time a school of fish had met in council to discuss the tale (familiar to all) that fish had life and breathed and took existence from one source: The Water. Furthermore, all which lives from Water gains its living, finds its life in Water. Water's fame fills all the world and Water fills the oyster's ear with pearl, the eyes of heavy clouds with mercy, the mouth of dust with flowing bounty. All the earth has pledged its soul as mortgage to this source, this element which with one drop renews the world—which with such light abounds, it seems that Heaven's very eye is fixed upon it.

Well, in their council, the fish began to argue. That is what the story says; let us simply believe it, says one fish. Another gave warning of what it meant to believe anything without proof: “Without hard facts, who knows what is true?” Yet another argued for intuition. “Believe what lies within.” You see, they had heard of Water all their lives, but they had never seen it.

They take their council to an ancient sage fish and say to him, *We have been told that Water is the source and origin of all, the ferment of all union and all separation; but how strange this seems to us, how hard to grasp, since we have never seen this Water, not a one of us, not once in all our lives! Not a trace of Him, this fabled Water, not a single drop before our eyes has fallen.*

And the ancient one, in the paradoxical voice of mystics, responds, *Ah, fish! If you could bring from all existence one thing, and one thing alone that is not Water, then I might reveal to you the Essence which you seek.*

The story, of course, is designed to help the human believer understand that all is God and God is all, and no further proof is necessary, because what is, is. But if you are the least bit skeptical, as were some fish, then you must seek other ways of discovering the truths about life.

As Unitarian Universalists we are descended from two of the three inter-related tribes known as the “the people of the book.” There are, in truth, three books—the Hebrew bible, the Christian bible, and the Muslim Qu’ran. Within the Christian community, there is a fourth in the Book of Mormon. These scriptures constitute, for those who believe in them, the truth that is told. They are passed on, modified and controlled by the formulators of doctrine and dogma. They are embedded in structures of authority and assent. They are revered and appreciated, because truth is in them and there is no need to seek further. This is not a failure of thought, but a structure of comfort and strength on which to build a life.

We have a large body of literature to tell us what happens when authority and assent go too far. I think of the Orwellian concepts revealed in *1984* and *Brave New Worlds* that warn us of such dangers. Or consider the irony of W. H. Auden, in his commentary, *In Time of War*.

By wire and wireless, in a score of bad translations,/ They give their simple message to the world of man:/ Man can have Unity if Man will give up Freedom./ The State is real, the Individual is wicked;/ Violence shall synchronize your movements like a tune./ And Terror like a frost shall halt the flood of thinking./ Barrack and bivouac shall be your friendly refuge,/ And racial pride shall tower like a public column/ And confiscate for safety every private sorrow./ Leave Truth to the police and us; we know the Good;/ We build the Perfect City time shall never alter; / Our Law shall guard you always like a cirque of mountains./ Your Ignorance keep off evil like a dangerous sea;/ You shall be consummated in the General Will./ Your children innocent and charming as the beasts.

Oh, we Unitarian Universalists are very, very good at questioning authority, mocking authority, arguing against authority, sniffing out the grey rot of authority that corrodes our freedom. Yet, without authority of some kind, without a center, without an organization and a common world-view, we would feel quite bereft of some assurance that cannot be had by intuition, or reason, or data. I hear the newcomers that arrive at our door saying, “I feel as if I have come home. Here I can believe what is right for me.” And yes, that is our claim, but I contend that as human beings we are seeking an authority that allows us to believe that we need not accept, without further study and revision, the truths we are told. It is nearly impossible to reject authoritative truth without some kind of mutual support. That is what we give one another. Such support, I contend, is simply another kind of authority.

If we were to put the methods for truth-seeking to a vote, my guess is that the majority of votes in this hall would go to reason. Reason has long been a standard in the Unitarian and Universalist Churches. We come from a long line of reasoners, preceding Emerson and post-dating Buckminster Fuller.

“As a way of telling truth from falsehood,” suggests Fernandez-Armesto, “reason combines apparently incompatible virtues: it relies on our own resources but can be subjected to an outside test. It can be checked by comparison with others’ opinion or by reference to rules. It is subjectively satisfying, but externally approved.” It is, when all is said and done, not so radical a position as we had assumed. It is the middle ground of truth-seeking, a secure and comfortable place from which to argue about truth.

The cult of reason we trace back to the Greeks, but other cultures, including ancient China, have dabbled with reason and logic to make sense of the world. It is an appealing system and supported by those with intelligence enough to use it. It is hard to argue against reason with pure emotion or intuition. The playing fields are not level. They are not, often, even in the same time/space continuum. There is seldom a general appeal in reason except among the elite and only briefly has it ruled an entire society. The Age of Reason did not last and was often about something else.

One of the reasons that reason appeals to us, is not that it leads us to a confident truth, but that with our own minds we can tweak the truth until its conclusions satisfy us. G. K. Chesterton remarked that, “Reason is itself a matter of faith. It is an act of faith to assert that our thoughts have any relation to reality.”

Anaximander, a Greek philosopher of the 7th or 8th century before the Common Era, is quite possibly the first to have recorded a reasoned truth. He argued that the planet on which we live does not rest on the back of an elephant, which stands on a turtle, but is unsupported because there is no reason for it to move. It is, he claimed out of his own reasoning brain, in equilibrium, at the center of a symmetrical universe, like a fulcrum at the midpoint of a seesaw.

It is a beautiful piece of reasoning, except for one thing—it begins from a flawed premise. That, of course, is the weakness of reason. Its outcome depends upon where we start. I allow Chesterton to close this chapter with his assertion that “You can only find truth with reason if you have already found truth without it.”

I once, foolishly, got into an argument with a man who insisted he believed in nothing he could not touch, or see, or feel. He knocked loudly upon a table that lay between. “This table is solid and provable. I can see it and I believe it exists.” “Yet scientists tell us that the table at a lower level

is made up of atoms which are mostly space and not solid at all,” I suggested. “I cannot see science,” he said, ending all hope of argument or discussion.

Again we are well documented with anecdotes and stories that either endorse or invalidate the truth arrived at by the senses. There is the parable of Plato’s cave-dwellers who sit with the fire at their back and stare at the wall where their reality consists of the shadows thus thrown upon it. There is the story of the Chinese emperor who dreamed he was a butterfly and awoke to wonder if perhaps he was not now a butterfly dreaming he was a man.

Although philosophers often turn to the sense world when the reason world does not support them, they are forced to admit that illusion and perspective, among other distortions, call sense-gathered truth into question. Science and the “scientific-method” have been called into service. First you observe and then you test your data. From this you will surely discover truth.

Yet the Kukuku tribe of Papua did just that, but their truth conclusions are not shared outside their own culture. The question is this: why is the sun on rising red? They gathered their data, tested it over time, and concluded scientifically: *The sun in the morning is red because he is embarrassed by his wife’s urine, which appears on the ground as the dew left by the moon.*

You laugh, but this conclusion was reached on systematic observation of the redness of the sun and the dampness of the grass and the invariable passage of the moon through the sky during the hours of dewcast. “The difference between their science and ours,” says Fernandez-Armesto, “lies not in the incompetence or inadequacy of their observation, but in underlying assumptions about the nature of matter and the relationship of cause and effect which are themselves—for us and the Kukuku in our different ways—genuine assumption, not verifiable by observation or experiment.” What you already believe is what you tend to see as truth.

So, what is truth? Are we any closer to discovering the answer or the best way in which to seek it? I think there is not one way to discover it, but a variety. In the end I side with G. E. Lessing, an 18th century philosopher, who said, “If God were to hold out enclosed in His right hand all Truth, and in His left hand just the active search for Truth, though with the condition that I should ever err therein, and should say to me: Choose! I should humbly take His left hand and say: Give me this one; absolute truth belongs to Thee alone.”

And once again we are left to our own devices and our own preferences. We will see the truth we wish to see and it will change over time. In the meantime, we have one another to help shape our repertoire of truth-seeking. And if you do not know who always lies or who always tells the truth, then you must ask your question to the riddles of life, when you confront the tribes who always tell the truth or who always lie, in this way. You say: *If I were to ask you if this road leads to the ancient city, what would you say?* The answer will always be true.