

Truth vs. Truths: An Enduring Dilemma for Skeptics

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It is in our nature to search for truth, and because we can read the preserved words of great thinkers of the ages, our personal search is not so much for truth as among truths. We pick and choose from truths condensed and refined over thousands of years: debated truths of government and justice, revealed truths of morality and faith, reasoned truths of mathematics and philosophy, and researched truths of nature and history. We use methods inherited from one great thinker to test the assertions inherited from another, rarely noting our indebtedness to the past. But that debt exists and to repay it we must carry on the search for truth.

What is Truth?

Some see truth as self-evident, absolute, and universal, while for others truth is just a noun, open to changing definition. In fact, neither view helps us understand truth. The meaning of a word is found in its history of use, and the word truth has four histories. Consider the following assertions:

All men are created equal.

God created man.

I think, therefore I am.

Humans evolved from an earlier species.

The four statements arose in different intellectual domains, and each was evaluated and affirmed as true, but with four entirely different tests of truth. The first statement appears in the Declaration of Independence

and is one of the most thoroughly debated declarations of all time. The assertion that God created man is unequivocally affirmed in the sacred text of many religions, and its truth is taken on faith alone. Descartes could doubt the existence of everything, but he could not deny that a doubter (the thinker) existed. Finally, the assertion that humans evolved from an earlier species resulted from, and has been confirmed by, scientific research. These four methods of establishing truth reflect the four ways that the word truth is traditionally used.

Four Domains of Truth

There are four established domains of truth. They differ not only in the tests of truth they employ, but also in the types of assertions tested, the qualifications required of individuals who perform those tests, and the archives where confirmed truths are preserved.

To make comparison and discussion easier, let us give the four domains names that reflect their respective ways of establishing truth. The first domain, both historically and developmentally, is *Rhetorica*, where statements are advanced or discredited by a process of persuasion and debate, or rhetoric. With the evolution of early human civilizations, a second domain, *Mystica*, gained importance. Here, truths arose from and are found in spiritual revelation, prophesy, personal enlightenment, sacred texts, and other mystical processes. With the advent of formal education, a third domain, *Logica*, arose. In this domain, statements are tested and validated by the methods of reason - that is, by logical inference, or formal proof. In the fourth domain, *Empirica*, truth is confirmed by the documented empirical findings of research and discovery.

Each truth arises and is validated in only one of the four domains, and may not be testable in others. If a truth is tested elsewhere, it is likely to fail the test. A statement accepted as true in one domain may, therefore, receive little notice in another, and if noticed it may be treated with derision. For example, faith healing ceremonies may only amuse the elders of *Rhetorica*, *Logica* and *Empirica*, but within the borders of *Mystica* it is a widely accepted truth that faith, prayer, or religious rituals can cure the ill.

In our personal search for truth, we wander freely from one domain to another, gathering truths and incorporating them into our unique system of truths. But as we cross the border from one domain to another, we discover conflicting truths and may become confused. As we will see, this confusion often results from our failure to respect the differences among the four domains.

***Rhetorica*: The Motherland**

In *Rhetorica*, partisans argue about what is true and what is not. Applying the methods of persuasion and debate, proponents and opponents seek to convince their audiences (and each other) to accept their opinion of what is true. The arguments that prevail in public debate may become widely accepted as truth. For example, only after decades of public debate did most Americans come to see women as competent to vote - an idea once considered preposterous. Today, few Americans can understand why women were ever denied the vote.

Some people may object to the use of the term truth for debated opinions of the day, but the first step of persuasion is to convince others that we speak the truth. Consider the bold rhetoric employed in the Declaration of

Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident.” Such confidence increases the likelihood that the political arguments that followed will be accepted.

The protocols for advancing and debating the truths of *Rhetorica* have been formalized in three democratic institutions. In legislative bodies, parliamentary rules structure the debate surrounding passage of new laws. In the courts, forensic rules structure debate; while among journalists, editorial rules provide guidelines for interviews, discussions, debates, and reports. These three forums differ in formal detail but the goals of all are the same: to structure and guide debate so the truth can be discovered.

The importance of rhetorical skills in the pursuit and advocacy of truth becomes obvious when we are called to jury duty in criminal cases. As jurors, we are expected to discover what is true by witnessing a forensic debate between the prosecution and the defense and their respective witnesses, then debating with other jurors until a verdict is reached. At this solemn and poignant moment, justice often fails. Televised coverage of celebrity trials has shown that jurors who lack appreciation for the rhetorical methods used to manipulate their opinions can be blinded in their search for truth and justice. Only the wisdom of the jurors, coupled with a strict enforcement of forensic rules, can prevent a miscarriage of justice.

Consider the so-called “trial of the century” in 1995 in which O. J. Simpson was found “not guilty” of murder. Twelve jurors spent months hearing the evidence presented and debated. In this media spectacle, rhyme (“if the glove doesn’t fit you must acquit”) replaced reason while scientific facts (DNA) were relegated to the status of “expert”

opinion. The jurors sought and found truth, as defined by the rules enforced by the court. The judge allowed such unfettered flights of rhetoric that even a guilty defendant might have been convinced of his innocence. The jurors were not convinced that the assertions of guilt were true, and they found the defendant not guilty.

Even when rules of rhetoric are strictly enforced, partisans are free to take liberties with truths imported from the other three domains. Debaters may draw from popular revelations and prophecies, misrepresent facts of science and history, and make a mockery of the rules of reason, all in order to promote their arguments and win the debate. In the end, jurors, or the media audience, or voters accept one argument and assert that they have discovered the “truth.” And according to the rules of *Rhetorica*, they have.

***Mystica*: The Holy Land**

We learn early in life that debate is not the only path to truth. There are some assertions that we are not allowed to question or to doubt. In formal ceremonies, we are introduced to sacred truths that are presented as final and certain, and we are told to accept these truths on faith alone. We read the truths revealed to ancient prophets, memorize sacred verses, and hear stories of religious struggles. From these experiences we learn that truths based on faith alone have no limits. Spirits can roam the earth and inhabit rocks, plants, and humans, life can be eternal, and miracles are possible.

To the uninitiated, religious revelations often appear incredible. Consider these revealed truths drawn from the archives of respected religions:

* The Buddha, pure and like space, without shape or form, pervades all.

* Brahman, the Absolute, inhabits and totally permeates the universe, which is brought forth from its own substance.

* Allah, a supreme, personal, and inscrutable God, will punish those who turn to other gods and fail to recognize His chosen messenger, Mohammed.

* He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.

Most believers would identify one of these statements - the one drawn from their own religious tradition - as true, and the other three as misguided or perhaps blasphemous.

Modern democracies typically permit free expression of personal beliefs, whether based in formal theology, political ideology, mysticism, superstition, or even delusion. Granted such freedom, we can and do assert our beliefs as truth.

What we choose to take on faith cannot be tested with the methods of debate, reason, or research. The rules of *Rhetorica*, *Logica*, and *Empirica* do not apply in *Mystica*. Of course, those who advocate their beliefs may use the tactics of persuasion, reason, and evidence, but their beliefs are not subject to correction by these methods. Matters of devout faith remain immune to all tests of truth. Thus it is that skeptics who challenge the truths of *Mystica* with those of *Logica* and *Empirica* are typically frustrated.

***Logica*: The Land of Reason**

Teachers in the earliest schools of philosophy relied on reason in their search for truth, and in our modern educational systems, students are required to follow the rules of reason with increasing degrees of rigor, from elementary school through college. To the extent they master these rules, they are recognized as scholars.

Over two thousand years ago, Aristotle formalized the methods of logic. Centuries later, during the Renaissance and Age of Reason, Aristotelian methods provided all scholarly disciplines with a fundamental unifying principle: Truth is revealed through reason. Today, scholars still profess *Logica*'s truths and assess the logical validity of conclusions. If the reasoning is valid, then conclusions must be accepted as true, at least within the halls of *Logica*.

Geometry and mathematics exemplify disciplines of truth within *Logica*. The Pythagorean theorem (the square of the hypotenuse of a right triangle is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides) is accepted as true because logical proofs have been devised to test and confirm it.

Descartes did not rely on the obvious evidence to confirm his own existence, but proved his existence through reason. In doubting that anything really existed, he could not rationally deny that a doubter existed - "I think, therefore I am."

Truths of *Logica* are impervious to the testing methods of the other domains. They cannot be refuted in a public debate, by a religious doctrine, or even with scientific research.

***Empirica*: The Land of Reality**

In *Empirica*, events of nature and history are rigorously researched and findings are carefully documented. Such events may be as simple and predictable as our shadows, as obvious as the print on this page, or as unapproachable as the galaxies; they may be as hidden as the core of the Earth, as complex as a human brain, or as abstract as time. Whatever the inherent difficulties posed, natural and historical objects, events, and processes eventually yield to the empirical methods of research. Facts are discovered and asserted as true.

In the fourth domain, facts are not subject to correction by public debates, spiritual revelations, or logical analysis. Researchers are notorious for flouting public opinion, popular beliefs, and even sound reasoning on their way to serendipitous discoveries about the natural world. Galileo, Darwin, and Einstein published well-known research findings that dismayed politicians, clerics, and scholars of the times.

Paradoxically, facts are never final, but rather conditional and correctable. A new research finding is typically accompanied by caveats listing the assumptions made, the limitations of the research design, and estimates of the probability that the observed events occurred purely by chance. But while research findings always remain open to correction or revision, those revisions must be based on research findings - not public debate, religious revelations, or philosophical analysis.

Scientific theories are never proven. Even when they become accepted and trusted, theories remain open to correction by future research, and the strongest statement any researcher will make about any

specific theory is to say that it has been repeatedly supported by research findings. Regardless of the many limitations of the domain of *Empirica*, newly established facts periodically redefine reality. Scientists and historians seldom use the word, but they are indeed in search of truth about reality - past, present, and future.

The Irreconcilable Nature of Truth

Only if one stays within the bounds of a single domain can the illusion of universal or absolute truth be sustained. There is no reason to assume that the truths that arise in one domain should or must agree with the truths from another, but armed with knowledge of the four different domains of truth and the ability to identify their borders, anyone can transcend the confusion and see why widely accepted truths (and those who advocate them) often do not - indeed cannot - agree.

Enduring disputes about what is true and what is not are often no more than clashes between domains. When proponents of creationism are pitted against proponents of evolution, the disagreement is not a difference of opinion, but a clash of the rules of *Mystica* with those of *Empirica*. Spiritual revelation and scientific research take us along totally different paths, not only to different truths but to different types of truth - beliefs versus facts.

Disputes between domains are inevitable, and the resulting controversies endure simply because they cannot be resolved. The domains can coexist, even within a single head, but their differences cannot be reconciled. To the extent we wish to dwell or travel in multiple domains, we must learn to accept irreconcilable truths.

If we cling to the idea that there is only one type of truth - universal truth - we will blind ourselves to the primary and enduring source of our disagreements. But when we recognize the borders and understand the rules of all four domains, we begin to understand why we disagree. Then the debate can shift from what is true to in which domain shall we search for truth.

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Source

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