

Truth, Absolute. *See* Truth, Nature of

Truth, Nature of. Pilate asked: What is truth? Philosophers from Socrates to the last century answered: Is it *absolute*? Is it *knowable* (*see* Agnosticism)? And does it correspond to a referent or, in the case of metaphysical truth, does it correspond to reality?

The Importance of the Nature of Truth. The nature of truth is crucial to the Christian faith. Not only does Christianity claim 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. For example, the statement “God exists” means that there really is a God outside the universe, an extracosmic Being (*see* God, Evidence of). Likewise, the claim that “God raised Christ from the dead” means that the dead corpse of Jesus of Nazareth supernaturally vacated its tomb alive a few days after its burial (*see* Resurrection, Evidence of). Christian truth claims really correspond to the state of affairs about which they claim to inform us.

The Nature of Truth. What Truth Is Not ... Truth can be understood both from what it is and from what it is not. There are many inadequate views of the nature of truth. Most of these result from a confusion between the nature (definition) of truth and a test (defense) of truth, or from not distinguishing the result from the rule.

Truth is not “what works.” One popular theory is the pragmatic view of William James and his followers that truth is what works. According to James, “Truth is the expedient in the way of knowing. A statement is known to be true if it brings the right results. It is the expedient as confirmed by future experience.” That this is inadequate is evident from its confusion of cause and effect. If something is true it will work, at least in the long run. But simply because something works does not make it true. This is not how truth is understood in court. Judges tend to regard the expedient as perjury. Finally, the results do not settle the truth question. Even when results are in, one can still ask whether the initial statement corresponded to the facts. If it did not, it was not true, regardless of the results.

Truth is not “that which coheres.” Some thinkers have suggested that truth is what is internally consistent; it is coherent and self-consistent. But this too is an inadequate definition. Empty statements hang together, even though they are devoid of truth content. “All wives are married women” is internally consistent, but it is empty. It tells us nothing about reality. The statement would be so, even if there were no wives. It really means, “*If* there is a wife, then she must be

¹ Norman L. Geisler, [*Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*](#), Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), iii.

² Norman L. Geisler, [*Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*](#), Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), iv.

married.” But it does not inform us that there is a wife anywhere in the universe. A set of false statements also can be internally consistent. If several witnesses conspire to misrepresent the facts, their story may cohere better than if they³

were honestly trying to reconstruct the truth. But it still is a lie. At best, coherence is a negative test of truth. Statements are wrong if they are inconsistent, but not necessarily true if they are.

Truth is not “that which was intended.” Some find truth in intentions, rather than affirmations. A statement is true if the author intends it to be true and false if he does not intend it to be true. But many statements agree with the intention of the author, even when the author is mistaken. “Slips of the tongue” occur, communicating a falsehood or misleading idea the communicator did not intend. If something is true because someone intended it to be true, then all sincere statements ever uttered are true—even those that are patently absurd. Sincere people are often sincerely wrong.

Truth is not “what is comprehensive.” Another idea is that the view that explains the most data is true. And those that are not as comprehensive are not true—or not *as true*. Comprehensiveness is one test for truth, but not the definition of truth. Certainly a good theory will explain all relevant data. And a true worldview will be comprehensive. However, this is only a negative test of whether it is true. The affirmations of that view must still correspond with the real state of affairs. If a view was true simply because it was more encyclopedic, then a comprehensive statement of error would be true and a digested presentation of truth automatically would be in error. Not all long-winded presentations are true and concise ones are not all false. One can have a comprehensive view of what is false or a superficial or incomplete view of what is true.

Truth is not “what is existentially relevant.” Following Søren Kierkegaard and other existential philosophers, some have insisted that truth is what is relevant to our existence or life and false if it is not. Truth is subjectivity, Kierkegaard said; truth is livable. As Martin Buber stated, truth is found in persons, not in propositions.

However, even if truth is existential in some sense, not all truth fits into the existential category. There are many kinds of truth, physical, mathematical, historical, and theoretical. But if truth by its very nature is found only subjectively in existential relevance, then none of these could be true. What is true will be relevant, but not everything relevant is true. A pen is relevant to an atheist writer. And a gun is relevant to a murderer. But this does not make the former true nor the latter good. A truth about life will be relevant to life. But not everything relevant to one’s life will be true.

Truth is not “what feels good.” The popular subjective view is that truth gives a satisfying feeling, and error feels bad. Truth is found in our subjective feelings. Many mystics (*see* Mysticism) and new age enthusiasts hold versions of this faulty view, though it also has a strong influence among some experientially oriented Christian groups.

³ Norman L. Geisler, [“Truth, Absolute,”](#) *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 741.

It is evident that bad news can be true. But if what feels good is always true, then we would not have to believe anything unpleasant. Bad report cards do not make a student feel good, but the student refuses to believe them at his or her academic peril. They are true. Feelings are also relative to individual personalities. What feels good to one may feel bad to another. If so, then truth would be highly relative. But, as will be seen in some detail below, truth cannot be relative.

Even if truth makes us feel good—at least in the long run—this does not mean that what feels good is true. The nature of truth does not depend on the result of truth.

What Truth Is. Correspondence with Reality. Now that the inadequate views of the nature of truth have been examined, it remains to state an adequate view. Truth is what corresponds to its referent. Truth about reality is what corresponds to the way things really are. Truth is “telling it like it is.” This correspondence 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.

Falsehood, then, is what does not correspond. It tells it like it is not, misrepresenting the way things are. The intent behind the statement is irrelevant. If it lacks proper correspondence, it is false.

Arguments for Correspondence. All noncorrespondence views of truth imply correspondence, even as they attempt to deny it. The claim: “Truth does not correspond with what is” implies that this view corresponds to reality. Then the noncorrespondence view cannot express itself without using a correspondence frame of reference.

If one’s factual statements need not correspond to the facts in order to be true, then any factually incorrect statement is acceptable. It becomes impossible to lie. Any statement is compatible with any given state of affairs.

In order to know something is true or false, there must be a real difference between things and statements about the things. But correspondence is the comparison of words to their referents. Hence, a correspondence view is necessary to make sense of factual statements.

Communication depends on informative statements. But correspondence to facts is what makes statements informative. All communication ultimately depends on something being literally or factually true. We cannot even use a metaphor unless we understand that there is a literal meaning over against which the figurative sense is not literal. So, it would follow that all communication depends in the final analysis on a correspondence to truth.

The intentionalist theory claims that something is true only if what is accomplished corresponds fulfils what is intended by the statement. Without correspondence of intentions and accomplished facts there is no truth.

Objections to Correspondence. Objections to the correspondence view of truth come from Christian and non-Christian sources.

When Jesus said “I am the truth” (John 14:6), it is argued that he demonstrated that truth is personal, not propositional. This falsifies the correspondence view of truth, in which truth is a

characteristic of propositions (or expressions) which correspond to its referent. But a person, as well as a proposition, can correspond to reality. As the “exact image” of the invisible God (Heb. 1:3), Jesus perfectly corresponds to the Father (John 1:18). He said to Philip, “when you have seen me, you have seen the Father” (John 14:9). So, a person can correspond to another in his character and actions. In this sense, persons can be said to be true, or express the truth.

God is truth, yet there is nothing outside of himself to which he corresponds. Yet according to the correspondence view, truth is that which correctly represents reality. Since God lacks correspondence, this argument goes, the correspondence theory denies that God is true, as the Bible says he is (Rom. 3:4). However, truth as correspondence does relate strongly to God. God’s words correspond to his thoughts. So God is true in the sense that his word can be trusted. God’s thoughts are identical to themselves, a kind of perfect “correspondence.” In this sense, God is true to himself. If truth is understood as what corresponds to another, then in this sense God is not “true.” Rather, he is the ultimate reality and so the standard for truth. Other things must correspond to him in a limited way in order to be called true, not he to them.

The basic fallacy in this objection that God is truth yet not correspondent is that it equivocates in its definitions. If correspondence relates only to something *outside* oneself, then God cannot be truth, but the ultimate reality to which truth corresponds. If correspondence can also be *inside oneself*, God corresponds to himself in the most perfect way. He is perfect truth by perfect self-identity. Consider the following fallacious thinking:

1. All who submit to the authority of the Pope are Roman Catholic.
2. But the Pope cannot submit to himself.
3. Therefore, the Pope is not Roman Catholic.

The mistake is in the second premise. Contrary to the claim, the Pope can submit to himself. He simply has to follow the rules he lays down for Roman Catholics. Likewise, God can and does live in accord with his own authority. In this sense he is true to himself.

The Absolute Nature of Truth. The relativity of truth is commonly a premise of current thought. Yet orthodox Christianity is predicated on the position that truth is absolute. Thus, the defense of the possibility of absolute truth is crucial to the defense of the historic Christian faith. According to theories of relative truth, something may be true for one person, but not for all people. Or, it may be true at one time, but not at another. According to the absolutist view, what is true for one person is true for all persons, times, and places.

As argued above, there is only one adequate view of the nature of truth—the correspondence view. Other views, such as coherence and pragmatism, describe tests for truth, not an explanation of the nature of truth itself. *Factual truth is that which corresponds to the facts.* It is that which corresponds to the actual state of affairs being described.

Relative Truth. The relativity of truth is a popular contemporary view. However, truth is not determined by majority vote. Let’s take a look at the reasons people give for belief that truth is relative.

Of all, some things appear only to be true at some times and not at others. For example, many people once believed the world to be flat. Now we know that truth statement was wrong. It would seem that this truth has changed with the times. Or has it? Did the truth change, or did beliefs about what is true change? Well, certainly the world did not change from a box to a sphere. What changed in this regard is our belief, not our earth. It changed from a false belief to a true one.

Within a statement's universe of discourse, every truth is an absolute truth. Some statements really apply only to some people, but the truth of those statements is just as absolute for all people everywhere at all times as a statement that applies to all people generally. "Daily injections of insulin are essential for continued life" is true of persons with some life-threatening forms of diabetes. This statement has an applied universe of discourse. It isn't purporting to be a truth that applies to everyone. But if it applies to Fred, then it is true of Fred for everyone. The caveat that this statement is false for people with a normally functioning pancreas does not detract from the statement's truth within its universe of discourse—diabetics to whom it is properly addressed.

Some statements appear to be true only for some. The statement, "I feel warm" may be true for me but not for another person, who may feel cold. I am the only one within the statement's universe of discourse. The statement, "I [Norman Geisler] feel warm" (on July 1, 1998, at 3:37 p.m.) is true for everyone everywhere that Norman Geisler did feel warm at that moment in history. It corresponds to facts and so is an absolute truth.

A teacher facing a class says: "The door to this room is on my right." But it is on the left for the students. Relativists argue that surely this truth is relative to the teacher since it is false for the class. But on the contrary it is equally true for everyone that the door is on the professor's right. This is an absolute truth. It will never be true for anyone, anywhere at any time that the door was on the professor's left during this class on this day in this room. The truth is equally absolute that the door was on the student's left.

It seems obvious that the temperature frequently is relatively high in Arizona and relatively cold at the North Pole. So, apparently some things are true for some places but not for other places. Right?

Not so. Some things are true concerning some places, but not true in other places where the conditions are different. But that isn't the point. Within the Arizona weather report's universe of discourse, the statement corresponds to the facts. So it is true everywhere. The statement: "It is relatively cold for earth at the North Pole" is true for people in Arizona in the summer, or on Pluto where it is colder than on the North Pole. Truth is what corresponds to the facts, and the fact is that it feels cold at the North Pole.

All truth is absolute. There are no relative truths. For if something is really true, then it is really true for everyone everywhere, and for all time. The truth statement $7 + 3 = 10$ is not just true for mathematics majors, nor is it true only in a mathematics classroom. It is true for everyone everywhere.

Evaluation. Like an old apple, relativism may look good on the surface but it is rotten at the core. Among its problems:

Absolutely Relative? Most relativists really believe relativism is true for everybody, not just for them. But that is the one thing they cannot hold if they are really relativists. For a relative truth is just true for me but not necessarily for anyone else. So, the relativist who thinks relativism is true for everyone is an absolutist. Such a person believes in at least one absolute truth. The dilemma is this: a consistent relativist cannot say “It is an absolute truth for everyone that truth is only relatively true.” Nor can the person say, “It is only relatively true that relativism is true.” If it is only relatively true, then relativism may be false for some or all others. Why then should I accept it as true? Either the claim that truth is relative is an absolute claim, which 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.” This begins an infinite regress that will never pay off in a real statement.

The only way the relativist can avoid the painful dilemma of relativism is to admit that there are at least some absolute truths. As noted, most relativists believe that relativism is absolutely true and that everyone should be a relativist. Therein lies the self-destructive nature of relativism. The relativist stands on the pinnacle of an absolute truth and wants to relativize everything else.

A World of Contradictions. If relativism were true, then the world would be full of contradictory conditions. For if something is true for me but false for you, then opposite conditions exist. For if I say “There is milk in the refrigerator” and you say “there is not any milk in the refrigerator”—and we both are right, then there must both be and not be milk in the refrigerator at the same time and in the same sense. But that is impossible. So, if truth were relative, then an impossible would be actual.

In the religious realm it would mean that Billy Graham is telling the truth when he says, “God exists,” and Madalyn Murray O’Hare is also right when she claims, “God does not exist.” But these two statements cannot both be true. If one is true, then the other is false. And since they exhaust the only possibilities, one of them must be true.

No Wrongs and No Rights. If truth is relative, then no one is ever wrong—even when they are. As long as something is true to me, then I’m right even when I’m wrong. The drawback is that I could never learn anything either, because learning is moving from a false belief to a true one—that is, from an absolutely false belief to an absolutely true one. The truth is that absolutes are inescapable.

Answering Objections. Relativists have leveled several objections to the view of truth as absolute. The following are the most important:

No Absolute Knowledge. It is objected that truth cannot be absolute since we do not have an absolute knowledge of truths. Even most absolutists admit that most things are known only in terms of degrees of probability. How, then, can all truth be absolute?

We can be absolutely sure of some things. I am absolutely sure that I exist. In fact, my existence is undeniable. For I would have to exist in order to make the statement, “I do not exist.” I am

also absolutely sure that I cannot exist and not exist at the same time. And that there are no square circles. And that $3 + 2 = 5$.

There are many more things of which I am not absolutely certain. But even here the relativist is misguided in rejecting absolute truth simply because we lack absolute *evidence* that some things are true. The truth can be absolute no matter what our grounds for believing it. For example, if it is true that Sidney, Australia, is on the Pacific Ocean, then it is absolutely true no matter what my evidence or lack of evidence may be. An absolute truth is absolutely true in itself, no matter what evidence there is. Evidence, or the lack thereof, does not change a fact. And truth is what corresponds to the facts. The truth doesn't change just because we learn something more about it.

In-between Truths. Another objection is that many things are comparative—like relative sizes such as shorter and taller. As such they cannot be absolute truths, since they change depending on the object to which they relate. For example, some people are good compared to Hitler but evil as compared to Mother Teresa. Contrary to the claim of relativists, in-between things do not disprove absolutism. For the facts that “John is short in relation to an NBA (National Basketball Association) player,” and “John is tall compared to a jockey” are absolutely true for all times and all people. John is in-between in size, and it depends on which one to whom he is compared whether he is shorter or taller. Nonetheless, it is absolutely true that John (being five feet ten inches) is short compared to most basketball players and tall compared to the majority of jockeys. The same thing is true of other in-between things, such as, warmer or colder, and better or worse.

No New Truth (or Progress). If truth never changes, then there can't be any new truth. This would mean that no progress is possible. But we do come to know new truths. That is what scientific discovery is all about. In response to this, “new truth” can be understood in two ways. It might mean “new to us,” like a new discovery in science. But that is only a matter of us discovering an “old” truth. After all, the law of gravity was there long before Isaac Newton. Many truths have always been there, but we are just finding out about them. The other way we might understand “new truth” is that something new has come into existence that makes it possible to make a new statement about it that is only then true for the first time. That's no problem either. When January 1, 2020, arrives, a new truth will be born. Until that day it will not be true to say, “This is January 1, 2020.” But when that happens it will be true for all people and places forever more. So “old” truths don't change and neither do “new” truths when they come to pass. Once it is true, it is always true—for everyone.

Truth and Growth in Knowledge. It is also objected that knowledge of truth is not absolute, since we grow in truth. What is true today may be false tomorrow. The progress of science is proof that truth is constantly changing. This objection fails to note that it is not the truth that is changing but our understanding of it. When science truly progresses, it does not move from an old truth to a new truth, but from error to truth. When Copernicus argued that the earth moves around the sun and not the reverse, truth did not change. What changed was the scientific understanding about what moves around what.

Narrow Absolutes. Of course truth is narrow. There is only one answer for what is $4 + 4$. It is not 1. It is not 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10 or any other number. It is 8 and only 8. That's narrow, but it is correct.

Non-Christians often claim that Christians are narrow-minded, because they claim that Christianity is true and all non-Christian systems are false. However, the same is true of non-Christians who claim that what they view as truth is true, and all opposing beliefs are false. That is equally narrow. The fact of the matter is that if C (Christianity) is true, then it follows that all non-C is false. Likewise, if H (say, Humanism) is true, then all non-H is false. Both views are equally narrow. That's the way truth is. Each truth claim excludes contradictory truth claims. Christianity is no more narrow than is any other set of beliefs, whether atheism, agnosticism, skepticism, or pantheism.

Dogmatic Absolutes. The claim that those who believe in absolute truth are dogmatic misses the point. If all truth is absolute—true for all people, times, and places—everyone who claims anything is true is “dogmatic.” Even the relativist who claims relativism is true is dogmatic. For the person who claims that relativism is absolutely true is particularly dogmatic. This person claims to own the only absolute truth that can be uttered, namely, that everything else is relative.

Something important is overlooked in this charge of dogmatism. There is a big difference between the pejorative charge that belief in absolute truth is dogmatic and the manner in which someone may hold to this belief. No doubt the manner with which many absolutists have held to and conveyed their beliefs has been less than humble. However, no agnostic would consider it a telling argument against agnosticism that some agnostics communicate their beliefs in a dogmatic manner.

Nonetheless, there is an important distinction to keep in mind: Truth is absolute, but our grasp of it is not. Just because there is absolute truth does not mean that our *understanding* of it is absolute. This fact in itself should cause the absolutists to temper convictions with humility. For while truth is absolute, our understanding of absolute truth is not absolute. As finite creatures, we grow in our understanding of truth.

Summary. Truth may be tested in many ways but it should be understood in only one way. There is one reality, to which statements or ideas must conform in order to be regarded as true. There may be many different ways to *defend* different truth claims, but there is really only one proper way to *define* truth, namely, as correspondence. The confusion between the nature of truth and the verification of truth is at the heart of the rejection of a correspondence view of truth.

Likewise, there is a difference between what truth *is* and what truth *does*. Truth is *correspondence*, but truth has certain *consequences*. Truth itself should not be confused with its results or with its application. The failure to make this distinction leads to wrong views of the nature of truth. Truth is that which corresponds to reality or to the state of affairs it purports to describe. And falsehood is what does not correspond.

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⁴ Norman L. Geisler, [“Truth, Nature Of,”](#) *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 741–745.