

## How Can We Know the Truth About Anything at All?

A casual observer of the American political scene would have to wonder if it is possible for us to arrive at truth at all. Facts and “alternative facts” abound. How is one to know the truth? Perhaps it is best to simply say we cannot know the truth. And maybe not just in the political realm, maybe in all of life. Besides, isn’t everything just a spin?

Angst about the attainability of truth is understandable, but coming to the conclusion that truth is completely elusive is rather problematic. If we make the claim that we cannot know truth about anything—either because we always have less than all the facts or because we are only told the facts that are convenient for one side of the argument—we are at the very same time making a truth claim and thereby undermine the belief that we cannot know truth. Like it or not, we cannot help but believe certain things to be true, even if we believe that we cannot know the truth about most things. The real question is not whether we should believe things to be true; the real question is whether we have sufficient reasons to believe something to be true.

Have you ever wondered why you or others believe something to be true? Author and speaker, James Sire believes there are four sources of people’s belief: sociological reasons, psychological reasons, religious reasons, and philosophical reasons. These four reasons seem to cover the landscape.

First, there are **sociological reasons**. That is, we often believe things to be true because we have been influenced by those around us, including parents and friends, or by the larger society or culture of which we are a part. Sometimes these sources of truth are reliable. For example, my parents told me I should brush my teeth and their words have proven to be trustworthy. But while sociological sources of truth might be reliable in some instances, we have all had the experience of being told things by friends or our community we later found not to be true, whether it be about American history, the proper kind of treatment for an ailment, or justification for racism.

Besides sociological reasons, there are often **psychological reasons** for why we believe what we do. We might believe things because doing so brings about a certain comfort, joy, peace, purpose, hope, or sense of safety. But it does not take long to see that psychological benefits alone are not a good grounding for belief. If they were, then we would have to agree with a child when they say that their imaginary friend is real. I have heard the Christian-turned-atheist and the atheist-turned-Christian both say that their newfound position has given them great peace. If we looked only to the psychological benefits others receive from their beliefs, we would have a hard time discerning whether it is true if a God exists or not.

Many believe what they do, particularly when it comes to metaphysical questions like, Why am I here? and, What happens when I die? by turning to **religious authority**. They trust a pastor or priest, a rabbi, imam, or guru, a church or holy scripture. But when we consider that the claims made by these different sources are often contradictory, how can we categorically say that religious reasons are the best grounding to believe something to be true? In other words, which religious authority should we listen to?

That leaves us with a fourth source of truth and that is **philosophical reasons**. If you took a philosophy class in college, you might say, “That is the worst source of truth that I know. I didn’t believe anything I heard in that class, let alone understand it!” So let me explain what I mean by philosophical reasons. I mean simply that truth can be grounded in logic and evidence, wherein someone looks at all the data on the table and comes to a reasonable and logical conclusion that is the best fit of that data. We use

philosophical reasons when we conclude something is wrong with our fuel gauge when we run out of gas three times and the gauge says the tank is half full. Likewise, we use philosophical reasons to conclude something has gone bad when we notice the business bank account unusually low, a number of false receipts in a file, and a brand new Maserati in the bookkeeper's driveway.

There is no doubt that over my lifetime I have grounded my beliefs in all four of the above reasons. I have believed things because my parents or teachers said it was so. I have believed things because it felt better than believing the alternative. And I have believed things because a religious authority has told me to believe them. But I have also found that in the end, I tend to use philosophical reasons to assess whether what I am hearing from these other sources is trustworthy. For example, when I was in elementary school, I was taught that the people of Columbus' day believed the world was flat. Later, however, I discovered evidence that 1) educated people of Western Europe had long believed the earth was round and 2) the flat earth narrative was part of a fictional account made up by American storyteller Washington Irving in 1828. So while I have learned many things from sociological sources like teachers, if I later found out that what I learned conflicted with philosophical reasons, it's the latter that won out.

I don't think any of us wants to think our beliefs are based on psychological reasons, but it probably happens more often than we recognize. I am competitive by nature, which means I like to win. Undoubtedly, if I win at a game of tennis, I feel better about the effort than if I lose. But herein lies the problem: my feelings often belie the truth of how I played. Truth be told there are days I have won that I played quite poorly and days when I have lost that I played quite well. In other words, the psychological benefits or detriments that came from my victory or defeat, are not a good indicator of the percentage of first serves I got in, or my winner-to-unforced-error ratio. If I want to arrive at a true assessment of my performance, I need to look more carefully at the evidence, and when I have done so I let philosophical reasons trump psychological reasons.

I am a Christian, and I was raised in a Christian family. I went to church nearly every week and have become quite familiar with the Bible. I have listened to literally thousands of sermons from "religious authorities" and have even delivered some myself. One could say that when I say I believe things to be true about God or the afterlife, I do so based on religious authority. But while on some level that may be true, on another level it isn't. Let's take for example the crucifixion of Jesus. Do I believe it or not? The Bible says I should, and the Qur'an says I shouldn't. How do I decide what is true? It seems to me that the only way I decide is to look at the whole of the evidence and then come to a conclusion based on a best fit of all the evidence. In the case of the crucifixion, there are early manuscripts (within 100 years of Christ's death) from both eyewitness followers of Jesus and those who dismissed Christianity as a blight on society. All of them are consistent in saying Jesus was crucified. The Qur'an, on the other hand, was written some 600 years later and has no external evidence of its claim that Jesus was not crucified. So here are contradictory claims from two different religious authorities. I must adjudicate between the two of them. I don't do so by giving greater weight to Christian authorities than Muslim authorities, I do so by looking at the evidence as a whole and coming to a conclusion that is a reasonable best fit of that evidence. The same is true if I hear something from a Christian pastor that later I find doesn't fit the evidence; I align myself with the evidence more than the Christian authority.

Now, perhaps you have noticed that while I am regularly presented truth claims from sociological, psychological, and religious sources, I have found that on occasion I must reject those claims based on philosophical reasons. Don't get me wrong. I firmly believe sociological, psychological, or religious sources can lead us to the truth. Many, dare I say most, of the things I hold to be true today I first learned from these sources. But when I find these sources at odds with logic or evidence, it's the philosophical reasons that ultimately carry the most weight.

Now you might say, “But, John, you know we don’t have all the evidence about any subject, so how can we be certain our beliefs are true even if they are based on the evidence we have?” The answer in most cases is that we can’t be *absolutely* certain, but in many cases we can be *reasonably* certain. I don’t think I am overstating things when I say that nearly every one of the decisions we make on a given day are not based on 100% certitude but only on that which we are reasonably certain. You didn’t know with absolute certainty you would not die from faulty brakes when you drove to work yesterday, but you were certain enough to risk your life and make the decision to drive. Often people say they refuse to believe in God because 100% certainty about his existence cannot be attained. But when they do so, they are establishing a standard of belief they do not ascribe to virtually any other belief.

But then you might say, “I can see how philosophical reasons should be used to arrive at truth when it comes to botany or mechanics, but those are things you can touch and see and even engage in experiments. But how do logic and evidence apply when it comes to a God we cannot see?” The answer is we use the same method we use to discover knowledge about other things we cannot see. For example, we cannot see gravity, but nonetheless, we are confident of its existence because of its effects. Likewise, if you see something like Mount Rushmore, you assume there was some kind of creative mind behind the task. You can’t see that creative mind, but nonetheless you reasonably infer that the presidents’ faces weren’t just the work of random natural forces. Therefore, it seems to me that just because God cannot be seen does not mean we cannot come to reasonable conclusions about his existence based on the evidence. The question is: What is the evidence and is it best accounted for by the existence of God?

Finally, if you are from the Eastern hemisphere you might say, “I can understand what you are saying from a Western perspective. But I am from India, and we see things differently. We don’t talk about logic. We don’t see things as *either* true *or* untrue. We believe that things can be *both* true *and* untrue.” This rejoinder is not new to me. I have heard it before, but I am not sure those who say it understand what they are saying. In saying that claims can be both true and untrue and rejecting the claim that things are either true or not true, they themselves are making an either-or truth claim. They have decided that it is *either* true that claims must be true or false *or* that it is true that claims can be both true and false, and they have opted for the latter position. But in opting for the latter position, they have unwittingly confirmed the former! As one Indian scholar said, “Yes, even in India we look both ways before we cross the street because it is *either* me *or* the bus, not *both* of us!” In other words, while those who hold to Eastern philosophy speak of holding onto all “realities” at the same time, that’s not how they make decisions in their daily lives.

This brings me to my final point in this discussion. When the question of how we can know the truth of anything comes up, it is often exclusively in the context of religious claims. When people take a skydiving course, they do not say, “But how can we really know anything about jumping from a plane?” When they read history, they do not say, “But how can we possibly know anything about history?” And when they investigate a crime, they don’t say, “But how can we possibly come to any truth about who killed this woman?” So, it seems to be a bit odd that they would categorically question whether truth can be discerned about God, particularly if the claim has been made, as it has been made by Christians, that God showed up in space and time. Surely, that claim can be tested. If the evidence is found wanting, then fine. But if the evidence is weighty and the God/Jesus thing has merit, we do well to live accordingly, especially if the consequences of not doing so are significant.