



TRUTH, RELATIVISM & THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

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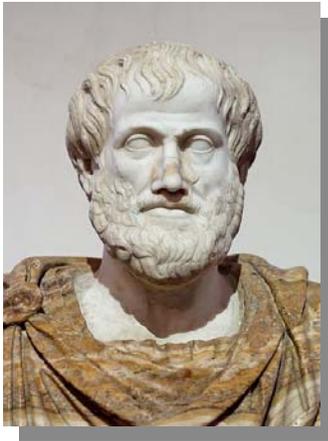
“What is truth?”

-John 18:38

“We are moving towards a dictatorship of relativism, which does not recognize anything as definitive and has as its highest value one’s own ego and one’s own desires.”

-Pope Benedict XVI

What is the Nature of Truth?



Reality is what is, that which exists actually and independently of our minds. Truth is a statement that corresponds to reality. This is the most basic definition of truth (called the “correspondence view”) and presumes that there is an objective reality out there, independent of the knower, which is capable of being known by reason. To judge that things are what they are is to judge truly.

This view presupposes that, at its most basic level, *a thing either is or is not*. This is the principle held by most philosophers down through the ages and affirmed by Catholic tradition: that is, the principle of non-contradiction, formulated by Aristotle:

“It is impossible for the same thing to belong and not to belong at the same time to the same thing and in the same respect” (with the appropriate qualifications) (*Metaph IV 3 1005b19–20*).

I.e., a square is either a square or it is not a square. It cannot be both a square and not a square at the same time. It must either be one or the other. Through erasing and altering the lines, one may transform a square into another shape, but it would then be another shape and no longer a square. The point is that it cannot both be and not be the same thing at the same time in the same way.

The search for God is the search for truth, the ultimate truth: the truth about man, about existence, about the meaning of life and of our destiny after this mortal life has ended. To search for truth, one must presuppose that there is a truth to be found. Catholic theology has always upheld that truth is an objective reality knowable to human reason. Divine truths are able to be known by reason aided by revelation.

“Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves.”

-John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 1998

The Alternative- Relativism

The term *relativism* means the errant belief that there is no absolute truth; i.e., nothing is absolutely true at all times and under all circumstances. Rather, what is call “truth” is based on factors such as religion, culture, historical context and so on (that the truth is “relative” to other historical situations). Thus truth, as understood in the Christian sense, does not exist. Rather, there are only a series of “truths”, none of which are universal. Some common relativist statements are:

- “That may be true to you, but it’s not true for me.”
- “Everybody has to discover their own truth.”
- “The truth is within you.”
- “Just because something is right for you doesn’t mean it’s right for me.”
- “Don’t push your beliefs on me; everybody needs to find their own truth about God.”

Relativism is of two types: *ontological relativism* and *moral relativism* (more common in the west). Ontological relativism denies that we can know true from false; moral relativism, which flows from ontological relativism, denies that we can know right from wrong.

Ontological Relativism: There is no true and false.

Moral Relativism: There is no right and wrong.

If you pay attention, you will notice that many statements by politicians, popular ideologues and many new age religions base their claims on the relativistic premise that there is no truth, or on the skeptical corollary to these premises: that if there was truth, it would be impossible to know it.¹ Much of our modern society bases its thinking on these principles. The Catholic religion takes it for granted that truth can be known with certainty, and hence that relativism is a false manner of approaching reality.²

Refuting Relativism³

There are two strong arguments against relativism (1) that it is a self-contradictory, and (2) that it is unworkable in practice.

(1) *Relativism as a logical system is self-contradictory.* Consider the following syllogism:

Major Premise: Nothing is true.

Minor Premise: If nothing is true, then the statement “Nothing is true” must be false.

Conclusion: Therefore, it is false that nothing is true.

¹ This sort of skepticism is not new; these same premises were put forward by the Greek sophist-philosopher Gorgias as early as 400 BC.

² Relativism under all forms is condemned explicitly by the Church in *Lamentabili Sane* (articles 58 & 64) of Pope St. Pius X (1903).

³ Moral relativism specifically will be refuted in the class on Freedom & Beatitude.

(2) *Relativism is unworkable practically.* Human society would be unworkable if everybody lived day-to-day acting on the principle that nothing is true. What would the state of our science, infrastructure, human relationships and economy be if we were unsure whether or not $2 + 2$ was really 4? While many profess relativism intellectually, nobody is able to consistently live as if it were true, for our day to day interactions with the world are based upon presuming that there are certain truths that are valid everywhere and at all times (architecture, mathematics, physics, etc).

The source of relativism, like atheism, is rarely a problem of logic but more often a problem of morals; to admit to absolute truth would be to admit the possibility of a single Absolute Truth from which all other lesser truths derive their truth, and to which one would be bound to give full assent of their intellect and will.

The God Who is Truth

“The sum of your word is truth; and every one of your righteous ordinances endures forever.”
-Psalm 119:160

“The Old Testament attests that *God is the source of all truth.* His word is truth. His Law is truth. His “faithfulness endures to all generations.” Since God is “true,” the members of His people are called to live in truth.”
-CCC 2465

The acknowledgment of the objective nature of truth leads the human mind inevitably to the ultimate question: what is *the* truth? What is the ultimate meaning of all things? This perennial quest for meaning by humanity is characterized by the search for the Ultimate Truth, a reality “that everyone calls ‘God.’”
-St. Thomas Aquinas, *STh* I, 2, 3

Can God’s Existence be Proven?

The existence of God cannot be proven in the sense of scientific or mathematical proofs (as such proofs deal only with empirical data and God, as a supernatural Being, is outside the realm of empirical observation), but His existence can be arrived at with firm certainty by many “converging and convincing arguments, which allow us to attain to certainty about the truth” (CCC 31).

Though the existence of God cannot be strictly and scientifically *proven*, the First Vatican Council (1869-1870) teaches that God’s existence can be *known* of by human reason unaided by revelation:

“The same holy mother Church holds and teaches that God, the beginning and end of all things can be known, from created things, by the light of natural human reason: “for the invisible things of Him, from the creation of the world, are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made.” (Dei Filius II)

Catholic theology, following St. Paul, distinguishes two ways of coming to know of God from reason alone: the world and the human person:

“For what can be known about God is plain...because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.”(Rom 1:19-20)

“With his openness to truth and beauty, his sense of moral goodness, his freedom and the voice of his conscience, with his longings for the infinite and for happiness, man questions himself about God’s existence. In all this he discerns signs of his spiritual soul. The soul, the “seed of eternity we bear in ourselves, irreducible to the merely material,” can have its origin only in God.” (CCC 33)

Nevertheless, what can be known about God by human reason is very limited and revelation (a self-communication from God to man) is needed to make what explicitly clear what man, on his own, can only grasp imperfectly and with some admixture of error. As Pope Pius XII said in the 1950 encyclical *Humani Generis*:

*“Though human reason is, strictly speaking, **truly capable by its own natural power and light of attaining to a true and certain knowledge of the one personal God...**yet there are **many obstacles** which prevent reason from the effective and fruitful use of this inborn faculty. For the truths that concern the relations between God and man wholly transcend the visible order of things, and, if they are translated into human action and influence it, they call for self-surrender and abnegation. The human mind, in its turn, is hampered in the attaining of such truths, not only by the impact of the senses and the imagination, but also by disordered appetites which are the consequences of original sin. So it happens that **men in such matters easily persuade themselves that what they would not like to be true is false or at least doubtful.**”(Pius XII, *Humani Generis*, 1950)*

This is why revelation⁴ is needed as an aid to reason, so mankind can, as John Paul II says, “come to the fullness of truth.”

Classical “Proofs” for the Existence of God

It must be stated at the outset that our faith does not depend upon any scientific or philosophical “proof” to establish it; our Faith rests on the words of Jesus Christ and the divine revelation in Him given by God to man. These proofs for God’s existence serve to strengthen or enliven our faith, but are not the source of it.

Throughout history, people have come up with many different “proofs” for God’s existence. Catholic tradition distinguishes at least twenty distinctive ones, and many more which are sub-categories of the more popular ones. As it would take far too long to go into all of them, listed here are some of the best known and compelling:

⁴ Revelation will be treated as a separate topic in the class on Divine Revelation.

The Argument from Efficient Causality

1. Nothing creates itself. (premise).
2. Therefore everything that exists either exists necessarily and eternally, or receives its existence from something else (extension of first premise).
3. Receivers of existence do exist (premise).
4. Two possible conclusions: The chain of being is infinite or finite.
5. An infinite chain of receivers of existence is impossible (first conclusion eliminated).
6. Therefore there exists a First Uncaused Cause of all existence (conclusion).

“Existence is like a gift given from cause to effect. If there is no one who has the gift, the gift cannot be passed down the chain of receivers, however long or short the chain may be. If everyone has to borrow a certain book, but no one actually has it, then no one will ever get it. If there is no God who has existence by His own eternal nature, then the gift of existence cannot be passed down the chain of creatures and we can never get it. But we do get it; we exist. Therefore there must exist a God: an Uncaused Being who does not have to receive existence like us – and like every other link in the chain of receivers.” (Kreeft & Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, 51)

The Design Argument

1. The universe displays a staggering amount of intelligibility (premise)
2. Either this intelligible order is the product of chance or of intelligent design (premise)
3. The universe is too complex to be made by chance (premise)
4. Therefore the universe is the product of intelligent design (conclusion)
5. Design comes only from a mind, a designer
6. Therefore the universe is the product of an intelligent designer

It is of course the third premise that is crucial. Ultimately, nonbelievers tell us, it is indeed by chance and not by any design that the universe of our experience exists the way it does. It just happens to have this order, and the burden of proof is on believers to demonstrate why this could not be so by chance alone. But this seems a bit backward. It is surely up to nonbelievers to produce a credible alternative to design. And “chance” is simply not credible.

The Argument from Desire

1. Every natural, innate desire in us corresponds to some real object that can satisfy that desire (major premise: relies on distinction between natural and artificial desires).
2. But there exists in us a desire which nothing in time, nothing on earth, no creature can satisfy (minor premise: this requires only honest introspection).
3. Therefore there must exist something more than time, earth and creatures, which can satisfy this desire (conclusion).
4. This something is what people call “God” and “life with God forever.”

(Taken from C.S. Lewis *Mere Christianity*, Bk. III, ch. 10, “Hope”)

Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for these desires exists. A baby feels hunger; well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim; well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire; well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.

Pascal’s Wager

	God Exists	God Doesn’t Exist
Theism	Eternal Happiness	Disappear Into Nothingness
Atheism	Eternal Suffering	Disappear Into Nothingness

Conclusion

All men want to know the truth, and ultimately to know the absolute truth, which pertains to God and the source of all things. Discerning the truth of God’s existence from the reality of the external world and from the longings of the soul, mankind has perennially sought to find some rational or philosophical grounding for what he already knows to be true intuitively. These proofs for God’s existence, while not establishing out faith, help us to better understand and believe the Gospel of Jesus and the Church established by Him.

For further reading: *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §26-49; Romans 1:18-23; *Handbook of Christian Apologetics: Hundreds of Answers to Crucial Questions* by Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli (InterVarsity Press) ch. 3: “Twenty Arguments for the Existence of God”; John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 1998; Pius XII, *Humani Generis*, 1950; Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, *Dei Filius* 2, 1870; St. Pius X, *Lamenatbili Sane*, 1903; C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*; St. Thomas Aquinas, *STh*, I, 1-3; Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, IV