

Rhyme & Reason **The Relative Nature of Truth**

By
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One of my favorite comedies is the 1980 film, *The Private Eyes*, starring Don Knotts and Tim Conway, in which their two clueless characters try to solve a series of murders taking place at a mysterious mansion. The thing I like most about it is that after each murder the killer leaves behind a limerick on a note that never quite rhymes. Here are a few examples:

I said when I died, that I'd come back.
If you believe in ghosts, you're on the right track.
I'm out of the grave, and roaming the moores.
If you want to be safe, you better lock all the... windows and screens.

Listen up dummies. The help is all gone, the house is bare.
Now you know, a shadow is there.
There's one left to die, then my job'll be done.
I like killing people, it's a lotta... kicks!

In this house, it's hard to survive.
Some'll be dead, who are now alive.
Mr. Uwatum is gone, 'cause he knew too much.
Bye for now, but rest assured we'll keep in... constant contact with each other.

To dig your own grave, is quite a sight.
But to bury yourself, is not very bright.
There are more to kill, and the job'll be done.
Now there are five, soon there'll be... a lot less.

I think this is a good way to begin a discussion about the relative nature of truth because it helps understand that truth, like rhyme, is only possible in a relative sense. It would be pointless to say the word "moores" is a rhyme, because it only rhymes in relation to other particular words, like "doors." In the same way, "done" rhymes with "fun," not "kicks," and "much" rhymes with "touch," not "constant contact with each other." Yet, you'll notice, in this case, the word "touch" and "constant contact with each other," mean virtually the same thing. But even so, they are not quite the same because of their contextual relationship.

Perhaps the greatest gift of Einstein's genius was his theory of relativity, that space, time, and motion are not absolute concepts. This understanding is what led to his famous equation, $E=mc^2$, the idea that energy and matter are the same thing, their apparent differences being *relative* only to how they are experienced. Only in a relative universe can two constructs that are experienced so differently really be

one and the same. Perhaps it is this awareness, then, that eventually led Einstein to conclude, with his *unified field theory*, that all things are really one. "There is no place in this new kind of physics for both the field and matter," he said, "for the field is the only reality."¹ For Einstein, reality is a field of energy in which all things are interconnected, similar to what we Unitarian Universalists call the *Interdependent Web of All Existence*.

Truth is also relative, perhaps even more so than bodies in space, because truth is but a concept, and has no existence at all outside of its relationship. Indeed, if you stop and think about it, truth is a word we use to ascribe a certain relationship or quality to an idea or concept. "That's true," we say, but truth is not tangible. We might search for truth, as many seekers do, but it's not something we can actually see or touch or put in our pocket or store in a vault. Truth is an adjective. It was Soren Kierkegaard who famously said, "Truth is subjective," meaning that how we experience the world has an effect on how we interpret it.

Yet how many of us not only pursue the truth as if it were an object, but when we think we have found it, cling to it like precious gold, some even becoming willing to kill and die for it? Gandhi, who said, "Truth is God,"² also said, "I am devoted to none but Truth and I owe no discipline to anybody but Truth... Truth is the first thing to be sought for, and Beauty and Goodness will then be added unto you."³ Yet even someone like Gandhi, with such a pure devotion to Truth, understood its relative nature. "Truth resides in every human heart," he said, "and one has to search for it there, and to be guided by truth as one sees it."⁴ Like Kierkegaard, he believed truth is subjective, residing in "every human heart," and, because of this, it is also relative, "as one sees it."

This subjective and relative nature of truth is, again, what Unitarian Universalists affirm in our principles by upholding "the worth and dignity of every person," and "the free and responsible search for truth and meaning." Since truth is relative to each of us, we recognize the value of those with whom we differ and vow to protect their right to pursue truth in their own way. Again, as Gandhi put it, "...no one has a right to coerce others to act according to his own view of truth."⁵

But does this mean there is no such thing as *Absolute Truth* or that we cannot ever get at the truth objectively? If this were the case, wouldn't it mean we must tolerate everything and allow everyone his or her truth, even if they are delusional or dangerous? Does it mean we must tolerate the Ku Klux Klan, or put up with gay

¹ Capra, Fritjof, *The Tao of Physics*, Shambhala Publications, Boston, MA, 1975, 1999, p. 211.

² Gandhi, *All Men are Brothers*, Continuum, New York, NY, 1980, p. 61,

³ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

bashing, or allow Christian prayer in our public schools and let the Ten Commandments be hung in our courtrooms?

For me, questions like these are at the heart of the issue; that even the notion that “Truth is subjective,” is relative. Sometimes we must treat the truth as if it were objective and absolute. When it comes to the mindset of intolerant groups like the KKK, for example, we cannot allow them the right to fully act upon what they consider to be the truth. They must be suppressed through laws and law enforcement to protect others from their bigotry and hatred. In our country, they may still have the right to assemble and to maintain their ideas, but not to act upon them. In our country, you can believe just about anything you want, but you cannot do whatever you want.

Sometimes this is good. Sometimes it’s not. It’s relative. I believe I should be allowed to marry same-sex couples, for instance, but the law of the land prohibits me from doing so. In my truth, this is wrong, but the Southern Baptist minister down the street might not have it any other way. Does this mean that both are legitimate views because of the relative nature of truth? Or is one the absolute truth and the other based upon a lie? Is it wrong for the law to prevent me from acting upon my truth but still right for it to prevent the KKK from acting on theirs? For me the answer is “yes” to both these questions, and I have little trouble with the inconsistency because I understand that truth is relative.

But this is difficult for us to grasp, especially here in the West, because our minds have been trained to think in black and white terms. We are absolutists in our thinking, not relativists. Although too few of us ever study formal logic these days, as a culture we practice classic Aristotelian logic, which is based on three laws most of us might consider self-evident.

The first of these is called *the law of identity*, which, simply stated, means, “whatever is, is.” A car is, a dog is, a tree is. The second law is called *the law of contradiction*, “nothing can both be and not be.” So the car, or dog, or tree, either exist or it doesn’t. The third law is called *the law of the excluded middle*, which states, “Everything must either be or not be.” Shakespeare said, “To be or not to be? That is the question,” as if there is no other choice. In short, the car, dog, or tree cannot both be a car, dog, or tree, and, at the same time, not be a car, dog, or tree. These rules might seem so self-evident to most of us that we simply take them for granted, and would likely consider taking a class on the subject a waste of our time. If it’s a car, then it must exist in time and space, and it either is a car or it isn’t, and it cannot both be a car and not be a car. All of this makes sense, that is, these seems to be the natural conclusions anyone would derive at when physically encountering a car.

But relativity tells us something else. Namely, that it is only a car within a certain context. Firstly, we must agree upon the definition of what a car is. A car is an automobile, for example, but not all automobiles are cars. Some are buses,

trucks, motorcycles, or vans. The difference has to do with relative size and shape, and some opinion may vary from person to person. Is a Chevy Suburban considered a truck, car, van, or bus? More importantly, physicists are now speculating, due to the otherwise inexplicable circumstances in deep space, that the Universe is composed mostly of dark matter and dark energy, something that is both there and not there, that is and isn't all at once. We're also learning now that the world we perceive is holographic in nature, meaning there's very little matter in the universe, if any. There's more energy in a square inch of space than there is matter in the entire universe. Or, as I often like to say, we're mostly not here. So our way of viewing the world is relative to us. Our senses cannot experience what they cannot experience, so we base our view of reality only on what we can experience, on what makes sense to us. It's a limited view, but it's the only view we have.

The problem occurs, I think, when we fail to recognize this, when we forget that ours is a relative view, a relative truth, and begin to treat our conclusions about the world as if they are absolute in all circumstances, rather than true for us in this time and place. Just as a rhyme exists only in relation to specific words, truth exists only in relation to specific beliefs and perceptions. On Valentines Day you'll be a lot better off telling your sweetheart;

Roses are red,
Violets are blue,
When thinking of love,
I'm thinking of you,

Than saying;

Roses are red,
Violets are a spectrum of light dominated by energy with
the wavelength of roughly 440 to 490 nanometers,
When thinking of love,
I'm thinking of a second person singular.

They may both mean the same thing, but they don't have the same meaning, and if you give your sweetheart a card talking about the light spectrum and grammar, you better also show up with lots of flowers and a huge box of chocolates to make up for it!

But this isn't a difficult lesson to grasp. All thinking people come to realize that life has a lot of gray areas. To say that truth is relative, or truth is subjective, isn't as hard to accept as it is to remember when we're actually in the midst of living life and trying to meet our everyday needs. Meeting our needs isn't always easy. It's a challenge, even in our modern world. Determining the truth can help us along the way. If I truly know the best way to acquire food, clothing, and shelter, I won't make a mistake and end up hungry, naked, and exposed. But then, sometimes, meeting

our own needs becomes the only criteria for determining what truth is, and upholding our truth becomes our justification for all manner of evil.

I think about the tragic case that's in the news right now, about the local college student who managed to conceal her pregnancy then tried to discard her baby in the trash after it was born. Although she claims the infant died at birth, she's now on trial for murder. She claims that part of the reason she didn't tell anyone about her pregnancy is because her parents are strict Catholics. This seems to me to be a case in which all the parties involved clung so tightly to their absolute truths that the relative nature of truth is now crashing in around them in a most tragic way. And now, as a society in economic crisis, in which our basic physiological needs are being threatened, many of us will want to cling to some objective view of the truth in the hope it will sustain us. But we must be cautious, lest the relative nature of truth also come crashing down on us.

Rather, we must remember, even in our darkest hours, that truth is relative, that truth is about our relationships. This is the reason, I think, why it is wrong for the law to prevent me from marrying gay couples, and right for it to prevent members of Ku Klux Klan from acting upon their values. As an adjective, truth is but a quality of relationship, and a proper relationship exists when all elements exists in the right balance. Balance is but another word for *justice*, which is why Lady Justice holds a pair of scales in her hand. Other words include equality, harmony, and sustainability. So, in essence, the specific relationship truth describes is a just one. And we can ascertain if our actions are based on the truth, not so much in the gratification of our own needs, but in seeing that the needs of others are being met too. The Zen master may know the sound of one hand clapping, but no one can know the sound of one word rhyming, and none will know the truth until all beings know compassion and justice.