

Truth Be Told...

Good morning! And, thanks for coming today! I know you had other options,...at least I hope so!.. Thank you Susan, for your kind introduction, for your service leadership, and for your friendship. Thank you Joan,...and Hope,...for your music. Good music is important...because it offsets a bad message! And, thank you to the Fellowship for the opportunity to speak today. I consider it a privilege.

I last spoke here on Sunday, November 4th, 2018. Today is Sunday, August 4th, 2019. Keeping with that progression, my next speaking engagement will be Sunday, October 4th, 2020...the next time Sunday falls on the 4th!...So, mark your calendars now,...that way you can plan to be out of the county that weekend!

Before diving into the philosophical theories of truth that I will be talking about today, (which is, by way of warning, not a shallow dive!), I want to tell you four truths about August 4th. I do so, so that when you leave here today you will at least have some truth...and not feel that your morning was totally wasted! So,...first truth,...today would have been Rik Warch's 80th birthday...I miss him greatly,...and will toast him at 5:00 today with a martini,...something we did...once or twice over the years!...O.K., O.K.,...it was more than once or twice! There's the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth!...Today, I promised only to talk about the

first!...Second,...today is Barack Obama's birthday...Happy 58th Birthday, Mr. President,...to a real president!... Third,...today is National Chocolate Chip Cookie Day...So, at the "coffee" you will be treated to Tate's Chocolate Chip Cookies,...the world's finest store-bought chocolate chip cookies,...compliments of the Goodes!...Fourth,...today is also National Hangover Day!...(Hey, I'm not making this stuff up!)...It would, of course, have been much more appropriate if it were tomorrow!...because after your dive into philosophical truth today, you will be driven to drink...and will have a hangover tomorrow! O.K.,...to philosophical truth...

The Unitarian Universalist Fourth Principle says that UUs believe in: "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning." Our Unison Affirmation says, "we gather together to celebrate within a caring community those truths which give meaning and direction to our lives." ...But,...*What is truth?*...And, how would we know if we found any that gave meaning and direction to our lives? I am not the first to ask these questions. I noted in my talk last November that Rik Warch raised the latter question, about *meaningful truth*, in 2007, in a *brilliant* Sunday message entitled "Oh, Lighten Up and Other Truths!" (The podcast is still available on the Fellowship web site.) ...*And*, for over 2,500 years philosophers have been asking the first question: *What is truth?* Being a philosopher, I will concentrate on it today. It is the seminal question of Western epistemology...perhaps the seminal question of all of philosophy...

Let me further preface my remarks by saying that I do know something about the problem of truth,...having studied the major philosophical theories of truth over the past 50+ years. That said, I need to make a disclaimer...I know few, if any, truths that will give meaning and direction to your lives! I know, I know,...that is very disappointing, particularly for those of you recent converts who came here expecting a revelation this morning! (But, hey, this is after all a Unitarian fellowship!) However,...if any significant truths come up during the course of my message, I will alert you!...Oh, here's one now!...“The truth will set you free!” ... (John, Chapter 8: verse 32)...Or,...if you prefer the Gloria Steinem version,...“The truth will set you free...but,...first it will piss you off!” ... which is our daughter's favorite refrigerator magnet! (And, I suggest, more significant than John 8:32!) O.K.,...now to truth from a philosophical perspective.

Philosophy is defined as “the love of wisdom.” Its primary aim is “the search for truth.” For thousands of years philosophers have asked the question: What is truth? Plato was concerned about the problem because truth played an essential role in his epistemology, the core of his philosophy. Plato's theory of knowledge held that “Knowledge is justified true belief.” Without truth there could be no knowledge, he argued. And, Plato believed that knowledge was attainable,...that man could not only discover it,...but also catalogue it. Thus, the start of libraries in ancient Greece...which were (and still are worldwide) the repositories of what we claim as knowledge and truth. While philosophers have struggled with the Platonic conception

of knowledge, and with the idea that truth is a necessary condition for knowledge, they have not strayed from the basic problem, ...What is truth?... Multiple theories have been proposed over the centuries. The four most important in the Western philosophical tradition are the Correspondence, Coherence, Pragmatic, and Authoritarian theories of truth,...each of which we will now dive into....

Before we do so, however, we must look at two extreme “anti-truth” theories that also arose in the Western tradition. Both must be dealt with...and,...dismissed. The first proposed that *there is no such thing as truth*...which,...if true, is false! The 19th century German philosopher, Nietzsche, was a proponent of a theory close to this. But, the theory that there is no such thing as truth is much older than the 19th century, having its roots in ancient Greek Skepticism and Sophism. In philosophy we call such extreme negative views “Nihilistic.” Their proponents deny the very concept about which they profess! A contemporary embodiment of the view was vividly exemplified in August of 2018 by Rudy Giuliani when he proclaimed that: “The truth is not the truth!” As a philosopher, I had just one critical response...“WTF?!”...

At the other end of the “anti-truth” spectrum is the theory that *there is such a thing as truth, but it is unattainable, because (real) truth is beyond human comprehension*...Of course, if that’s true, how could we ever know it! In philosophy we call this “Mysticism.” Immanuel Kant, the

great 18th century German philosopher, held a view close to this with respect to what he took to be important *truths*, arguing that knowledge of God (i.e., that God exists), knowledge of freedom (i.e., that our lives are free and not determined), and knowledge of immortality (i.e., that we have immortal souls) were three truths that could not be known...i.e., were unproveable,...but were necessary to be *believed*,...in order to “give meaning and direction to our lives...” It isn’t clear how Kant knew precisely what we couldn’t know...nor, why these were the only truths that were necessary for a meaningful and directed life. But, it is clear that Unitarians are not buying it since they have for years rejected 2/3^{rds} of it! O.K., let’s take the dive into truth from a philosophical perspective!

I think that *the truth about truth* lies somewhere in between the two extremes of: “there is no such thing as truth” and “there is such a thing, but it cannot be attained.” In between are the four philosophical theories of truth identified above, each of which provide an important kernel of truth about truth, but not the full story. The oldest is the Correspondence theory of truth. Some say Plato was responsible for the original theory. Others say it was Aristotle. Aristotle was, of course, Plato’s student. So, either way, the theory has ancient roots. The Correspondence theory tells us that something is true if it corresponds with the facts. But, what are the “things” that correspond?, and what is a “fact”? (Philosophers just love to answer questions by asking other questions! It’s what keeps us in business!) The things that correspond, the things which

are said to be true (or not), are called *propositions*. But, what is a proposition? (Yet another question!) A proposition is what is expressed by a natural language declarative sentence. Thus, “It’s raining” and “Está lloviendo,” and “Es regnet” are three declarative sentences, in three different natural languages, each of which express the *same* proposition...i.e., the proposition that *it’s raining*. That proposition “describes” what philosophers call a *state of affairs* about the world, and the proposition describing it has a truth value...it is either true or false. *True* if it is raining,...*false* if it is not. But,...the state of affairs, that which is described, is another thing altogether. It is something that is neither true nor false... It is what we call a “fact.” Propositions that are true are true because they “express facts”...thus, the intimate relationship between truth and fact. As the Correspondence theory puts it, so simply,...a proposition is true if and only if it “corresponds” with the facts. So, when I say right now, “It’s raining”, that proposition is true if and only if it is a fact that *it’s raining*...right here, right now,...in Ephraim, WI!...(Had it been raining at the moment this would, of course, have been a much more compelling demonstration!)

Could it get any easier than this?! *Truth is correspondence with fact*. But, what if a proposition doesn’t correspond with any fact...does that automatically make it false?...No!...And, examples abound! Philosophers call such propositions *counterfactuals*. “If the U.S. had not been attacked at Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941, it would have entered the Second World War

anyway.” This proposition is arguably true. At least most historians believe so. But, if true, there is no “fact” to which it corresponds!...And, if false, which it might be, then the proposition “If the U.S. had not been attacked at Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941, it would not have entered the Second World War.” would then have to be true! But,...there is no fact to which that proposition corresponds either! We know, however, that one of the two propositions must be true!... (*Isn't philosophy fun?!*)

Negative propositions also proved problematic for the Correspondence theory. The proposition “The man in the corner does not have a blue hat on” is true. Is that because it is a fact that there is no man in the corner,...or because it is a fact that there is a man in the corner, but he is not wearing a hat,...or because it is a fact that there is a man in the corner, but he is wearing a hat of a different color?! Are there three different facts then, and, if so, to which does the proposition “The man in the corner does not have a blue hat on” correspond?...

(Throw the red/blue hat!) ...You decide!...Luckily, we do not have to solve this problem about the ‘correspondence’ of negative propositions...because Bertrand Russell, the great British philosopher and logician, solved it in 1905 with his famous Theory of Definite Descriptions. There is not time today to explain that theory. It will have to await another Sunday! (I think I just heard, even from the Unitarians,...“Thank the Lord”!)

Problems with the Correspondence theory, particularly with counterfactuals, led philosophers to develop another important theory of truth,...Coherence. The Coherence theory proposed that a proposition is true just in case it *coheres* with all other propositions accepted as true. (How to determine the initial set of accepted propositions is, of course, an obvious and serious problem for the theory!) The Coherence theory is sometimes attributed to Hegel, the 19th century German philosopher, but its roots were at least two centuries earlier. Spinoza, the great 17th century Rationalist, was a proponent. The Coherence theory of truth proposes *consistency* as the primary test for truth. Our accepted truths at any given time can be enumerated as the set T1...Tn. Along comes a new proposition, T', a proposed candidate for truth. We look to see if T' conflicts with anything in the set T1....Tn (or anything implied by that set). If it does conflict, T' is rejected. If not, T' is added to the set of accepted truths, and we go on. The strongest version of the theory holds that any candidate for truth must be *implied* by the initial set of accepted truths itself.

The Coherence theory proposes that an objective external reality is not required for determining truth, only coherence with accepted truths, determined by the test of logical consistency or entailment. *This was a radical shift in thinking about the concept of truth...introducing the idea that truth does not require a relationship with the outside world, like correspondence to fact.* But, the Coherence theory has a problem when candidates for truth

conflict. How then are we to choose between conflicting claims to truth? If consistency is the only measure, we would never get beyond our own initial set of beliefs. *The Coherence theory must enlist facts, or some other outside standard, to adjudicate between conflicting beliefs. But, if so, then coherence alone cannot be the sole basis of truth.* New discoveries are made in science all the time. Things we once thought were true are shown to be false. So, we reject the original belief and replace it with a new one. *Facts must come into play in this process.* If not, what then is the basis for the rejection of earlier beliefs? Think about the transition from “The earth is the center of the universe” to “The earth revolves around the sun”...perhaps the most important “paradigm shift” in human thought...i.e., the Copernican Revolution. Strict coherence would have rejected the Copernican theory outright at the time. It was facts that gave it its prominent and important place at the table of truth.

The Coherence theory is not as “weak” as it might appear, however. It is important for two reasons. First, the Coherence theory proposed a *method* to decide whether or not something was true when correspondence with fact could not be demonstrated. Think about thought experiments, where we know that there is not or cannot be a test against facts. Many important scientific theories, particularly those in astrophysics and quantum mechanics, depend upon such thought experiments, where no actual experiment can be performed, except conceptually. And, *all such thought experiments are based upon counterfactuals.* Second, the Coherence theory has

an important corollary. Because it allows for modifying our beliefs, i.e., changing the set of accepted truths, it is descriptive of how progress is actually made in knowledge. In short, the theory allows for what is called *verisimilitude*, the idea of “getting closer to the truth.” Truth is not just the collection of propositions expressing facts,...but part of a progressive process which continually weeds out what is false. Verisimilitude is a very important philosophical concept,...but, developing it must also await another Sunday! (I think I just heard another “Thank the Lord”!)

Of course, many philosophers found neither Correspondence nor Coherence adequate for understanding truth. One such group, the Pragmatists, sought to disassociate truth from fact all together. Pragmatism is, by the way, the only entirely American conceived and developed philosophical movement in Western philosophy. Pragmatists argued that truth is contextual, a matter of the intent of the speaker and the outcome of the conversation. It is sometimes presented as the theory that “the truth is what works” or the theory that “what’s true is what is useful to believe.” Thus, the important essay, “The Will to Believe,” by the famous American Pragmatist, William James. Example?...When Pam asks me, “Is there enough ice for the UU Circle Supper tonight?” and I reply, “There’s a *ton* of ice in the fridge!,” have I said something true or not? From a strict Correspondence perspective, clearly not. Our freezer is simply not that large! (Only Al & Cynthia Johnson’s is!) Nor is it true from a Coherence perspective. The proposition is

incompatible with all accepted propositions about the ice capacity of home refrigerators and freezers. But, the context suggests that my answer is obviously true. My intent was to express that “There is enough ice for the party” and the outcome was useful. Pam got the information she needed, and I didn’t have to run to the 57 Depot for ice! You get the point...despite the “(d)-icey” example! (Hey, philosophy progresses in slow and tedious ways...and, always requires humor!) And, I quickly note that the Goodes always have a ton of ice on hand!

There is actually very compelling evidence for the Pragmatic theory. It is interesting to note that 95% of all sentences we read, hear, speak, or write in our lifetime are unique...never heard, read, spoken, or written by us before! Yet, we not only understand them, we can and do make immediate and accurate judgements about their *truth*. This cannot be because we immediately see some *correspondence* with the facts. And, we are surely not continuously doing tests of logical consistency, attempting to demonstrate *coherence*. This is because almost all sentences we read, hear, speak, or write are “metaphorical.” That is, they are not “literally true.” (Like the “ton of ice” example.) Yet, we not only understand them...we know if they are true or not on the spot...without the need to “translate”. That is, we do not say, “Ton of ice,” oh, that means “Enough ice”...It is something that is simply understood. Maybe truth is embedded in the deep structure of natural language, as Noam Chomsky thought... Or, maybe truth is embedded in how

language is used, as Wittgenstein thought... (Both ideas are topics for another Sunday message,...or not!)

Now, Pragmatism sounds great! But, an obvious consequence of the theory is that what works for you to believe may not work for me to believe; what is useful or beneficial for you to believe may not be useful or beneficial for me to believe, despite agreed upon context and intent. In short, the theory leads to what philosophers call *Relativism*. *Relativism* is a very popular theory about the nature of truth. (But, insidious nonetheless!) The idea that one and the same proposition can be true for you but not for me, makes no sense except for claims about our personal tastes. After all, it's either raining or it isn't! And, that is not a matter of taste. Pragmatism quickly leads to the position that there is no such thing as *objective truth*,...that one can believe whatever one wants...and, still be "right"... as long as believing it works! A modified but only slightly more palatable version of this view suggests that there are multiple *paths* to truth, each equally valid. In fact..., this seems to be the modern Unitarian view of truth...which is, however,...also false! Why? Because, regardless of version, *Relativism as a theory of truth simply doesn't work...because...if Relativism is true, it shows that truth is not relative! If there is no such thing as objective truth,...then there is at least one important objective truth...namely, that there is none!* This is not a play on words! It is a serious and devastating criticism of

Relativism. So, alert, alert! Here is your second important truth today that will give meaning and direction to your life!...*Relativism is false!...And, this is why we continue the search for truth.*

I turn then to the fourth of the traditional philosophical theories of truth,...Authoritarianism. It is, if not the oldest, the most practiced theory of truth in the West, and, in the East...(particularly around Washington, D.C.!) Authoritarianism says that what is true is what the current authority proclaims is true. Think traditional (fundamentalist) religion here, particularly appeal to the “truth of the Bible,” but also think Fascism and all forms of Totalitarianism...even the current administration’s theory of “alternative facts” and “fake news.” The problem with Authoritarianism is that it not only purposely alters the facts to corroborate its views, it also stifles dissent by those who attempt to suggest otherwise. It is because it is so disingenuous, even denying the *value* of searching for truth, that we must be vigilant in constantly calling Authoritarian regimes and their programs, policies, practices and values into question. It is why the *fourth estate, the free press*, is so important...*Authoritarianism fails as a theory of truth because it cannot provide an objective standard for truth. If it could, it would obviate the need for its own authority...*

Let me conclude by summarizing the role of facts within the four philosophical theories of truth just discussed. I do so to underscore that facts have a central role to play in understanding

truth,... good, bad or indifferent. The Correspondence theory of truth suggests that facts are all that matter for truth. No 1:1 correspondence between proposition and fact,...No truth. But, there are truths that correspond with no facts! The Coherence theory comes at the problem from another direction. Facts are not the direct measure of truth, but the *arbitrator* when conflicting propositions are accepted as true. This was an important distinction and gave us an important test for truth, namely consistency. But, we still have no acceptable theory about how to choose our initial truths! Then there is Pragmatism. It basically rejects facts all together. If the truth is “what works,” we needn’t worry about facts or consistency. But,...the very measure of if something works or not is based upon facts...namely, *the facts of the outcome*. Finally, there is Authoritarianism. It is by far the weakest of the four philosophical theories of truth. In fact, it is a downright dangerous theory. It endorses “making up” facts to corroborate one’s views...which leads to the ultimate important truth of the day,...*Lying about the truth is the beginning of tyranny...* The great 20th century philosopher, Karl Popper, argued this in his important 1945 work, “The Open Society and Its Enemies,” which eloquently explained why the search for truth requires a free society.

So, where do we go from here? Long and short of it...Either there is such a thing as truth or there isn’t. If there is, it is either attainable or it is not. If attainable, we must seek to continue

develop the methods for finding it. I believe those methods are to be found in philosophy...and,...sometimes even at a party at the Goode's,...where there is always a ton of ice!

Thank you again for the opportunity to address the Fellowship today...May the truth be with you!

TMG