

'Context is all' (Margaret Atwood). Does this mean that there is no such thing as truth?

What is truth and what is true? Is there such a thing as a truth or just what we perceive to be true at any given time? There are some circumstances where truth is certain: I am sitting in my study and I am writing my essay. This statement is true and hardly refutable unless we try and argue that all we see and feel is what our senses perceive. What the question is asking is whether there is such a thing as universal truth, a statement which cannot be refuted regardless of the situation, and which holds true across time and place.

The definition of truth is that something is true always, everywhere and is independent of belief. There are three tests for truth, the first of which is proof by inductive logic, the second by actually testing a truth and the third being pragmatic. In George Orwell's dystopian novel '1984' a character states $2+2=5$. We know this not true and can say immediately that two and two make four because this is what is mathematically accepted when we add up the definitions of two and two. Therefore this is *a-priori* truth and a deductive syllogism. No matter what context we put this statement in, it will always be true, be it in the addition of two items (such as a sock and a piece of gum) or in a mathematical formulae as shown above. In other words, this statement is always true. However this kind of truth is only relevant in certain – mathematical - contexts. In other contexts, there is no such thing as absolute truth.

Gödel's¹ Incompleteness theory shows us that even in a mathematical context, absolute truth is not possible. He claims that in any rational formulaic sentence there is point of improvability. 'This statement is improvable'² if one was to prove this statement then it would reiterate its meaning whereas not proving it simply proves that it is improvable. What we can deduce from Gödel's findings is that even in a mathematical context, a formula of rational *a-priori* numbers can be formulated in such a way that they are untrue.

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Perception is important when deciding a truth, particularly in the arts, including literature, poetry, music and visual arts. Perceptions have changed over time, and what was once thought beautiful may no longer be considered so. Similarly, some kinds of truth can be contextual depending on time, point of view and place. For example, Indonesia is famous for its Gamalan musicians. The instruments are tuned to different scales from western instruments which makes the sounds unappealing to western ears who are accustomed to western scales. The same would be true for Indonesian musicians listening to western music.

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A historian prides himself on the ability to state the truth about certain historical events or situations by giving an unbiased account of an event. However, lack of bias is nearly impossible, as a historian will always be affected by his environment and social surroundings. There are certain historical events about which we are certain because we have proof. For example, we know that the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were hit by nuclear bombs during World War II, and no matter what context we look at, this is true. However, there are other situations that we cannot be so sure about. A prime example is the Armenian genocide. In May 1915 the Ottoman empire (now Turkey) is

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¹ Kurt Gödel, Austrian mathematician.

² This is a method of demonstrating Gödel's theorems in word form.

believed to have carried out genocide upon the people of bordering Armenia. The official position of the Turkish government until this day is complete denial that a massacre occurred. However, in Armenia historians tell us that thousands of innocent Armenians were slaughtered by Ottoman soldiers. This demonstrates how the context changes our understanding of the truth of historical events.

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‘Thou shalt not kill’ is a tenet that a religion with billions of followers states in its first teachings and is generally accepted not just as a piece of guidance on how to behave but as a moral absolute, and as a statement of true fact. However, ‘why do we kill people who are killing people to show that killing people is wrong?’³ A person convicted of murder in the state of Texas is automatically eligible for the death penalty. It is generally considered unacceptable to kill, however, if the person is being punished for a crime that he has committed then the death penalty is in some countries applicable and accepted, thereby contradicting the so-called ‘moral truth’ put forward by religion.

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The Iraq war has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, mainly Iraqi civilians who have no part in the actual conflict but who were living in Baghdad when bombs started landing, or simply present in a market the day a suicide bomber struck. During the initial phases of ‘operation Iraqi liberation’, President George W. Bush and UK prime minister Tony Blair claimed they had evidence that Saddam Hussein was building ‘Weapons of Mass Destruction’ in his country – claims which turned out to be totally unfounded. These claims were used to support the ‘doctrine of Just War’. The two countries’ political leaders then changed tack and used the excuse ‘the end justifies the means’ to support their actions. The name ‘Operation Iraqi Liberation’ gives people a sense of patriotism and that what they are doing is right. The context in which the

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³ http://thinkexist.com/quotation/why_do_we_kill_people_who_are_killing_people_to/208319.html

governments of the USA and UK put the evidence for the invasion has given the impression of a just war. This context was, however, built up using emotive language, colourful displays of patriotism and many fallacies. This context was required in order make their 'just war' (jus ad bellum, jus in bellum) cause true.

From the point of view of the leaders of the USA and the United Kingdom, the war in Iraq is justified; however if we were to examine the standpoint of the insurgency in Iraq then we see a clear difference in perception of the truth. The West believes it is liberating while the Iraqi insurgency see 'liberation' as an invasion. Once again, the truth of the situation depends on the context. We see from this that one's perception of 'truth' is dependent on things such as cultural background and political viewpoint.

The table I am sitting at to write this essay appears to be hard – another *a-priori* truth. I know this by using my senses and I can deduce empirically that the table is suitable to be rested upon. However, scientifically, I know that this table is mainly empty space for there are spaces in between the molecules held in a lattice, vibrating at high speed. Richard Dawkins likens atoms at a molecular level to balls in a sports hall, one ball or atom in one sports hall, with the next atom in the next sports hall along. So the hardest of materials are, in fact, predominantly empty space. Dawkins describes us as living and evolving in a 'middle world' where we move at middle speeds and are of middle size. We can comprehend that if we run into a wall we will knock ourselves out. If we had neutrino brains and we had developed from neutrino ancestors, our brains would be able to process the spaces between the atoms and we would in fact be able to move through walls. What we perceive is not a direct translation of the world around us. Each organism has developed from different ancestors and perceives the world to his own benefit. A monkey, Richard Dawkins claims, needs to be able to visualise a 3D world of

branches and trees, whereas a water skater has no need for a 3D world or a perception of gravity because its whole world is on the surface of a pond. The context in which the world is interpreted changes from species to species. It is convenient for humans to see colours (differentiating wave-lengths) because we live predominantly in the light, however for a bat living in darkness most of its life, it is more suitable for it to use its ears to perceive colours. The context changes the usefulness of external sensory information. Evolution has enabled humans to operate successfully in the context of Dawkins' middle world.

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We exist in a world where we must make sense of situations as we find them. That may involve making judgements and evaluating historical, artistic, mathematical, religious and moral information. I believe that there is no such thing as absolute truth, and that Margaret Atwood was right when she said 'context is all'.

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