

Relativism & Christianity



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Introduction

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines Relativism as the view that truth and falsity, right and wrong, standards of reasoning, and procedures of justification are products of differing conventions and frameworks of assessment and that their authority is confined to the context giving rise to them.

More precisely, “relativism” covers views which maintain that—at a high level of abstraction—at least some class of things have the properties they have (e.g., beautiful, morally good, epistemically justified) not *simpliciter*, but only relative to a given framework of assessment (e.g., local cultural norms, individual standards), and correspondingly, that the truth of claims attributing these properties holds only once the relevant framework of assessment is specified or supplied.

Relativists characteristically insist, furthermore, that if something is only *relatively* so, then there can be no framework-independent vantage point from which the matter of whether the thing in question is so can be established.

Relativism has been, in its various guises, both one of the most popular and most reviled philosophical doctrines of our time. Defenders see it as a harbinger of tolerance and the only ethical and epistemic stance worthy of the open-minded and tolerant. Detractors dismiss it for its alleged incoherence and uncritical intellectual permissiveness. Debates about

relativism permeate the whole spectrum of philosophical sub-disciplines. From ethics to epistemology, science to religion, political theory to ontology, theories of meaning and even logic, philosophy has felt the need to respond to this heady and seemingly subversive idea. Discussions of relativism often also invoke considerations relevant to the very nature and methodology of philosophy and to the division between the so-called “analytic and continental” camps in philosophy. And yet, despite a long history of debate going back to Plato and an increasingly large body of writing, it is still difficult to come to an agreed definition of what, at its core, relativism is, and what philosophical import it has. This entry attempts to provide a broad account of the many ways in which “relativism” has been defined, explained, defended and criticized.

In short...**Relativism** is the concept that *points of view* have no absolute truth or validity within themselves, but rather only relative, subjective value according to differences in perception and consideration.

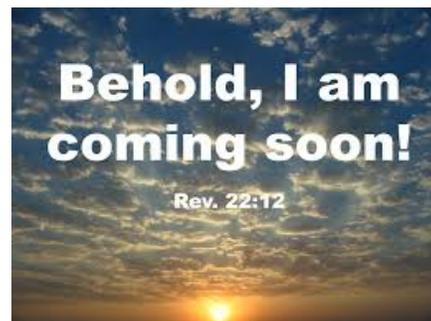
As moral relativism, the term is often used in the context of moral principles, where principles and ethics are regarded as applicable in only limited context.

There are many forms of relativism which vary in their degree of controversy. The term often refers to *truth relativism*, which is the doctrine that there are no absolute truths, i.e., that truth is always relative to some particular frame of reference, such as a language or a culture (cultural relativism).

Absolute Truth - Inflexible Reality

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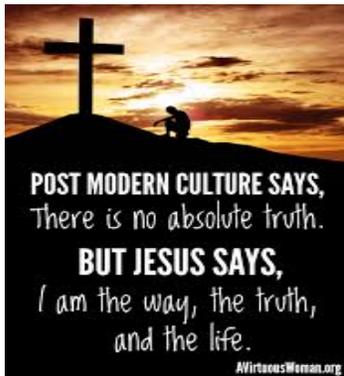
"**Absolute truth**" is defined as inflexible reality: fixed, invariable, unalterable facts. For example, it is a fixed, invariable, unalterable fact that there are absolutely no square circles and there are absolutely no round squares.



You can't logically argue against the existence of absolute truth. To argue against something is to establish that a truth exists. You cannot argue against absolute truth unless an absolute truth is the basis of your argument. Consider a few of the classic arguments and declarations made by those who seek to argue against the existence of absolute truth...

"Are There No Absolutes?" First of all, the relativist is declaring there are absolutely no absolutes. That is an absolute statement. The statement is logically contradictory. If the statement is true, there is, in fact, an absolute - there are absolutely no absolutes.

"Truth Is Relative." Again, this is an absolute statement implying truth is absolutely relative. Besides positing an absolute, suppose the statement was true and "truth is relative." Everything including that statement would be relative. If a statement is relative, it is not always true. If "truth is relative" is not always true, sometimes truth is not relative. This means there are absolutes, which means the above statement is false. When you follow the logic, relativist arguments will always contradict themselves.



"Who Knows What The Truth Is, Right?" In the same sentence the speaker declares that no one knows what the truth is, then he turns around and asks those who are listening to affirm the truth of his statement. "No One Knows What The Truth Is." The speaker obviously believes his statement is true.

There are philosophers who actually spend countless hours toiling over thick volumes written on the "meaninglessness" of everything. We can assume they think the text is meaningful!

Then there are those philosophy teachers, who teach their students,

1. *"No one's opinion is superior to anyone else's."*
2. **There is no hierarchy of truth or values.**
3. **Anyone's viewpoint is just as valid as anyone else's viewpoint.**
4. **We all have our own truth."**

Then they turn around and grade the papers!

Absolute Truth And Morality

Morality is a facet of absolute truth. Thus, relativists often declare, "It's wrong for you to impose your morals on me." By declaring something is wrong, the relativist is contradicting himself by imposing his morals upon you.

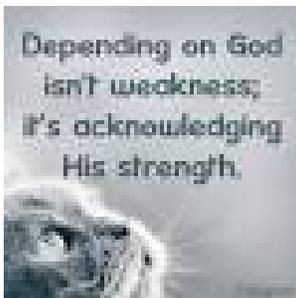
You might hear, *"There is no right, there is no wrong!"* You must ask, is that statement right or wrong?

If you catch a relativist in the act of doing something they know is absolutely wrong, and you try to point it out to them, they may respond in anger, **"Truth is relative! There's no right and there's no wrong! We should be able to do whatever we want!"** If that is a true statement and there is no right and there is no wrong, and everyone should be able to do whatever they want, then why have they become angry? What basis do they have for their anger? You can't be appalled by an injustice, or anything else for that matter, unless an absolute has somehow been violated.

The World Is Filled With Absolute Truth

We all know there is absolute truth. It seems the more we argue against it, the more we prove its existence. Reality is absolute whether you feel like being cogent or not. Philosophically, relativism is contradictory. Practically, relativism is anarchy.

A Relativistic Viewpoint



A relativist maintains that everyone should be able to believe and do whatever he or she wants. Of course, this view is emotionally satisfying, until that person comes home to find his house has been robbed, or someone seeks to hurt him, or someone cuts in front of him in line.

No relativist will come home to find his house robbed and say, "Oh, how wonderful that the burglar was able to fulfill his or her view of reality by robbing my house. Who am I to impose my view of right and wrong on this wonderful burglar?"

Quite the contrary, the relativist will feel violated just like anyone else. And then, of course, it's OK for him to be a relativist, as long as the "system" acts in an absolutist way by protecting his or her "unalienable rights."

Whatever Happened To The Truth?

Linda Keffer of Focus On The Family

In our world today, the idea of ultimate truth — something that is true at all times in all places and has relevance for our lives — is about as extinct as the dinosaur. In fact, **nearly three out of four Americans say there is no such thing as ultimate, or absolute, truth.** And the numbers don't look much better among those who claim to follow Jesus.

In a society where ultimate truth is treated like a fairy tale, an outdated idea or even an insult to human intelligence, the motto of the day becomes, "**WHATEVER!**" Believe whatever you want. Do whatever seems best to you. Live for whatever brings you pleasure, as long as it doesn't hurt anyone. And of course, be tolerant. Don't try to tell anyone that their *whatever* is wrong.

But where does that leave us? If we have ultimate truth, it gives us both a way to explain the world around us and a basis for making decisions. Without it, we're alone. We're just 7 billion organisms running around, bumping into each other with nothing unifying to work for or believe in. It's every man for himself. And we're without a purpose; if there's no true story of where we came from and why we're here, then there's nothing that really gives our lives meaning. Sounds a little depressing, huh? And maybe frightening.

Has life always been like this? Do we have to carry on this way? No! In fact, in the scope of history, *whatever* is a pretty new way of viewing the world.

When Truth Wasn't A Bad Word

If you consider that the human race has been around for thousands of years, the last two or three hundred don't seem that long. And it is in that short time that



our beliefs have shifted from a certainty in truth to a denial that it even exists.

From before Jesus was born until the late 1700s, people believed in a spiritual or supernatural world that coexisted with the physical world, affecting all aspects of it. People who lived during that time also generally believed that the natural world was orderly, that it could be studied and that truth was touchable, based on supernatural rather than natural realities.

Those people gave spiritual explanations for what went on in their physical lives. They also made moral decisions on the basis of the supernatural; things were believed to be right or wrong based on what God thought. Of course, not everyone believed in the God of Israel, but history shows that every civilization developed a way of thinking that looked for truth in the supernatural world. Societies that didn't recognize the one true God were sometimes closer to finding Him and finding truth than people are today because they were actively seeking these things.

That's what the apostle Paul found when he visited Greece. He walked into a group of scholarly Athenians and said, "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: To an unknown god. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you" (**Acts 17:22-23**). Paul went on to talk about the real God, and many Athenians listened. They had not formerly known God, but they knew that there was something supernatural that they were missing. The altar they had built showed that they were looking for truth, so when Paul showed up, they were eager to hear about Jehovah — He was what they had been missing!

Another thing is clear about how ancient people looked for truth — they watched and listened for signs of the supernatural within the natural world. Bottom line: They expected God to reveal himself through words and circumstances. ***Revelation* was their source of ultimate truth.**

So, How'd We Get Into This Mess?

Around the mid-1700s, common ideas about truth and the supernatural changed. At first, the new ideas weren't bad. People started focusing on the uniqueness



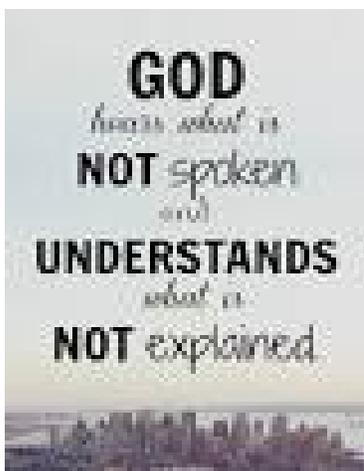
of humans and the human mind. And they were right — we *are* unique and God *has* made us special. Unfortunately, the good idea took a wrong turn. Instead of praising God for creating our minds, people started treating the human mind as if it were a god.

Scientists made astounding discoveries, and the scope of knowledge seemed limitless. Charles Darwin had given people an excuse for forgetting God with his ideas about evolution and natural selection. People began to think that maybe the world just happened by chance. And Sir Isaac Newton proved that the natural world is a big machine that runs according to a certain set of laws. If we could just discover these laws, then we'd know how to better manage our lives and thus improve the world.

But there was one huge problem with these ideas — science can discover truth only in the natural realm. In other words, it works only on things that can be tested. Rather than admitting that *our ability* to discover truth is limited, we decided to say that *reality* is limited. People began to believe that the physical world is all there is — no supernatural world and no God (or if there is a God, He doesn't have much to do with us).

Since people no longer believed in the revelation of a supernatural standard, they had to find another basis for moral decisions. Their sources of truth were reason, facts and science, so it's no surprise that those same sources became the standard for moral decisions. Instead of asking, "What would Jesus do?" people asked, "What does reason tell us is best for humanity?"

What Happened Then?



Everything worked fine until we started coming up with questions and problems that science couldn't answer. It took nearly 200 years, but eventually people started to realize that science and reason hadn't eliminated the problems of poverty, crime and hunger. After a while, we became discouraged with trying to find a better solution and decided that there just *isn't* a solution.

Science isn't the answer; it isn't *the* source of truth. And of course, God had been excluded

from the picture long ago. So what did that leave us? Nothing. Oh, of course, there are true statements that can be made about what we see around us: "I have three apples," "The law of gravity applies," etc. But once we've excluded both God and reason, there's nothing left to provide ultimate truth — the kind of truth that is true always and everywhere, the kind of truth on which to base our moral decisions. And that leads us to *whatever*.

Living In A "Whatever" World

If there is no basis for moral decisions, then *whatever* you choose to do is fine. Of course, most people like to believe that they have *some* basis for the decisions they make. So we've constructed our own standards:

- ***Science And Reason***

Even though most people have thrown out reason as the source of ultimate truth, some still cling to it. "If I can't see it, hear it, smell it, taste it, touch it and test it, it can't be true," they say.

- ***Popular Opinion***

You only have to look as far as your TV to know that society thinks popular opinion is a good basis for making decisions. Otherwise, why would our advertisements tell us to "catch the wave" or make the "choice of a new generation"? All these ads appeal to the idea that "everyone is doing it" and that you should, too.

- ***Feelings***

Emotions are perhaps the most popular basis for making choices today. After all, how can anyone argue with how you feel? If feelings are a good standard for decision-making, then you'll never have to come up with a better defense than, "I did it because I felt like it."

It doesn't take a lot of "what if" scenarios to realize that there are *major* problems with all these approaches to decision-making. What if you're asking a question that science can't answer? What if the group changes its opinion? How do you know which one was right?⁷ And what if following your feelings

I AM
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FOR WHAT YOU PUT
AFTER THEM
SHAPES YOUR REALITY.

leads you to an action with consequences you can't handle? We've gotten ourselves into this *whatever* mess, but it's getting harder and harder to live here. So how do we get out?

Recognizing The Need For Truth

The first rung on the ladder out of this "no-truth" hole is realizing that it's reasonable to desire truth. In fact, those who tell you it's useless or narrow-minded to believe in ultimate truth have more explaining to do than they can pull off. When someone says, "There is no such thing as absolute truth," that person is actually making a statement that he or she believes to be absolutely true. Contradictory, isn't it?

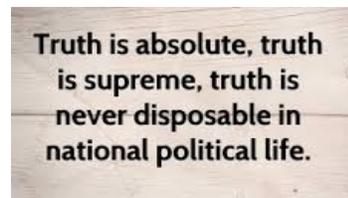
And it's even reasonable to search for ultimate truth in God. Those who say there is no God on whom to base our standards have a very hard time dealing with these questions:

- **Why do we have personalities?** If there is no personal God who "shared these bits of His personality with us," where did we get them?
- **Why do the pieces of the universe fit together so intricately?** If there isn't a higher standard outside the natural world ordering the way things work, then why do they work so well?
- **Why do we have a strong desire for purpose and meaning in life?** If there is no "big picture" that explains where we came from and why we're here, why do we ask questions about purpose and spend our lives trying to find the answers?

These questions don't automatically take us to the truth, but they do give us a place to start looking.

Where Do We Go From Here?

If you got lost hiking in the woods, what would you do to find your way? If you knew anything about outdoor survival, you wouldn't keep wandering around, trying new paths and hoping you'd eventually stumble upon the right one. Instead, you'd turn around and retrace your steps



until you found where you went wrong. Then you'd make a better choice and go on from there.

In our search for truth, we are obviously lost. In fact, many of us have given up hope of ever reaching our destination. Those still looking for truth have chosen to keep wandering rather than turn around and fix past mistakes. But making that 180-degree turn and taking a hard look at where we've gone wrong in the past is exactly what we need to do.

We have already discussed the fact that through most of history, people believed in objective truth and the supernatural. And they believed that the two were closely related.

When these ideas got lost, it was because society made two distinctly wrong turns. **First**, people abused human reason and intellect. **Second**, they threw God out the window. If we are to get back on the right track, we've got to go back and fix these mistakes.

Fixing The "Science And Reason" Mistake

It's important to remember that the *use* of reason isn't what destroyed belief in truth. The problem was that people *misused* reason, mistaking it for something much bigger and more powerful than it really is. Many have already discovered this wrong turn, but in trying to fix it, they've made another, equally dangerous, mistake.

Have you ever heard someone say that Christianity is based on ignorant, blind faith? Unfortunately, in some ways, Christians have earned that insult.

Many Christians today don't want to be like the people of the 1700s, who relied on reason instead of God as the source of truth, so we've put thinking on the back burner of our faith. But the human intellect is not a bad thing. God created our minds, and He wants us to glorify Him by *using them!*

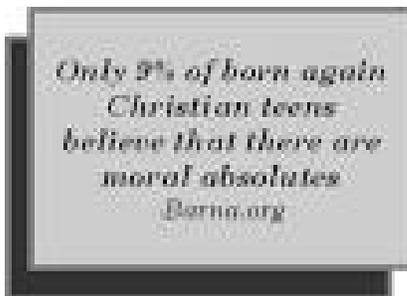
“Situational Ethics”

GotQuestions.org

“Situational Ethics,” the belief that what is right or wrong is relative to the situation. There is no right or wrong; therefore, whatever feels or seems right at the time and in that situation is right. Of course, situational ethics leads to a subjective, “whatever feels good” mentality and lifestyle, which has a devastating effect on society and individuals. This is postmodernism, creating a society that regards all values, beliefs, lifestyles, and truth claims as equally valid.

A good question to ask people who say, “There is no absolute truth” is this: “Are you absolutely sure of that?” If they say “yes,” they have made an absolute statement—which itself implies the existence of absolutes. They are saying that the very fact there is no absolute truth is the one and only absolute truth.

Beside the problem of self-contradiction, there are several other logical problems one must overcome to believe that there are no absolute or universal truths.



One is that all humans have limited knowledge and finite minds and, therefore, cannot logically make absolute negative statements. A person cannot logically say, “There is no God” (even though many do so), because, in order to make such a statement, he would need to have absolute knowledge of the entire universe from

beginning to end. Since that is impossible, the most anyone can logically say is “With the limited knowledge I have, I do not believe there is a God.”

Another problem with the denial of absolute or universal truth is that it fails to live up to what we know to be true in our own consciences, our own experiences, and what we see in the real world. If there is no such thing as absolute truth, then there is nothing ultimately right or wrong about anything. What might be “right” for you does not mean it is “right” for me. While on the surface this type of relativism seems to be appealing, what it means is that everybody sets his own rules to live by and does what he

thinks is right. Inevitably, one person's sense of right will soon clash with another's.

What happens if it is "right" for me to ignore traffic lights, even when they are red? I put many lives at risk. Or I might think it is right to steal from you, and you might think it is not right. Clearly, our standards of right and wrong are in conflict.

If there is no absolute truth, no standard of right and wrong that we are all accountable to, then we can never be sure of anything. People would be free to do whatever they want—murder, rape, steal, lie, cheat, etc., and no one could say those things would be wrong. There could be no government, no laws, and no justice, because one could not even say that the majority of the people have the right to make and enforce standards upon the minority. A world without absolutes would be the most horrible world imaginable.



From a spiritual standpoint, this type of relativism results in religious confusion, with no one true religion and no way of having a right relationship with God. All religions would therefore be false because they all make absolute claims regarding the afterlife. It is not uncommon today for people to believe that two diametrically opposed religions could both be equally "true," even though both religions claim to have the only way to heaven or teach two totally opposite "truths."

People who do not believe in absolute truth ignore these claims and embrace a more tolerant universalism that teaches all religions are equal and all roads lead to heaven. People who embrace this worldview vehemently oppose evangelical Christians who believe the Bible when it says that Jesus is "the way, and the truth, and the life" and that He is the ultimate manifestation of truth and the only way one can get to heaven (**John 14:6**).

Tolerance has become the one cardinal virtue of the postmodern society, the one absolute, and, therefore, intolerance is the only evil. Any dogmatic belief—especially a belief in absolute truth—is viewed as intolerance, the ultimate sin. Those who deny absolute truth will often say that it is all right to believe what you want, as long as you do not try to impose your beliefs on others. But this view itself is a belief about what is right and wrong, and

those who hold this view most definitely do try to impose it on others. They set up a standard of behavior, which they insist others follow, thereby violating the very thing they claim to uphold—another self-contradicting position.

Those who hold such a belief simply do not want to be accountable for their actions. If there is absolute truth, then there are absolute standards of right and wrong, and we are accountable to those standards. This accountability is what people are really rejecting when they reject absolute truth.



The denial of absolute or universal truth and the cultural relativism that comes with it are the logical result of a society that has embraced the theory of evolution as the explanation for life. If naturalistic evolution is true, then life has no meaning, we have no purpose, and there cannot be any absolute right or wrong. Man is then free to live as he pleases and is accountable to no one for his actions. Yet no matter how much sinful men deny the existence of God and absolute truth, they still will someday stand before Him in judgment.

The Bible Declares "...what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools" (**Romans 1:19-22**).

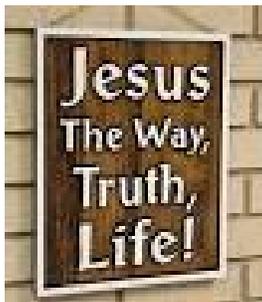
Real Evidence

Is there any evidence for the existence of absolute truth? Yes, There is. **The first evidence** is the human conscience, that certain "something" within us that tells us the world should be a certain way, that some things are right and some are wrong. Our conscience convinces us there is something wrong with suffering, starvation, rape, pain, and evil, and it makes us aware that love, generosity, compassion, and peace are positive things for which we should strive. This is universally true in all cultures in all times. The Bible describes the role of the human conscience in **Romans 2:14-16**: "Indeed,

when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them. This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.”

The second evidence for the existence of absolute truth is science. Science is simply the pursuit of knowledge, the study of what we know and the quest to know more. Therefore, all scientific study must, by necessity, be founded upon the belief that there are objective realities existing in the world and these realities can be discovered and proven. Without absolutes, what would there be to study? How could one know that the findings of science are real? In fact, the very laws of science are founded on the existence of absolute truth.

The third evidence for the existence of absolute or universal truth is religion. All the religions of the world attempt to give meaning and definition to life. They are born out of mankind’s desire for something more than simple existence. Through religion, humans seek God, hope for the future, forgiveness of sins, peace in the midst of struggle, and answers to our deepest questions. Religion is really evidence that mankind is more than just a highly evolved animal. It is evidence of a higher purpose and of the existence of a personal and purposeful Creator who implanted in man the desire to know Him. And if there is indeed a Creator, then He becomes the standard for absolute truth, and it is His authority that establishes that truth.



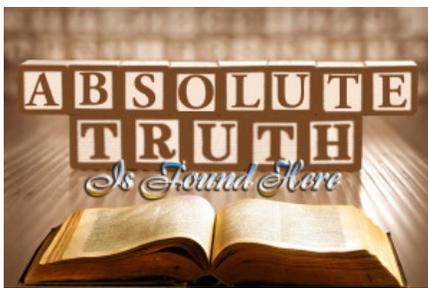
Fortunately, there is such a Creator, and He has revealed His truth to us through His Word, the Bible. Knowing absolute or universal truth is only possible through a personal relationship with the One who claims to be the Truth—Jesus Christ. Jesus claimed to be the only way, the only truth, the only life and the only path to God (**John 14:6**). The fact that absolute truth does exist points us to the truth that there is a sovereign God who created the heavens and the earth and who has revealed Himself to us in order that we might know Him personally through His Son Jesus Christ. That is the absolute truth.

Most People Will Accept Absolutes

Compellingtruth.com

The question is truly not whether there are any absolutes but rather which claims of truth are absolute. People will generally accept absolutes in areas of science or mathematics, but tend to question truth when it comes to matters of morality. For example, most people would agree premeditated murder is morally wrong, yet what about in a society in which cannibalism is practiced? Is morality therefore simply socially conditioned, based on "what works" or what a given community agrees upon, or is there a standard of absolute truth or morality?

Philosophically, people may disagree on what is moral or ethical, yet virtually all people agree on some system of right and wrong. Therefore, the natural question arises, "Upon what do we base our moral standards?"



Many religious systems provide moral codes or standards for their followers, yet the Bible presents a unique look at truth. In the New Testament, Jesus was asked, "What is truth?" by Pilate (**John 18:38**), the very man who approved the death of Jesus. When Pilate asked this question, he was looking into the eyes of the One who claimed to be the way, the truth, and the life (**John 14:6**). Further, because God is perfect (Father, Son, and Spirit), what He says is true. This includes the Scriptures that are called God-breathed or inspired by God (**2 Timothy 3:16-17; Psalm 19**).

Absolute truth exists, as no other option is adequate. Many systems of "truth" or morality exist, yet only Jesus Christ claimed to be truth and proved it by His resurrection from the dead (**1 Corinthians 15:3-11**).

Absolute Truth is real. Those who deny it, reject it only on two points, Sex and religion. All other points are ok with the "Nay-Sayers". These are the folks that are liberal in their thinking. They want to be promiscuous desiring to do immoral things without consequences. These folks are also those that deny the true and living God so they can proceed with evil and boast in their darkened state of mind.

Scientific Knowledge

Institute For creation Research

Scientific knowledge is not a collection of subjective opinions. Rather, it is a collection of explanations about objective reality that is based on observed or predicted phenomena. In addition, the explanation must be verified repeatedly to confirm that it correctly models reality.

As our technical ability to observe reality improves, we are able to increase the quality and quantity of our observations. Better-observed data challenge our explanations, some of which will no longer fit the observed facts. New theories are then formed and either verified or falsified.

While our scientific knowledge changes rapidly, the absolute reality that is being modeled has never changed. The scientific method assumes an absolute reality against which theories can be verified.

Conclusion

The nature of truth has been explored throughout the centuries but the concept that truth can be absolute has been under attack for some time now. Historically, biblical foundational beliefs centered American society even when external forces threatened a change in direction.

Due to its nature, particularly in the area of absolute truth, this theological grounding gave great strength and resilience to the nation. The truths that the founding fathers held to be “self-evident” are now generally seen to be relative and confusion has crept into society, with a particularly deadly toll on the moral compass of our world. **(Carolyn De Gregory Towart)**

We, as Christians, must above all else, hold biblical truth as absolute and live by every word every day, no matter what others think or do. We must not allow our moral compass to slip away or our eyes to shift from God to ourselves. We must stand our ground demonstrating faith in all that we do.

Absolute truth can only be found in Jesus. He is the source of all truth and is the embodiment of truth. **(John 14:6)** He brings order out of chaos, peace out of confusion, love out of hate, and life out of death.

Absolute Truth Exists



Really Does

It Is Called the Bible