«What is truth?»

Pontius Pilate. The Gospel of John, 18:38, The New Testament.

“The value of truth must for once, by way of experiment, be called into question.”

Friedrich Nietzsche: On the Genealogy of Morals (1887), 3:24

Classical philosophy has defined whether something is true or not by three parameters. Truth has been defined as a *true, justified belief*. The parameter of *true* is in regard to whether or not something is right or wrong, and is a completely binary state of either yes or no. The parameter of *belief* is only to show that someone (or something) must produce the statement, that there has to be a subject to perceive the truth. The parameter of *justified* is set in place to prohibit “accidental” truths, i.e. someone being correct without them knowing it.

This definition has been used for centuries, and is seemingly quite a good definition. However, it might still have a few problems in certain scenarios.

Pilate’s quote, in regards to the divinity/guiltiness of Jesus, seems to ask a question that longs for the answer that the classical definition has given us. But the question of Jesus’ divinity is in and of itself an example of a question that creates problems with the classical definition. Pilate could have easily seen that Jesus was human, and yet he claimed to be the son of, and by dogma some years later, God. Is it then true that Jesus, if we are to, for sake of the argument, accept the premise that Jesus is part of the holy trinity, is God? Or human? Is it *true* to place him in either of these categories? Humans do not have the ability to resurrect, either oneself or others. God should not, because according to dogma he is all-powerful, be able to die. Yet Jesus satisfies both of these criteria. Pilate is not only asking what is true, but in addition if two things that are seemingly contraries, where one possibility eliminates the other from co-existing, allows for both to be true.

Nietzsche asks a completely different question; does it even matter? Does truth really trump happiness, pleasure, and other positives that in some way make life better? Is not truth a source of things that can make things worse? It is not only his claim, but he seeks to experiment with its actual value.

A quite simple argument shows us that truth, to some degree, not only is valuable but also *completely necessary*. If we are to have a very sceptic world-view, and doubt anything and everything we observe or think, Descartes’ argument *cogito ergo sum* can be used to establish some sort of footing. We might not know anything of the “outside world”, but we can be certain that something must exist, if only our very own mind. If not our own mind then something that can think the thoughts our mind thinks in itself, or some other external, being the source of thought and reflection. Because we know that our thoughts, no matter if they are correct, or not, have to exist then *something* must exist. If nothing exists, nothing would be able to think or imagine, and thus the very groundwork for anything’s, even our minds’, existence has to be false. We learn one truth through this, and that is that something must exist. If this statement was not true, not correct at least, then the very foundation for anything is false. We also learn that there must be something that is *completely true*, if only in the binary question of “does something exist?”, “yes”. Keep in mind that we must not necessarily know anything about the objects these truths refer to, only that they, out of necessity, have to be true. In short, truth is a necessity for any existence.

We can also learn things about existence: there must be some sort of *room* for the existence to exist in, i.e. a world, and something must exist in it. These two might even be the same thing for all we know. This room does not have to follow any rules of space or time, or even have space or time (Kant argued that anything that exists must exist in space and time, because we cannot imagine how anything would exist outside of these to parameters. This argument is sound in regards to our world, but it is not impossible to imagine a “world” (not as in physical plane of existence) as a way of existing that is in no way understandable to the human mind, except for the fact that it is incomprehensible, that it is devoid of space and time and perhaps uses other phenomena. Simply put: even if we cannot imagine how a “world” without space and time would operate, we can imagine one existing without knowing anything else of it), but that is has to provide some sort of plane for whatever exists, whatever produces thoughts. In fact, out of clear necessity we learn a couple of important truths: existence has to be possible, something must exist now, that existence has to have some sort of plane of existence, even if itself is that plane. These things must be *completely true.*

These truths are quite close to what Kant calls *analytic a priori* knowledge. Analytic only refers to the concepts in any statement being equivalent to each other. The classical example of this is “a bachelor is an unmarried man”, where the concept of bachelor could be substituted with unmarried man, and vice versa, and the truth of the statement would be intact. By way of the previous argument, “I can think” is a necessity to something existing. We can’t say that, because something exists something thinks, but the argument does work the other way around. A priori means *before experience*, and has to do with it being devoid of any empirical experience. One could argue that, because we have experienced that we think, this is an empirical and not an a priori statement. In empiricism however, it is the results that we perceive through our senses that are important, and not the existence of our senses themselves. If we are to use our minds existing as any empirical truth, we abolish any meaning it could have (if we are to continue with the same skepticism that for example Descartes had) and therefore, for sake of the continuation of the essay, I’ll say it’s a priori. Because thinking is not directly linked to sensory stimuli, it becomes easier to draw this distinction. Another defining quality of a priori knowledge, according to Kant, is that it is necessary. To answer both Pilate and Nietzsche’s questions:

Truth is something that is necessary. There cannot exist two contraries in regards to basic truths as Pilate wonders. The value of these truths, if it is not seen or experienced by the general public, is high. This is of course completely dependent on if you believe that existence is a good thing or not, but because these truths are necessary they are valuable.

It is only in regards to empirical and synthetic truths that the questions of Pilate and Nietzsche have less clear-cut answers. Synthetic empirical truths are not necessary, they are not a condition for existence. They might even vary, from person to person.

Determining the value of any non-necessary truth is problematic. It is entirely subjective, and there is no unit of value. We cannot say “this truth is exactly 40 units valuable”. We can however look at historical examples. Nietzsche himself claimed that God is dead. If we are to accept this statement as true, then we can try to value “truthness” compared to other things. Even though a large amount of the world’s population does not belong to any specific religion, the majority of the world does. Some combination, in different ratios, of feelings of community, security, happiness, tradition and hope has in this instance been more important than truth. On the contrary, almost all people who belong to a faith claim that they are, at least to a high degree, correct and true.

The problem with trying to value what is true in comparison to other phenomena is difficult, because in instances like this, both sides claim they are true. Humans hunger for authenticity in their beliefs, and trying to set up an experiment where one could really value truth compared to other things correctly, where the subjects can at the same time know whether a statement is true or not, and still be able to make the choice based on what they value most, and ignore authenticity, seems impossible.

A new word in 2016 was *post-truth*, and was especially used in regards to the American presidential election, where Trump, and his supporters, would repeatedly spread lies, to further their cause. An easy solution to this case would be to call the majority of Trump’s supporters so stupid that they could not separate true from false, but this does not really solve anything. What we can claim at least, is that they are not *interested* in the truth that they don’t enjoy or see any benefit in. The question of authenticity is not brought up to begin with, and is shadowed by frustration, anger, hope and other powerful emotions. This is of course not the only reason Trump was elected president, but we can learn that for some people, maybe truth might not be as imminent a question, there is no immediate need for confirmation.

Nietzsche’s question can be divided into separates: is truth more valuable than other things when we know the truth to be false, and is truth more valuable than other things when we believe the truth is correct (regardless of if it is or not)?

If false truth, or what we know to be incorrect, in effect that is not true becomes more important than that which is true, is more valuable, than some semblance of structure and predictability might fall away. How this would affect humanity is dependent on what truths we would be willing to throw away, and for what reason. But we can still claim that this is not the case in the world we observe today. Living, knowing that established truths are wrong, could lead to insanity and utter chaos. If nothing we know is true, then everything we know is false, and the only logical thing to do is do be completely illogical. This is clearly not the case. We do not live in a world where everything is completely correct either, at least not one where we uphold this ideal of authenticity. We divulge in media that is clearly not true, and yet people can be moved by a movie, or feel invested in a video game, even though they know all are creations of somebody else’s mind. We are neither all for or all against truth as a collective species, but rather in the middle, taking the truths that we need and like, and throwing away those we don’t.

Another way to differentiate is by looking at how Nietzsche himself separates science and religion. Science exists only to describe how something happens or has happened, to count atom for atom and make a model or accurate retelling of how something happened. According to Nietzsche, the purpose of religion is not in matters is not how, but *why*. To illustrate, we can make a cake. Science might explain how the cake was made, if it is made from chocolate or carrot, how many carbon atoms it is made of, and how long it was in the oven. Religion on the other hand, delves into why the cake was made, if it was a birthday cake, if it was made for John or Jack. The difference between science and religion can be separated into truths, concrete scientific truths, and emotional truths.

The emotional truths are perhaps the one’s we have decided for ourselves. They might not be true in the “scientific” sense that they are correct on a physical basis, but they tell us something about the subject that holds it. I.e: A Christian might not care if the world was created in 7 days or billions of years, because the truth that is more important in their eyes is that of God creating the world; the emotional truth.

The conclusion becomes that the truth of our own identity, of that which we believe to be our morals, the emotional truths that make us who we are, are more valuable than the truths that are objectively correct. It is not a matter of the value of truth, but the value of the type of truth, and how our subjectivism comes into play.

When our emotional truths are in conflict with the scientific and objective truth, the most logical thing to do is to abolish the emotional truth, and yet we rather ignore the scientific one.

Which is *more true?* This can be linked to Pilate’s question of contradictory statements. It is obvious that scientific truth satisfies the classical definition for truth, and that the only way the emotional truth does is by a statement like “It is true that I believe…”. We seem to value what we want to be true more than that which actually is true. It is clear that Nietzsche is right in the regard that we perhaps should test how we value truth, because we seem to not respect the finality of scientific truth and give too much to the emotional.

Contradictory realities have long been explained by the multiverse theory, that whenever more than one possibility presents itself, separate realities will spring forth, one for each possibility. The problem arises when they exist in the same reality, and when they are contradictory by definition. A classic example is that of the unstoppable force meeting the immovable object. By their definitions, there is only one explanation that is close to sufficing. It is necessary that they go through each other, the immovable will stand still, while the unstoppable will move through it. The truth becomes neither yes or no, but both, in order to satisfy their definitions.

In the end, our truths are what we perceive as necessary. Some impossibilities become possible, because their definitions make it necessary that it has to be so. Some truths are necessary, and those we have to accept to make sense of anything at all. Some truths are necessary for anything to exist. Some of us might value emotional truths higher because that is perceived as necessary, necessary for our own identity, for our morals, for our own understanding of our place in the world. The truths that are unnecessary, we might believe. If they fit.