*«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.

The Importance of Truth

Children have seemingly always been raised under the notion that lying is bad. Parents have created fairytales, punished their children and made them promise to never lie, in order for their children to speak only the truth to them. As shown famously in films, the first thing anyone called up to the stand in the American court must do is to swear on the Bible that they will speak “the truth, he whole truth, and nothing but the truth”. Truth is ingrained in the human culture and mentality, which is why it is considered outrageous when someone questions the definition of truth, or worse, the importance of it. But when Friedrich Nietzsche wrote that “The Value of truth must for once, by way of experiment, be called into question”, he was not the first to question this importance, and would not be the last. But reflecting on the value of truth creates another question, which seems to be fairly simple and impossible to answer at the same time; What is truth?

It is perhaps best to begin with defining truth, or attempting to do so, as one would need an understanding of the phenomenon to be able to decide why it is needed at all. However, truth is considered a primal part of our humanity, it becomes a bit difficult to define it with words alone, but nevertheless I shall attempt to do so. Truth is something true. It is a real thing or real knowledge that can be proven. But what qualifies as proof of something being true? From a scientific point of view, it must be tested numerous times and the proof must be grounded in the physical or what science claims to have a grasp on. However, from the view of a religious person, the truth can be proven in something spiritual or other worldly. An atheist supporter of science would claim that the evidence points to a potential God not existing, and therefore it and, the religion created around it, must be a lie. Meanwhile an extremist religious person will at times say that science is merely fabricated by humans, and therefore a lie attempting to overshadow the power of the higher power said religious person believes in. Yet, there also exist religious scientists who believe that science and the results of its experiments are proof of the existence of one God or more, as it is, in their eyes, an examination of God’s or several Gods’ work. The religious scientist may think of science as an attempt to understand this higher power, and can even look upon science as praise to God/the Gods. Therefore, truth can be considered something relative, as what proves something to be true depends on the standpoint of the individual. But what about its polar opposite?

Truth is the opposite of falsehood and lies, which are created to keep the reality of a subject hidden from others. It is often used for personal gain, or in fear of an unwanted reaction to the truth. Yet, the existence of lies can be called into question. Most people assume that the reality they live in is real, and thus true. And, following the thinking of Immanuel Kant, it is only possible for us to perceive everything within time and space. If everything within time and space is real, and it is impossible for humans to think outside of time and space, then all lies must build on truth and truth alone. Does that not mean lies are true? And while something may be considered false in one place or a point in time, it could be the truth in another. Still, I will argue that lies, though based in reality and having elements of truth in it, are something that exist. Lies choose different elements from different truths and shape them into a result which, on its own, is false. Lies are sometimes also considered half-truths, a full fact that has been stripped of several important factors to fit the narrative of the liar, often ending in a completely different result than if the whole truth had been revealed. Perhaps it is therefore the American court has relevant people swearing to tell the whole truth.

So truth can be defined as something real that is grounded in reality, and is not altered to fit a certain narrative. But what does this mean for its value? For as long as we can remember, humans have searched for universal truths. Questions about our existence, our purpose, the proper society and so much more have after centuries of thinking and searching still not been answered. Ancient Greece is considered to be the first proper wave of philosophical searching for these truths. Best known for this search are Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, who each had a different idea of how to search. Socrates believed that the truth lied buried within our minds, from a past life of living in a perfect world, and thought that the answers could be accessed through conversation and thinking. Plato went even further and split the world into several levels, where the world of ideas was the only true world, and the physical world was close to the bottom of the system, a mere illusion. Like Socrates, Plato believed that humans had to think and converse their way to the truth, and described the journey to this truth and the world of ideas as a chained prisoner being dragged out of the dark cave he was kept in to see the real world outside. Aristotle had the opposite idea of his teacher, Plato, and believed that the truth could only be found in the physical world, and had to be proven through rigorous testing. This was the predecessor to the modern scientific method, where, once something is proven, the scientist must work to disprove it, so as to see how well it actually holds.

Another period filled with philosophers who debated about the road to proper knowledge was the Enlightenment. Here it is important to note that there was a particular discussion shaped by the previously mentioned great thinkers of Ancient Greece, with (more or less) two sides: the rationalists, who believed that the truth could mainly be accessed through the mind, and empirics, who believed the truth was found in the physical world. On one end of the spectrum was Rene Descartes. He believed that proper knowledge, thus truth, could only be accessed through thought. Descartes created a dilemma of this thinking by claiming first that for all he knew he was controlled by the Devil, but then exclaimed that since he knew God existed and that God was good and would not let such a thing happen, Descartes could trust his mind. He also made a distinction between the physical and spiritual, the physical being animalistic and dirty, while the spiritual was good and pure. A man who agreed on God’s existence and importance in the human search for knowledge, but disagreed on the Socrates-like thinking of Descartes was John Locke, who claimed that though humans access proper knowledge as we age, we all begin as blank slates. Further on the spectrum, at the end of empiricism was David Hume, who believed that proper knowledge could not be accessed by humans, that is was impossible to really know something, and that the only way to attempt to get it was through examination and testing of the physical world. He was, however, critiqued by Immanuel Kant. He, as mentioned previously, meant that the truth could be found because of the existence of time and space, and the lack of ability to perceive anything outside of them.

But the belief in truth, especially a universal truth, was gradually fading. Hegel, whom was considered to be the last great philosopher was one of the few who held onto the dream of an absolute truth. He created a theory about a world spirit, which was learning and evolving through the changes in society and actions of humans. The world spirit will, for example, put two contradictory ideologies against each other and put the winner, either one of the two or a mixture or both, against a third and so on. Eventually the world spirit will have gone through every possible variation and found the best solution for everybody, thus having the world end in a utopia. But Hegel’s world spirit did not save the belief in the absolute truth. As time has passed more people have argued that it does not exist, and therefore is of no value at all. Philosopher Francois Lyotard argued that people now live in a postmodern society, a society that deals with the consequences of globalization and has realized that universal truths are non-existent. He argues that everyone has an individual truth, and that to attempt to convince others that one’s personal truth is the only truth is to act discriminatory and wrongly. However, as many as those who agree with Lyotard are, there still are some who believe in the dream of a universal truth. One of these is Habermas, who argues that a universal truth exists, but has become almost impossible to find. This is because the people who dare to seek it have had their judgement clouded by personal agendas and the wish to be right. He believes that to find universal truths spaces conversation and philosophy, akin to those of the past, must be created, where people come without agendas and converse their way to a common truth. It will be a difficult and long process, but Habermas believes in it.

The question of whether universal truths exist or not seems, once again, to create a new question: what of the value of the individual truths? According to Lyotard, they are all equally important. However, contradictory individual truths exist, so would it not be impossible to say they both are correct if they build on the falsehood of the other? And if absolute truths were to exist, would they not shut down the individual truths? Then again, it might be impossible for people to ever know if a truth is universal, even if it was. Following Kant’s line of thinking, there is a difference between the thing as it is and the thing for us. If we were to follow the thinking of Søren Kierkegaard too, we would come across the problem of sharing. Every person is an individual with their own experiences and interests that have shaped their view on the world, and with that their idea of what is true and what is not. One person cannot share their individual truth with someone else, once they share it, the receiver will interpret the truth based on his or her own truth, thus creating a new and different truth from what the one who shared intended. So either way, it might be impossible to know whether a truth is the one truth, and just as difficult to decide the value of different individual truths, as we are unable to separate our individuality from the thing we are perceiving.

I have looked at philosophers who discuss the existence of universal truths and how to find them if they exist, but if there is (as Lyotard claims) no absolute truth, is there even a point in guarding the individual ones? Should it not be allowed for anyone to lie at any given time? To create their own realities based on these lies? This is where I would argue that the lack of existence of a common truth makes it even more important to shun lies. While it is difficult to decide whether something is a lie or not in a world of vastly different truths, I believe that some things can be considered false, at the very least to the majority of the world. After all, enough people agreed on the same things to create human rights, and people, while still unique, have more in common than we often believe. And now, perhaps more than ever, it becomes important to remember these similarities. We are currently living in a tense political climate filled with extreme views and arguments coming from every side of the political spectrum. It could be argued that we are living in a climate as tense as the Cold War, where terrorist attacks, large waves of refugees, civil wars, and elections filled with fear have caused many to believe that a war is right around the corner. And in the middle of the tension lies the fake news hysteria, extremist news sources spreading false information to its readers, listeners and watchers, and claiming other sources to be the fake news. The current American president has been caught lying by several respected news sources, and turns to other sources for information while calling his critics “fake news”. This not a new phenomenon either. In most, if not all dictatorships, false stories have been spread from government-supported news sources to put the leadership in a good light and to spread hate against enemies of the state. The most polarizing example of this might be propaganda from North Korea which reportedly range from claiming to have found a unicorn layer to celebrating nuclear weapon testing. When so many extreme truths that go against each other exist, especially when several of these truths concern the safety and well-being of people, it becomes extremely important to find common values and find the proper balance between empiricism and rationalism. A Habermas-like space of respect where people can find something to agree on.

Of course it could be argued that there is no point in this struggle if one does not believe in universal truths. If there is no point in existence, no one answer to how people and a society should live and work, why bother with fighting lies? I can understand this way of thinking, and I respect it and those who believe in it. Yet, I personally feel that this so-called fight is needed, if not for anything but entertainment. Humans seem to have been created with a genuine wish to survive, and deception is dangerous for the survival of an individual or a group. Perhaps this fear of death through deception is what makes so many believe in this one truth, or at least in common ideas of what the truth can be. While I am not sure if I agree with Habermas when he claims that a universal truth exists, I do, like him, believe that it is necessary to find common ground. In a world of over 7 billion people, some common ideas of truth seem to be needed.

So what is truth, and does it even have a value? Truth is something real, something that can be proven, though how it can be proven depends on the values of the individual. It can be found in lies, but that does not make a lie a truth, as a lie alters the truth for personal gain. Whether universal truths exist seems impossible to know, though many philosophers over the centuries have tried and claimed to know they do. But common interpretations of what the truth of something can be exist, and they nor individual truths should necessarily be treated as less because they’re not a potential universal truth. But are these common ideas of truths and he individual truths worth fighting for? I would argue that they are, as I believe search for knowledge is of deep importance to humans, even if which truth to believe in can become incredibly difficult at times. Perhaps what is most important is to create an atmosphere of respect, where different individuals with different experiences can converse freely and without agenda in a search for common ground. It might be a naïve line of thinking, but then again, what’s wrong with a little optimism?