Are There Objective Truths about God

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SUMMARY

Critique of three modern/post-modern attempts to deny that there are objective facts about God.

ARE THERE OBJECTIVE TRUTHS ABOUT GOD

Pilate entered the praetorium again and called Jesus, and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me; what have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world." Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice." Pilate said to him, "What is truth?" (John 18.33-38)

Down through the ages, men have asked Pilate's question. What is the nature of truth? How can I know truth? Is there one truth? As a Christian philosopher, these are some of the questions that I would like to explore with you.

The biblical conception of truth is quite multifaceted. The Bible typically uses the words "true" or "truth" in non-philosophical senses to indicate such qualities as fidelity, moral rectitude, reality, and so forth. Occasionally, however, the Scriptures speak of truth in the more philosophical sense of veracity, and, of course, the biblical writers everywhere presuppose that what they are writing is true in this same sense, that is, that they are not writing falsehoods. So Christian theology certainly has a stake in the philosophical conception of truth.

That being so, however, it remains the case that there is no peculiarly Christian theory of truth. This is just as it should be, for if Christianity presented a distinctive definition and standards of truth, then its claim to be true would be circular or system-dependent and therefore trivial. But the Christian faith means to commend itself in the marketplace of ideas. The Christian faith claims to be true in the common, ordinary sense of that word and leaves the enunciation of a more careful definition to the philosophers. Thus, when philosophers formulate various theories of truth, such as the Correspondence Theory of Truth, the Coherence Theory of Truth, or the Existence Theory of Truth, none of these can be christened as *the* Christian Theory of Truth, and there have been

Christian philosophers among the adherents of each one.

For my part, I find some minimalist version of the Correspondence Theory to be most satisfactory. This theory goes back to Aristotle and beyond. According to Aristotle, "To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false; while to say of what is that it is, or of what is not that it is not, is true." Aristotle is here providing the conditions under which something is truly asserted, rather than giving a definition of truth itself, and it seems to me that his enormously influential characterization is quite correct. During the Middle Ages, philosophers addressed the question of truth more directly, Thomas Aquinas characterizing truth as the correlation of intellect and reality. In other words, if reality is as the intellect judges it to be, then truth is a quality inhering both in the judgement and in the intellect itself. Among contemporary correspondence theorists, truth is likewise conceived as a property of either sentences or propositions which correspond to the world as it actually is. Thus, for example, the sentence "Snow is white" is true if and only if snow is white. While I would not pretend that the Bible *teaches* truth as correspondence, such a theory seems to me wholly compatible with biblical ideas about truth and very plausible, if not obvious, in its own right.

But then what contribution does Christian theology have to make to a discussion about truth? Well, it tells us specifically that there are truths about God, and this is not trivial. For certain contemporary schools of modern and post-modern thought deny that there are any objective theological truths. Atheists and theists may disagree as to which propositions about God are true or false—the theist holding that the proposition "God exists" has the value "true" and the atheist holding that this proposition has the value "false"—but at least both agree that there are propositions about God and that these are not truth valueless. Some schools of modern and post-modern thought, however, do not concur.

Consider, for example, the challenge of Verificationism. In order to understand the Verificationist challenge, you first need to understand the difference between a sentence and a proposition. A sentence is a linguistic entity, composed of words. A proposition is the information content expressed by a declarative sentence. So, for example, the sentence "Snow is white" is obviously a different sentence than the sentence "Der Schnee ist weiss." One has three words and the other has four, and they have no words in common. Nevertheless, they both have the same information content, namely, that snow is white, and so they express the same proposition.

Now during the heyday of Logical Positivism in the thirties and forties, it was widely thought among philosophers that there literally are no propositions about God, that sentences including the word "God" are in fact meaningless, so that to say, for example, "God created the world" is as nonsensical as saying,,"'T was brillig; and the slithey toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe." This

display of philosophical arrogance toward religious and ordinary language was the result of the Positivists' vaunted Verification Principle of Meaning. According to that Principle, which went through a number of revisions, a sentence in order to be meaningful must be capable in principle of being empirically verified. Since theological statements could not be empirically verified, they were regarded as meaningless. Under the pressure of Verificationism, some theologians began to advocate emotivist theories of theological language. On their view theological statements are not statements of fact at all but merely express the user's emotions and attitudes. For example, the sentence "God created the world" does not purport to make any factual statement at all but merely is a way of expressing, say, one's awe and wonder at the grandeur of the universe. Now it hardly needs to be said that such an interpretation of theological discourse represents neither the viewpoint of the biblical writers nor of the common religious believer. They typically mean by their religious statements precisely what those statements appear to assert, for example, that God created the world. Fortunately, it was soon discovered that the Verification Principle would not only force us to dismiss as meaningless theological statements, but also a great many scientific statements—along with ethical, aesthetic, and metaphysical statements as well—, so that the Principle was wholly unreasonable. But even more fundamentally, it was realized that the Principle was self-refuting. Simply ask yourself, is the sentence "A meaningful sentence must be capable in principle of being empirically verified" *itself* capable of being empirically verified? Obviously not; no amount of empirical evidence would serve to verify its truth. The Verification Principle is therefore by its own criterion a meaningless combination of words, which need hardly detain the theist, or at best an arbitrary definition, which the theist is at liberty to reject. Therefore, Logical Positivism and its Verification Principle have been almost totally abandoned by philosophers; but it is sad how this positivistic attitude persists in some non-philosophical fields, particularly among scientists who were educated during the positivist era.

A second denial of theological truth comes from the quarter of Eastern mysticism and its peculiarly Western step-child, the New Age movement. According to this perspective, which I shall call mystical Anti-Realism, there are propositions about God all right, but they are neither true nor false; they are all of them truth valueless. Thus, propositions expressed by sentences like "God exists," "God is good," or "The world was created by God" are neither true nor false, having no truth value. God is said to transcend all categories of human thought and language, so that it is quite impossible to assert any truths about God, as Christian theology pretends to do.

Unfortunately, it's not even clear what is meant by the Mystical Anti-Realist claim that God is "above human thought and language." This is a metaphorical expression; but what does it mean? The best sense I can make of this claim is that what logicians call the *Principle of Bivalence* fails to be valid for propositions about God. The Principle of Bivalence states that for any proposition *p, p*

is either true or false. The Principle is very closely related to the Law of Excluded Middle, one of the famous three "laws of thoughts," which states that for any proposition p and its negation not-p, either p is true or not-p is true. The claim under consideration is that propositions ostensibly referring to God are neither true nor false.

Now on the face of it such a position seems incomprehensible, for it seems absurd to say that a logical contradiction is not false. But on this view a proposition expressed by a sentence like "God both exists and does not exist" is not false. Such a proposition seems necessarily false! Neither is it true that "God either exists or does not exist." But this statement seems to be necessarily true—what other alternative is there?

But the position involves an even deeper incoherence. For consider the proposition expressed by the sentence: "God can be described by bivalent propositions." Since that proposition is itself a proposition about God, the Principle of Bivalence should not be valid for it. Therefore, it cannot have a truth value; in particular, it cannot be false. But if it is not false, then how can it be the case, as the Anti-Realist claims, that the Principle of Bivalence fails for propositions about God? If the Principle of Bivalence fails for propositions about God, then isn't it false that God can be described by bivalent propositions? The claim thus refutes itself: one cannot coherently affirm that propositions about God are neither true nor false.

The Anti-Realist might retort that the above only shows that rational paradox is inevitable when we try to talk about God. But that is not the case. So long as we respect the Principle of Bivalence we can discourse perfectly rationally and coherently about God. What is incoherent is the Anti-Realist's denial of the validity of the Principle for propositions about God. The one who denies that the Principle of Bivalence is valid for propositions about God is in the very denial affirming a bivalent proposition about God. It is not God which is the source of the incoherence, but merely the Mystical Anti-Realist's view itself.

In any case, it is clear that *no reasons* can be offered for adopting the view that the Principle of Bivalence is not valid for propositions about God. For any purported reason for adopting this view would involve affirming certain truths about God, which the position prohibits. For example, if it is said that the principle fails because "God is too great to be grasped by human categories of thought" or "God is wholly other," or "God is omnipotent," then all of these are bivalent propositions about God. But the position holds that there are no bivalent propositions about God. Thus, none of these statements can be true, and so they can furnish no grounds for adopting the position in question. The position can only be embraced by an arational leap of faith. But surely, as rational men and women, we ought to be extremely reluctant to commit intellectual suicide for no reason whatsoever when it comes to theology. In the absence of any reason to abandon rational thought

in this realm, we ought to continue to employ the rational canons of thought which have proved so fruitful in other disciplines.

A final contemporary attack on theological truth as the Christian understands it is the most wild of all: what I shall call Radical Pluralism. With roots in Eastern Mysticism and radically individualized through the influence of Kant's Critical Philosophy, this view holds that each individual constitutes reality himself, so that there is no trans-subjective truth about the way the world is. On this view, the popular expression "It may be true for you, but it is not true for me" is quite literally correct. At face value, this attitude may seem patently absurd: whether we believe the stove burner is on or not, if we put our hand on it and it is on, we shall be burned. It's objectively true that the burner is hot, regardless of our subjective attitude toward it. Similarly, there were surely events going on before I was born which are entirely independent of me: the Big Bang, the era of galaxy formation, the age of the dinosaurs, and so forth. But these absurdities result because we are still thinking of an objective reality and trying to marry subjectivism to it. According to radical Pluralism, there is no objective reality; there is no overarching way the world is. The world has fallen apart and has been replaced by the world-for-me.

This Radical Pluralism is antithetical to the Christian world view because Christianity ascribes to God a privileged position as the knower of all truth. He stands, as it were, at the pinnacle of the pyramid of diverse perspectives on the world and in the unity of His intellect grasps the world as it is. There is thus on the Christian perspective a unity to truth and reality which is known by God. Radical pluralists thus often see their task as overtly anti-theological in character. For example, literary critic Roland Barthes writes,

To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final significance, to close the writing . . . . In precisely this way literature, by refusing to assign . . . an ultimate meaning to the text (and to the world as text) liberates what may be claled an antitheological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases--reason, science, law.

I find it especially intriguing that reason, science, and law are regarded by Radical Pluralists as to be rejected along with God.

Radical Pluralism is attended by relativism. For example, the American philosopher Richard Rorty says that truth is whatever my colleagues will let me get away with. Since you and I have different colleagues, truth is pluralistic because your colleagues may not let you get away with the same things my colleagues let me get away with. Reacting to Rorty's view, philosopher Alvin Plantinga writes,

Although this view is very much *au courant* and with-it in the contemporary intellectual world, it has consequences that are peculiar, not to say preposterous. For example, most of us think that the Chinese authorities did something monstrous in murdering those hundreds of young people in Tiananmen Square, and then compounded their wickedness by denying that they had done it. On Rorty's view, however, this is an uncharitable misunderstanding. What the authorities were really doing, in denying that they had murdered those students, was something wholly praiseworthy: they were trying to bring it about that the alleged massacre never happened. For they were trying to see to it that their colleagues would let them get away with saying that the massacre never happened; that is, they were trying to make it *true* that it never happened; and who can fault them for that? The same goes for those contemporary neo-Nazis who claim that there was no holocaust; from a Rortian view, they are only trying to see to it that such a terrible thing never happened; and what could be more commendable than that? This way of thinking has real possibilities for dealing with poverty and disease: if only we let each other get away with saying that there isn't any poverty and disease--no cancer or AIDS, let's say--then it would be true that there isn't any; and if it were true that there isn't any, then of course there wouldn't *be* any.

The serious point of Plantinga's satirical critique is its exposing the truly sinister nature of Radical Pluralism. Since there is no objective truth, reality is what those in authority make it to be. In the absence of truth, there is nothing to check the unbridled will to power.

If this weren't bad enough, it seems to me that Radical Pluralism is also self-refuting. We need only ask ourselves, "Is Radical Pluralism objectively true?" It claims that "There is no objective truth about the word;" but that statement purports itself to be an objective truth about the world. It says that "Each individual constitutes reality," so that there is no objective reality; but that is itself a statement about objective reality. It states that the proposition "Truth is pluralistic" is objectively true, which is self-refuting.

The Radical Pluralist cannot escape this incoherence by saying that it is only from his perspective that there is no objective truth about the world. For if that is true only from his perspective, that does not preclude that there is objective truth about the world, in which case his perspective is objectively false. If he replies that it is only from someone else's perspective that there is objective truth about the world, then it follows that all truth is perspectival, or that Radical Pluralism is objectively true, which is incoherent.

Why is it, then, that in our day and age so many people seem attracted to pluralistic and relativistic views of truth, despite the fact that they are both preposterous and self-refuting? I believe the attraction is due to a misunderstanding of the concept of *tolerance*. In our democratic society, we have a deep commitment to the value of tolerance of different views. many people have the

impression that tolerance requires radical pluralism with regard to truth. They seem to think that the claim that objective truth exists is incompatible with tolerance of other views because those views must be regarded as false. So in order to maintain tolerance of all views, one must not regard any of them as false. They must *all* be true. But since they are mutually contradictory, they cannot all be *objectively* true. Hence, truth must be relative and pluralistic.

But it seems to me pretty obvious that such a view is based on an incorrect understanding of tolerance. The very concept of tolerance *entails* that you *disagree* with that which you tolerate. Otherwise, you wouldn't tolerate it; you would *agree* with it! Thus, one can only tolerate a view if one regards that view as false. You can't tolerate a view which you believe to be true. Thus, the very concept of toleration presupposes that one believes the tolerated view to be false. So objective truth is not incompatible with tolerance; on the contrary the objectivity of truth is presupposed by tolerance.

The correct basis of tolerance is not pluralism, but the inherent worth of every human being created in the image of God and therefore endowed with certain God-given rights, including freedom of thought and expression. That's why Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." The basis of tolerance is not relativism, but love.

In summary, it seems to me that while Christian theology does not propound a particular theory of truth, it is wholly compatible with the traditional notion of truth as correspondence. The Christian world view purports to describe reality as it is and therefore to be true. The challenges posed to theological truth by Verificationism, Mystical Anti-Realism, and Radical Pluralism are all ultimately self-defeating and incoherent. Of course, I have not tried to show that the propositions constituting the Christian world view are in fact true. That is a talk for another day.