

ESSAY: WHAT IS TRUTH?

This essay was written with a view to clarifying some thoughts. Feedback will be most appreciated.

THE VALUE OF TRUTH

Regarding the question of “What is truth?”, perhaps it is worth inquiring into the matter in some depth, since truth is very likely the most important concept in all of philosophy, logic, religion, science and even everyday life. After all, if a philosophy or religion or logical argument or scientific theory isn’t true, what good is it?

Any serious statement, argument, teaching or theory stands or falls by whether there is any truth in it or not. If there isn’t, it is hardly even worth mulling over.

Of course there are those viewpoints which claim that truth is valueless, and naturally that means that the viewpoint itself, even if true (let alone if it isn’t), must be valueless: so there is no need to mention or deal with such a viewpoint, except in passing. (After all, what need is there to refute a viewpoint which by its own admission must be valueless?)

Now assuming that truth really does have some value, the question needs to be asked: “What is truth?”

DEFINITION OF “TRUTH”

Normally the word “truth” is taken to mean “an idea corresponding with some sort of reality”. (The *Hypertext Webster Gateway* has it thus: “truth: ... Conformity to fact or reality; exact accordance with that which is, or has been, or shall be”; and the *WWWebster Online Dictionary* has it as “the property (as of a statement) of being in accord with fact or reality”).

Of course this implies that there is a clear meaning to the term “reality”. Most dictionaries give rather flimsy and weak definitions of “reality” (e.g.: “1: the quality or state of being real; 2 a (1): a real event, entity, or state of affairs <*his dream became a reality*> (2): the totality of real things and events <*trying to escape from reality*> b: something that is neither derivative nor dependent but exists necessarily” — from the *WWWebster Online Dictionary*, which also defines “real” as “having objective independent existence”).

In most of these, “reality” is pretty much defined as “that which exists”, which isn’t too strong a definition; and since it is obvious that nothing can exist independently of *everything* else, that part can obviously be scratched as a valid definition anyway. So to be a valid definition for the purposes of *this* inquiry, the definition must clearly be strengthened.

Thus a clear meaning has to be given to the term “reality” in the context of this discussion. One possible meaning, which seems clear enough, might be as follows:

“Reality is that of which the existence is undoubtable, undeniable and/or irrefutable.”

It is to be understood by the above that of these three words, undoubtable, undeniable and/or irrefutable, only the applicable word(s) should apply to any individual case. For instance, it is both undoubtable and undeniable that pain exists, especially when the pain is intense. In any case it would be impossible to find sufficiently intense pain either doubted or denied for any length of time. However, the term “irrefutable” does not seem to apply here, because the existence of pain is not *proven*, but rather *directly experienced*.

On the other hand, the theorems of pure mathematics are *proven*, not directly experienced. Thus if the theorems of pure mathematics are to be taken as being a part of reality, they must be *irrefutable*. (However, it may be best to examine this concept in greater depth at a later stage in this essay, since it is not altogether clear in what sense they are part of reality.)

It is also to be noted that under the above definition, the term “to exist” or “to be” need not be defined at all. When there is pain, the existence of pain is both undoubtable and undeniable, and thus the meaning of the words “exists” and “is” is self-evident. (And so, too, is the meaning of “pain”.)

Anyway, taken simply as a beginning to this inquiry, given this definition of the term “reality”, the term “truth” is seen to be not exactly *synonymous* with reality: rather it must be taken as a thought that *corresponds* with reality: a kind of “map”, as it were, of reality.

Thus for instance the statement (or thought, or idea, or proposition, or concept) “suffering exists” is not the suffering itself. The suffering is the reality; the statement “suffering exists” is the truth which corresponds with that reality.

Of course the *statement* (or thought, or idea, or proposition or concept) “suffering exists” also exists. But the reality of *its* existence is not the same reality as the reality of the existence of suffering.

This, then is the most commonly-used sense in which the word “truth” is used, and may for all intents and purposes be considered the “definitive” definition of the word.

“TRUTH” USED AS “TRANSCENDENTAL REALITY”

However, the term “truth” is also used in other ways. Admittedly this is not done often, but it *is* so used. For example the word “Truth”, especially with a capital “T”, is sometimes used in the sense of “a transcendent fundamental or spiritual reality”. This is the way it is

used in many different languages, so it is highly likely that there is some universality to this concept. Examples are : the statement attributed — whether mistakenly or not is a moot point at this stage — to Jesus: “I am the way, the truth and the life” (*Gospel according to St John 14:6* — most likely originally uttered, if it was uttered at all, in Aramaic); “Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” (*Gospel according to St John 1:17* — originally written in Greek); the celebrated utterance attributed — again, whether mistakenly or not is a moot point — to the Sufi mystic Mansur al-Hallaj *An’al Haqq* “I am the truth” (originally presumed to have been uttered in Arabic), and the Vedic dictum *ekam sat viprâh bahudhâ vadanti* (Sanskrit), which can be validly translated as “Truth is one; the wise / In many ways do speak of it”.

“TRUTH” MEANING “MUNDANE REALITY”

Then there is the sense in which the word “truth” is used as being synonymous with (non-transcendental or mundane) reality (or real state of affairs): as in the phrase “in truth”, which is taken to mean the same as “in reality”. Here the words “truth” and “reality” are considered to be pretty much equivalent to one another.

“TRUTH” RATHER ILL-DEFINED IN WORKS OF FICTION

There is also the somewhat ill-defined way the word “truth” is used in connection with fiction. It is averred, for instance, that utterly fictional and made-up stories like *Aesop’s Fables* or the *Panchatantra* teach or point to “important truths”. This despite the fact that the stories are not only made up, but that there is not even a pretense that they are not made up. The same thing is averred of such plays as *Oedipus Rex*, *King Lear* or *Shakûntalâ*. Or of stories such as *Alice in Wonderland* (which is so far removed from reality that not only is the “Wonderland” purported to have been visited by the fictional “Alice” not claimed to have been real, but even the dream that “Alice” is supposed to have dreamed *about* “Wonderland” is not claimed to have been real!) Come to that, fairy tales are also regarded as “helping little children learn important truths”.

However, just what these truths are is not altogether clear or agreed upon. Indeed different readings of the same work of fiction may reveal different “truths”! And yet the discerning viewpoint cannot help but admit that there *is* some truth in all these works of fiction: indeed the truth in them is in some ways far *more* important than in many so-called “documents of fact” such as histories or court transcripts. It is a very abstract sort of truth, no doubt, and not too easy to pin down or define accurately, but it does seem to be a valid sort of truth nonetheless.

“TRUTH” UNDEFINED IN WORKS OF ART

Indeed perhaps for these reasons, it is averred that “truth” of the same sort, only more abstract still, inheres even in works of art that *cannot* be put into words: such as sonatas or

symphonies or paintings or sculpture. Even in architecture, when referring to buildings, what is called a “truth in materials” is often spoken of, in the sense for instance that woodwork should not be painted or veneered over, or vinyl made to look like tile. Sensitivity to art and architecture makes it clear that this sort of use of the word “truth” is not really invalid, even though the meaning here of the word “truth” is extremely hard to define. The mere fact that there has often been repressive regulation of works of art, music, and architecture, and even murderous condemnation of artistic viewpoints in many totalitarian regimes around the world, should be proof enough of the fact that works of art have been regarded by political authorities in many societies to be expressing some truth which could put in danger the prevailing power structure.

It may be argued that it might be possible to put down in words the truths inherent in such works of art, but that is obviously not altogether the case. If it were, then it ought to be possible, for example, to replace the *Hammerklavier Sonata* with a page or two of prose or poetry, which ought to create essentially the same effect. That is obviously quite impossible.

“TRUTH” AS USED IN LOGIC

Of course the way the word “truth” as used in logic is also relevant to this inquiry. But it can get quite tricky indeed, as logicians know full well. To quote from *The Free On-line Dictionary of Computing* (15 Feb '98):

“Logic is concerned with what is true and how we can know whether something is true. This involves the formalisation of logical arguments and {proof}s in terms of symbols representing {proposition}s and {logical connective}s. The meanings of these logical connectives are expressed by a set of rules which are assumed to be self-evident.”

The tricky part here lies, of course, in the last bit: the set of rules which are assumed to be self-evident. The rules themselves cannot be proved by logic. Now in what way is the truth of these rules known? This is the point from which much of the argument in logic as to what truth is — and whether it is at all applicable to the “real world” — seems to stem. (A viewpoint which has been attributed to Marvin Minsky, the well-known MIT Artificial Intelligence expert, is the following: “Logic does not apply to the real world!” Whether this is true or not is, of course, yet to be determined.)

On the mailing list *Logic-L* there has been much discussion of late (December 1999) concerning where there is only “one true logic or many”. It also seems clear that all the expert viewpoints on that list have yet to come to a consensus regarding the answer to this question. If this is so when even the best and most expert viewpoints are inquiring into the subject, what can an amateur viewpoint contribute?

And yet it seems illogical to suppose that there is *no* truth at all which logic can provide. If that were the case, why should not logic be abandoned altogether? The fact that logic does allow valid inferences to be arrived at (or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, *seemingly* valid inferences!) leads to the conclusion that there must be *some* sense in which logic leads the mind at least *toward* the truth — even if it doesn't actually take it *all the way* there.

Also, even if it is true that logic does not apply to the real world, by what sort of logic is the truth of *that* statement determined? At some point or other, as the celebrated though fictitious Vulcan character Mr Spock might have said on *Star Trek: the Old Generation*, it is illogical *not* to apply logic to the real world. (It is intriguing, in fact, to speculate on what Mr Minsky might have said in reply to Mr Spock!)

It all seems fairly tricky: for even though it cannot be pinned down exactly *how* logic leads toward the truth, yet it seems indisputable and undeniable that it does!

GOEDEL'S THEOREM

It gets even trickier when Goedel's Theorem is factored in, which basically states that in any system of logic which is sufficiently advanced to enunciate the theorems of arithmetic, statements can be made which can be neither proved nor disproved within that system of logic. (This, by the way, does not mean that these statements *are* neither true nor not true: all it means is that they can't be *proved* either true or not true; and that too, only within that particular system of logic! Other systems of logic may be able to prove their truth — but then again, they may not be able to do so.)

But then this leads to the question whether a statement or proposition proven true under one system of logic is equally true under another! If it is, then all "logics" — two-valued, many-valued, fuzzy, Boolean, De Morgan, etc., etc. — ought to be pretty much equivalent; however this is not so, as affirmed by expert viewpoints on the subject.

But if a statement (or proposition) can be true under one system of logic and not so under another, what is *meaning* of such a "truth"? How can a proposition be *in reality* — or even in logic taken as a whole — both true and not true? (Agreed that the term "not true" does not necessarily mean "false" — it can for example mean "indeterminate" or "meaningless" or "inapplicable" — but even so, how can it be both true and meaningless, or both true and indeterminate, or both true and inapplicable?)

It is worth asking, therefore, whether it is at all possible to determine the truth or otherwise of conclusions arrived at by *any* system of logic without using *some* system of logic. It seems impossible to even come to the conclusion that a proposition can be true under one system of logic but not true under another, without using some sort of logic in the first place. It may be called a "meta-logic" or some such thing, but logic of *some* sort has to be used even

to determine the truth or otherwise of any conclusion arrived at by any other system of logic.

So then the question arises: which system of logic is to be the “judge”, so to speak, of the truth of the conclusions arrived at by all the other systems? Although there does not seem to be a consensus as to what this “ultimate” system of logic should be, there seems to be little doubt that there must be one, otherwise there would be no way even to conclusively prove Goedel’s Theorem!

And as a result, it may be asked under which system of logic was Goedel’s Theorem itself proved? Or in other words, for which system of logic is Goedel’s Theorem itself a valid logical proof? Is it valid for *all* systems of logic, whether they be presently known *or* unknown? And if so, how is *that* proven, especially since the presently unknown systems of logic are, well, not even known as yet?

“ONE TRUE LOGIC”?

Moreover, if it is indeed valid for all systems of logic, whether known or unknown, then the conclusion is inescapable, that there *is* at least *one* proposition that can be proved true for *all* possible systems of logic: namely, Goedel’s Theorem! Thus Goedel’s Theorem *must* be valid universally, otherwise it may not apply in some cases (in which case there may *be* a system of logic in which there can be *no* statements that can be neither proved nor disproved — in stark contradiction to what is “proved” by Goedel’s Theorem.)

Also, if Goedel’s Theorem is a proposition that can be proved to be universally valid, there are likely to be other such propositions, whose proofs are valid universally as well. In that case, why not call the system of logic which includes proofs that are true for all systems of logic as the “one true logic”, the logic that is valid universally?

It might be good to get some expert feedback on this question. Maybe the above lay viewpoint is missing something crucial here.

“TRUTH” IN MATHEMATICS

Speaking of Goedel’s Theorem also raises the question as to whether there is truth inherent in mathematics. Unlike logic, of which there are many different kinds, there seems to be a consensus among mathematical viewpoints that there is only one kind of mathematics (of course it is admitted that there are many divisions within it, like arithmetic, geometry, etc.) Mathematics is even thought to be universal, in the sense that even if alien intelligences exist somewhere in outer space, the mathematics they will have developed, if any, can be no different from the kind developed here on earth. And moreover it is thought that all aliens will have the same kind of math: Klingon math will be no different, as it were, from Cardassian or Romulan math (whereas Klingon opera will likely sound bloody awful to all

but Klingons). Of course this is not yet proven, but it does sound plausible, and so even NASA has apparently sent a plaque into deep space with some mathematics represented on it, indicating to any aliens who might happen to chance upon it that “math is spoken here on earth”.

However, even though mathematics might be universal in that sense, it is not universal in another sense, in that it does not apply to everything. For instance, number theory does not apply to things that are not discrete: one cloud merging with another remains one cloud, not two; and one-half of an experience is still one whole experience. Indeed the more abstruse parts of mathematics do not even seem to refer to any reality (except of course itself). For instance, the irrational and — especially — the imaginary numbers seem to apply to nothing “real”. There is no such thing in the so-called “real world” as the square root of minus two, but a mathematical symbol has nevertheless been created to indicate this so-called “number”. Similarly, “real life” — however that term may be defined — has nothing like the geometry of, say, fifty or more dimensions, but such geometries are nevertheless discussed in mathematics as if they apply to some sort of reality.

Come to that, the “real world” has nothing like the geometry of two or three dimensions either. As a viewpoint attributed to geodesic dome inventor Buckminster Fuller says, in the observed world, no such thing as a triangle or a straight line can be found — that is to say, a figure having only one or two dimensions, with an infinite number of locations on each “line” or “plane”. Such a one-dimensional “line” or two-dimensional “plane” is a pure fiction: it can be neither experienced nor observed. It can only be imagined, like a unicorn. Indeed it’s even less “real” than a unicorn, for a unicorn can at least be drawn, but a perfectly straight line (or for that matter a crooked line either!) can’t even be drawn: any drawing possesses more than one dimension.

Moreover, there are some things that can’t even be *imagined*: they can only be put into words. An example is “a square circle”. The words “a square circle” do exist, indeed taken individually, they are terms very commonly used in mathematics: but a square circle itself can’t even be imagined. (Well of course neither can a tesseract — a four-dimensional analogue of a cube — be imagined, so what else is new.)

Thus most of mathematics has nothing to do with any sort of “real world” — whether one of so-called “matter” or of so-called “mind” (except, of course, its own private world of mental constructions.)

It should also be appreciated that if the definitions of mathematical concepts are deliberately altered so as to be forced into accord with the so-called “real world” — for example, if the definition of a line as being a one-dimensional figure which possesses an infinite number of locations along it is abandoned in favour of a definition of a line (as in the “real world”) that postulates a three-dimensional though very long object possessing a finite number of locations along it — then mathematics loses much of its rigor, and many of the theorems of

mathematics become unprovable! For instance under such assumptions it would become impossible to rigorously “prove” Pythagoras’s Theorem, or the value of π to be calculated using the value of e (i.e., Euler’s constant, or 2.71828...): all that could be said would be that empirical observation shows that the area of the square on the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle is more or less equal to the sum of the areas of the squares on the other two sides, or that π is approximately equal to 3.142 or thereabouts.

So it would appear that if the axioms of mathematics were so defined as to be in accord with the “real world”, mathematics would lose much of its practical value, especially as a tool capable of being used by science to manipulate the real world; and only if the axioms are retained the way they are — that is to say more or less at variance with observed facts — does mathematics become a powerful tool of science capable of application to the “real world”! Talk about a paradox.

Well anyway, the question surely looms large: what kind of “truth” is the truth of mathematics, especially pure mathematics, the kind not applied to anything in the “real world”? Most of it — particularly the more “far out” parts of it, the kind found in most math Ph.D. theses — certainly does not correspond to any directly-experienced reality. If at all, it *is* itself a directly-experienced reality (and that too only when it is actually understood: otherwise it’s pure gibberish). But even when it is understood, the reality is just the mathematics itself — it doesn’t *represent* anything else, doesn’t *correspond* to anything else.

“TRUTH” IN SCIENCE

One of the most intriguing questions which arises as a result of this analysis is that since modern physics is inextricably tied up with mathematics, if the truth of mathematics is “iffy” at best, to what extent is the truth of physics not likewise “iffy” at best? Especially the latest physics, which has virtually nothing to do with direct experience. Quarks and electrons and super-strings and black holes are never directly experienced or observed (or for that matter even *perceived* to be experienced or observed, as a chair or a table or a rock or a mountain might be perceived): they are only mathematical models — especially the 10-dimensional super-strings out of which all matter is supposed to be made up, at least according to some of the latest theories. So what sort of “truth” is the truth of physics? *Is* there a reality to which it corresponds?

And since it is generally accepted that physics is the basis of all the other physical sciences — chemistry, biology, geology, palaeontology and so on — the question must by extension apply to all of science, or at least all the physical sciences. (Maybe social sciences like psychology are exempt from this list.)

And yet it sounds absurd to say that science is *not* able to lead the mind toward the truth. After all, without science, experienced reality would be very different: there wouldn’t be any

experience of watching television or driving cars or tasting tangelos and other such fruits which never grew in Eden. So it means that science *must* have at least *some* truth behind it. The question still remains, however, just what that truth is, and to what extent it is not truth but simply imagination run riot.

“BUDDHIST TRUTH”

At this juncture it might be worthwhile mentioning a specific kind of “truth”, namely truth as expressed in some — but by no means all — Buddhist circles. In some ancient Buddhist texts, truth is asserted to be of two kinds, “relative truth” and “absolute truth” (in Sanskrit, *samvritti satya* and *paramârtha satya*). The term “relative” is perhaps not the most appropriate translation term for *samvritti*, for that Sanskrit word means, among other things, “being, existing, becoming, happening” (according to the Cologne Digital Sanskrit Lexicon). However, *paramârtha* does mean in Sanskrit “the highest or whole truth, spiritual knowledge, in reality, really, in the true sense of the word”.

Anyway the meanings of these two terms when contrasted with one another is mostly taken to be, basically, as follows: *samvritti satya* or “relative truth” (which is also at times translated as “everyday truth” or “practical truth”) is something like the truth of the statement “I paid about \$20,000 for my Honda Civic”. In practical terms, if that is indeed more or less what was paid — remember, this is being written in Canada! — then this statement becomes a *samvritti satya*, an “everyday (or practical) sort of truth”. However, the *paramârtha satya* or “ultimate (or highest or spiritual) truth” is that neither “I” nor the “Honda Civic” nor the “\$20,000” can ever be found existing independently — for after all, what can ever be found existing independently of the mind, since in order to find anything at all, mind is unquestionably required? — and so in the final analysis, and taken as an ultimate truth, nobody *really* paid any money for anything.

Now this is certainly a very ... should it be said, *practical*? — way to approach the dilemma caused by reaching such ultimate conclusions as the truth that neither objects (like cars) nor persons (like myself) nor money (which is of course only a convention, especially electronic money) really exists in any independent or ultimate sense. If this is accepted as the ultimate truth — and it is hard to see how it can’t be, since the reasoning behind it seems to be watertight — then living in the “real world” (which by this very argument is of course not *ultimately* real) becomes extraordinarily hard: it would be impossible, for instance, to open a bank account, or to get married! (Of course it may be retorted that there is no real need to do either of these things, and that’s a valid enough objection: but still.)

A parallel of sorts to this division of truth into two kinds can be seen in modern science too. In particle physics, it is expected that mathematics be used to exactly predict the consequences of any particular experiment. However, in chemistry and biology, although theoretically it is agreed that physics lies at the root of both of these sciences, in practice it becomes much too hard to mathematically predict the results of experiments, at least in the

majority of cases; and thus conclusions arrived at empirically are considered to be “good enough”.

DANGER OF MIXING UP TWO KINDS OF “TRUTH”

All this sounds very reasonable, of course. Nevertheless there have to be some ground rules for dealing with two kinds of truth in a single paper or discussion. If the two meanings are kept separate — say, the *samvritti satya* or “practical truth” be used exclusively for discussions about practical activities like banking, and the *paramârtha satya* or “spiritual” or “highest” truth be used exclusively in spiritual or philosophical discussions — then the system can work relatively well: just as using mathematical proofs in physics while relying largely on empirical proofs in such sciences as organic chemistry or medicine works well enough in practice.

However, mixing up the two kinds of truth in a single discussion doesn’t always work too well. It would be ludicrous, for instance, when caught robbing a bank, to mount a legal defence based on the ultimate non-existence of the bank, of the money and even of the robber — what to speak of the judge and the jury!

Thus considering the two Buddhist kinds of “truth”, and observing the constant arguments that seem to abound in Buddhist circles as to which of the two should apply in any individual case, it would seem to be, at least at first blush, a way to engage in sophistry (if “sophistry” be defined as “reasoning sound in appearance only”: cf. “The juggle of sophistry consists, for the most part, in using a word in one sense in the premise, and in another sense in the conclusion” — Coleridge) with the hope of deceiving an adversary in an argument.

This sort of trickery is practised often in law courts, and gives rise to the commonly-held view that lawyers are liars. (Indeed that is how the practice started, in ancient Greece.) Of course once the trick is known nobody is deceived any more, and what clever lawyers do in a court case is try to catch other lawyers at it, thus discrediting them. It’s not all that hard to catch the trick, for when overdone — as in a counter-example — it can lead to pretty silly conclusions, even when the meanings of the word in question are only subtly divergent from one another, as in this example from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*:

Today chain-smokers are rapidly disappearing.
Karen is a chain-smoker.
Therefore, today Karen is rapidly disappearing.

Similarly, the word “truth” as used in two divergent ways can be very cleverly used to “prove” just about anything, such as the thesis that the real world is not really real, or that in reality nothing at all exists, or that everything both exists and doesn’t exist, or that reality neither exists nor doesn’t exist — as also that none of the above theses is a thesis at all!

Nevertheless many Buddhists do take the word “truth” to mean two totally different things as an article of faith, unconvincing though such a notion appears to most of those who are not Buddhists (but nevertheless have minds just as keen as those of the Buddhists — though of course the Buddhists seriously doubt that, for if these other guys have minds that are really so sharp, how come they’re not Buddhists already?)

ONE “TRUTH” OR TWO?

However, the fact that this sort of division of truth into two kinds, each supposedly equally valid philosophically but obviously mutually exclusive, seems to be restricted pretty much to Buddhist viewpoints — and that too, only to *some* Buddhist viewpoints — indicates that unless a particular kind of Buddhist dogma is subscribed to whole-heartedly, it becomes hard to swallow this notion without gagging. Indeed a few viewpoints even among the Buddhists find it hard to swallow this dogma of two truths — for after all, what kind of truth is the truth that there are two kinds of truth? a third kind altogether? — and thus such viewpoints go so far as to assert that there is only one kind of truth: which of course makes sense.

However, between the two, relative or ultimate, many such viewpoints opt for the relative (or everyday or practical) kind; as far as they are concerned, there *is* in fact no such thing as any ultimate or highest or universal truth at all, and as a result it is asserted that seeking any such thing is an utter waste of time. It is not explained, though, why if one of the two kinds of truth is to be abandoned, the ultimate or highest truth is abandoned in favour of the merely relative or practical: it seems a bit like rejecting a dollar in favour of a penny!

Nor is it explained why the highest truth is presumed to be necessarily impractical: if it *is* indeed a higher truth, shouldn’t it be actually *more* practical than the “practical” kind — like, isn’t Quantum Mechanics, which enables such things as computer chips and hospital MRI machines to be made, *more* practical than Newtonian Mechanics, which is only good for designing and manufacturing much cruder equipment such as cars and airplanes?

It should be appreciated that if the word “truth” be taken as a thought or idea or proposition which corresponds with reality, then truth of *any* kind, whether relative or absolute, ought to have *some* practical application. This is because the word “practical” itself implies a relationship to reality. Exactly *how* the highest kind of truth might be put to practical use may not be too easy to determine, but there can be no question that it must have *some* practical application, just as even particle physics, divorced though its concepts appear to be from all observed reality, does have *some* practical application.

It is to be noted in any case that if the situation is reversed, and the *paramârtha* (or ultimate or highest) truth be taken as the only valid sort, and the relative or *samvritti* truth be considered invalid — or at best only a half-truth or partial truth — then provided that the conclusions reached in an analysis aimed at attaining the ultimate truth be taken seriously, it

would have to be admitted that a person as such does not really exist in any ultimate or highest sense. In the history of Buddhism, however, the only viewpoint in which such reasoning seems to have been taken even close to seriously is that of the Buddha, who generally referred to himself as *The Tathâgata*, meaning “He who is thus gone” (as if to imply “I am gone, I am no longer here, there is no such thing as ‘me’.”) Most of the expressions of today’s Buddhist viewpoints, however, are as full of the words “I” and “you” as a constipated colon is full of doo-doo.

TWO “TRUTHS” USED AS A CORRECTIVE

There *is* a case in which both kinds of truth may validly be mixed up in a serious spiritual discussion, and that is the case in which the aim is to use the discussion or teaching as a *corrective*. Many spiritual teachings have as their aim or goal the *correction* of a deluded viewpoint, so as to attenuate the delusion. It is assumed that removing the delusion completely should be done in stages, and in the preliminary stages it would be impossible to reach a perfect understanding, and thus impossible to enunciate the ultimate truth.

Thus if a teaching aims at removing the (mistaken) idea that things or persons exist in themselves, or have any kind of independent existence, then it might be justifiable to use both kinds of truth in a single discussion, as in this passage attributed to the Buddha:

“If, Subhuti, a Bodhisattva holds on to the idea that a self, a person, a living being, or a life span exists, that person is not an authentic Bodhisattva.” (From the *Vajracchedika Sûtra*, Section 3.)

Note that if the above teaching is correct, there is no such thing as an “authentic Bodhisattva” either; but the sentence is expressed as above simply to lead the mind *gradually* from a belief in the independent existence of persons to an abandonment of such a belief.

This, in other words, is a specific use of a partially erroneous sentence in order to correct an even more erroneous idea. In the end, however, according to this teaching the Bodhisattva, and even the Buddha, must abandon the notion that a Bodhisattva or a Buddha really exists.

It is to be noted that Buddhism in general does not aver that nothing at all exists. As expressed in another Buddhist text, “Suffering exists, though there be no one who suffers; ... Nirvâna exists, although no one attains it.”

In any case, to *indiscriminately* use the word “truth” in both its Buddhist senses — and especially when the meaning in each particular case is not properly defined — can obviously result in arguments capable of justifying virtually any conclusion, no matter how absurd.

ANTONYMS OF THE WORD “TRUTH”

It is also to be noted that the opposite of the word “truth” can be taken in several different ways. One way, as exemplified in Buddhism, is delusion or illusion. (The word “illusion” is taken to be akin to with what might be termed “untruth”, and the word “delusion” with what might be termed “anti-truth”.) In these cases, the truth is contrasted with something that merely appears to be what it is not. For instance, the material world is taken to be an illusion, ultimately unreal, like the contents of a dream. This is one reason why the Buddha is called “The Buddha”, which literally means “The Awakened One” — Awakened, as it were, from a sort of dream. In Buddhism, the viewpoint that looks upon the material world as a reality is regarded as deluded; on the other hand, that which views it as empty of inherent existence or *svabhâva* (literally, “self-being”) is regarded as “Awake” to the truth.

It is to be noted that the term “lie” as an antonym of “truth” is included in the word “delusion”. A lie is a delusion intended to be inculcated in another mind, while a delusion is a lie inculcated in the same mind that fosters it. Of course the belief that “another mind” exists might well be a delusion itself — as is averred in some Buddhist texts — and so the word “lie” may be dispensed with altogether as an antonym of “truth”.

However, another antonym of the word “truth” is “ignorance”. Here, “truth” is equated with “knowledge”. It makes sense to do so, for if nothing is known, there can be no truth in any meaningful sense: a *totally* ignorant mind can hardly be called “truthful”! This is the way the word “ignorance” is used in Hinduism, for instance (in Sanskrit, this word is written as *avidyâ* or *avignâ* — and to be fair, Buddhism also uses these terms as antonyms of truth, to a lesser extent however than does Hinduism.) Here, that which is unknown is taken to be the opposite of truth, and not merely that which is falsely imagined to be what it is not. Removal of ignorance is averred to lead the mind toward the truth.

Modern science also leans towards this antonym of the term “scientific truth”. Many beliefs may be scientifically *false* — such as the belief, for instance, that heavy objects fall faster than light ones — but the number of false beliefs, large though it is, pales in comparison with the presumed extent of the scientifically unknown. It is presumed, or at least hoped, that in a thousand or a million or a billion years so much more will be known in science, that in comparison the amount hitherto discovered will be about as tiny as the amount known to Neanderthals would be in comparison to what is known in the 21st century.

Thus even if all delusion is eliminated, it still does not mean that all the truth is necessarily known or attained. Indeed even to believe or assert that the removal of all delusions will by itself lead to a complete knowledge or attainment of the truth is to be deluded!

It is also to be appreciated that the word “knowledge” does not *necessarily* imply a duality of “knower” and “known”. It *may* imply that, of course, but there is no *need* to postulate a knower of knowledge, any more than there is any need to postulate a “hurricaner” of a

hurricane, or to think that there can be no thunderbolts without a Zeus sitting on Olympus hurling them down.

MANY MEANINGS TO THE WORD “TRUTH”

To sum up, it is obvious from all the above that the word “truth” can be used (by non-Buddhists) with at least a dozen different meanings — and perhaps even more — as follows:

- 1 Truth defined as an idea or thought corresponding to reality;
- 2 Truth defined as being synonymous with some sort of Transcendental or Spiritual Reality;
- 3 Truth defined as being synonymous with everyday reality;
- 4 Truth somewhat undefined as being inherent in works of fiction;
- 5 Truth — very much undefined — as being inherent in works of art which are not expressed in words;
- 6 Truth as defined in logic, which leads to the conclusion that any particular logical “truth” is valid only for one or more particular systems of logic, while it is not valid in other systems of logic;
- 7 Mathematical truth, which may well be universal in one sense and yet is obviously quite divorced from reality in another;
- 8 Scientific truth, which is based either on mathematics or on logic, and thus can either be considered as quite divorced from reality, or applicable only under the particular system of logic used to reach the particular conclusion under consideration;
- 9 (actually, 9 and 10, and maybe 11 as well) The Buddhist *samvritti satya* and *paramârtha satya* — “relative truth” and “ultimate truth” — both of which (or at times only one of which) is/are taken as the “real” truth;
- 10 (or maybe 11 and 12, or 12 and 13) “Truth” as an antonym of “delusion/illusion”, as contrasted with “truth” as an antonym of “ignorance”.

As a result, and speaking in general, there is a great deal of ambiguity as to the meaning of the word “truth”. It is no wonder, then, that arguments abound as to the truth of any particular philosophy or religious teaching, and that there is a saying in India that it is impossible to find two *gurus* who will agree with one another! As the Vedic saying goes, although truth is indeed one, the wise in many ways do speak of it. (And so, of course, do the foolish.)

EVEN MORE ELUSIVE MEANINGS OF THE WORD “TRUTH”

Also it must be realised that the above list is by no means exhaustive: there are even more elusive meanings of “truth”. Perhaps most elusive of all is the meaning of truth as referred to in such phrases as “seeking the truth” or “finding out the truth”. In many if not most such cases the truth is not known, even though it might be known that it is not known. But it is not always known if it *can* be known: certainly there is no absolute guarantee that it can be. In that case, what can be the “reality” to which this sort of “truth” could correspond or to which it could be considered equivalent? It is obviously not possible *in the present* to know a “truth” which is not only not yet known, but may never be known. Such a truth might be known, if at all, only in a future which doesn’t yet exist, and indeed may never exist. In what sense can it be asserted, then, that such a truth exists, or corresponds to a reality that must indubitably exist?

And yet it *can* be established by logical argument is that *some* ultimate truth must exist, because *some* ultimate reality must also exist — even if that ultimate reality turns out to be Absolutely Nothing! Even the statement that ultimate reality neither exists nor does not exist — which seems to be meaningless — can be taken, if meaning be indeed ascribable to it and if it be proven conclusively that that is indeed the real state of affairs, to be the ultimate truth.

Indeed even if a statement is meaningless, if it be admitted that the statement itself exists, the truth that the statement exists cannot be denied! The only way it can validly be said that no truth exists at all is to postulate that nothing exists at all, but then such a postulate contradicts itself, for if the postulate exists, then *something* does exist, while if it doesn’t, then it cannot validly be said that no truth exists at all.

Thus no matter just how reality (or the real state of affairs) is understood to be or not to be — or even neither to be nor not to be, or both to be and not to be! — the ultimate truth *must* exist: for such an understanding must itself be the ultimate reality, and the statement that it is the ultimate reality must be the ultimate truth.

However, exactly *what* the ultimate reality or the ultimately real state of affairs is — and thus what the ultimate truth is — cannot be known *before* it is known, can it? Maybe, in fact, it can never even *be* known. Certainly it cannot be known whether, in case it *does* become known, if it will be possible to express it in words or even in thoughts understandable by the human mind.

Nor, it seems, will it ever be possible to know whether *all* the truth is known. How can the unknown possibly be known? That is a veritable contradiction in terms, isn’t it. And it is to be noted that one of the things that *is* known is that there are many things that are *not* known. Indeed the list of the things that are unknown increases even faster than the list of things that are known! In other words, the unknown increases not just in proportion to the

known, but in greater degree — leading to the almost absurd conclusion that an Omniscient Being would be overawed by the immensity of His own ignorance, for when everything is finally known, a much greater amount than “everything” will remain still unknown! (Maybe this conclusion is “absurd” only because the human mind does, in fact, not know everything: because if it did, it would know how to get round this difficulty too. — Maybe.)

THE UNKNOWABLE AND UNEXPERIENCEABLE

Then there is the question of the *unknowable* and the *unexperienceable*. There is no proof that everything is knowable or experienceable. Certainly there is no proof that everything is knowable or experienceable by the human mind. Indeed it seems fairly certain that this is not possible: for if the human mind were to know and experience everything that is both unknown and unknowable, both unexperienced and unexperienceable, it would probably turn into a something which could no longer be called “the human mind”. In other words an omniscient and omni-experiencing “human mind” would no longer be a *human* mind, in any commonly-understood sense.

At all events, in what sense can the unknowable be taken as a truth, or the unexperienceable as a reality, of any sort at all? Note that the existence of the unknowable and the unexperienceable — unlike that of the merely unknown and unexperienced — is *not* undeniable or undoubtable. Thus unless its existence is irrefutable, it wouldn’t even fit the definition of “reality” given earlier.

This especially if it is defined as unknowable and unexperienceable by *any mind whatsoever*, whether that mind be human or not: even if it be by what might be termed the Divine Mind. If there *is* something that absolutely *no* mind — not even a hypothetically omniscient and omni-experiencing Mind, whether it be called the Mind of God or Allah or Ahura Mazda or Gitchi Manitou or whatever — can know or experience, can it be called “reality” at all?

One of the problems with defining “reality” as “that of which the existence is undoubtable, undeniable and irrefutable” is that under this category fall only things that *are* in fact experienced. The existence of just about anything that is not directly experienced can be doubted. This means that even if something is experienceable, if it is not actually experienced, its existence can be doubted!

This is probably where faith comes in. If the existence of some reality that is definitely unknown (and maybe even unknowable) is taken on faith, and efforts then made to determine if the faith is justified, then it may be possible to arrive at a knowledge of that which previously was unknown.

It is not only in religion — as exemplified especially by Christianity — that this procedure is adopted: it is adopted even in science, although to a lesser extent than in religion. In science, the existence of scientific discoveries that are yet unmade is taken on (what is

thought of as reasonable) faith, and then efforts made to determine if that faith is justified. In religion, likewise, the existence of God, or the Saviour, or the Spiritual Realm, or whatever, is taken on faith, and then efforts are made to see if that faith is justified. It's just that from the purely materialistic viewpoint, religious faith is not *reasonably* justified. But then again, according to what criterion is that averred? What is reasonable from one viewpoint need not necessarily be reasonable from all.

TRUTH AND REALITY AS CHANGEABLE AND CREATABLE

Also, it is to be noticed that if the attention is intensely focussed on any particular experience or part of the total awareness, it generally tends to make that part more "real" in some ways than the rest. As the fictitious Qui-Gon Jinn says to the equally fictitious Anakin Skywalker in *Star Wars: Episode I*, "Always remember, your focus determines your reality." Extreme sports like rock climbing and base jumping provide such one-pointed and highly focussed experiences, in which all other reality is pushed into the unconscious. This is also the case in instances of obsession. The obsessed mind is often spoken of as "not living in the real world": but that's not entirely correct, it's just that the "reality" of which it is aware is very likely not the reality of which the more balanced mind is aware.

Then too there arises a question whether all of reality is *already* a reality. If "reality" be defined, as above, as "that of which the existence is undoubtable, undeniable and irrefutable", then that which is not *yet* a reality is of course not a reality: its existence is very much in doubt. For example, before airplanes were invented, they did not exist, the experience of humans flying in the air did not exist, and the experience of bombs falling from the stratosphere and blowing things to smithereens did not exist. Indeed it was widely doubted that this was ever going to be possible. But now such things do exist: or at least there does exist the undeniable and indubitable *perception* that they do exist.

So something that is seriously doubted one day can become an undoubtable and undeniable experience the next! In that case the question surely arises: did the reality of airplanes, or even of the perception of airplanes, exist at all a hundred years ago or more? If it did, in just what sense did it do so? What could be the meaning of such a reality, or of the word "reality" in such a case? And what sort of "truth" could correspond to it, especially *before* that reality existed in any meaningful sense?

It should also be appreciated that if that reality did not exist then but does exist now, then reality must change and be created over time; and if truth be defined as "an idea or thought which corresponds to reality", then truth must change and be created over time too: which generally speaking seems an absurd notion. (However, this does bring to mind the story of a husband complaining about his wife to a Divorce Court judge: "She's such a liar — when we met she told me she was 25 years old, and now she tells me she's 40! Fact is, your honour, her story changes every year. If I'd known she was going to say something different about her age every twelve months I'd never have married her.")

Anyway, and jokes aside, it is important, surely, to ask in just what sense there is any reality of things (or experiences or awareness or knowledge) that does not yet exist. Some of it will in great likelihood exist some day, while in other cases that likelihood is small; but in no case can the likelihood be proven to be absolutely zero, and neither can the likelihood be 100%. Thus it is obvious that there *is* some sort of reality inherent even in that which is not yet real: whether “that” be Dyson Spheres, Holodecks as in *Star Trek*, or the Millennium Falcon as in *Star Wars* — or even the mere perception of such “things”. The question however is just what sort of reality this can be.

Besides, if reality can be created, just where does this process have to end? The more science and technology advance, the more limitless seem to be their possibilities. Already Nanotechnology promises to render death and disease obsolete, and poverty a word without meaning. There are even claims of having transported elementary particles back in time. There seems to be no end to such advances. So then: will it ever be possible, for example, to create an Omniscient Mind (whether computer-based or otherwise)? Would it be possible to create a Spiritual Realm, exact in every detail to that which is described in the scriptures? Faith can not just move mountains, but may also be able to create entire universes. What exactly *can't* be done? Can God be created? Indeed, what, if any, can be the status of the truth or otherwise of the answer to *this* question? The mind surely boggles just thinking about it.

THIS ESSAY IS NOT DECONSTRUCTIONISM

It should be noted that all the above is not to be taken as some sort of post-modern deconstructionism. As an article on <http://www.pbs.org/faithandreason/gengloss/postmbody.html> explains:

... Postmodernism ... denies the existence of any ultimate principles, and it lacks the optimism of there being a scientific, philosophical, or religious truth which will explain everything for everybody -a characteristic of the so-called “modern” mind. The paradox of the postmodern position is that, in placing all principles under the scrutiny of its skepticism, it must realize that even its own principles are not beyond questioning. As the philosopher Richard Tarnas states, postmodernism “cannot on its own principles ultimately justify itself any more than can the various metaphysical overviews against which the postmodern mind has defined itself.”

The last sentence says it all. In order for any philosophy or view be to self-sustaining and self-justifiable — or even to be taken seriously — it has to assert, whether explicitly or implicitly, that it is itself true: and this is impossible from a post-modern or deconstructionist perspective.

What is questioned in the present essay is not the *existence* of an ultimate reality (and thus of some sort of ultimate truth which corresponds to it), but the possibility of *defining* the terms “reality” and “truth” in a way that will always fit any particular case. And even that is not actually *denied*, only questioned. It is perhaps possible that a better writer would be able to define these concepts in adequate terms. (On the other hand, perhaps not!)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the following statements may be validly made (in addition, of course, to the very clear understanding that the word “truth” is extremely ambiguous, and so great care ought to be taken to remove ambiguity in discussions concerning it):

1. There is *some* reality whose existence is self-evident, and thus undoubtable and undeniable.
2. There has got to be *some* ultimate truth which corresponds with the reality whose existence is self-evident, and thus undoubtable and undeniable.
3. It *may* be possible to know this ultimate truth.
4. It may not be possible to define the word “truth” in a manner validly applicable under all circumstances.
5. Even though the word “truth” may itself be undefinable, it is undeniable that even the undefinable kinds of truth must exist.
6. It need not be possible to enunciate in words *all* truths.
7. It may be possible to find a system of logic that lies at the root of all other systems of logic, and that root system of logic might be capable of leading to conclusions the truth of which is irrefutable.
8. It is not properly known or understood how the truth of mathematics applies to reality, although it is indisputable that in some way it does.
9. It is impossible *in the ultimate analysis* to justify dividing “truth” into two kinds, “relative” and “ultimate”, or “practical” and “absolute” — though in *practice* it may be beneficial to do so.
10. Ultimate truth cannot be entirely impractical (i.e., altogether divorced from reality).
11. The existence of reality that is hitherto unknown is undeniable, and thus the existence of truths that correspond with that reality is likewise undeniable, even though such truths are not presently known.

12. The existence of reality that is unknowable is not undeniable, and thus there need not be any truth that corresponds with it.
13. Even so, the above does not mean that there is *no* existence of reality that is unknowable. All it means is that such a reality *may* exist or it may not.
14. The above indicates that no matter how much is known, there is in all likelihood always going to be a valid doubt as to whether *everything* is known.
15. However, it may be possible to lead the mind to a state in which *all ignorance* is removed. If that state is attained, then it may be possible to validly remove all doubts, including the doubt as to whether everything is known. Under such conditions, everything may become possible, since possibility itself is dependent on knowledge.

Other conclusions may be arrived at from other viewpoints.

This is being published, therefore, with the hope that other viewpoints will be able to shed some light on the subject. Indeed, since it is of primary importance, it is hoped that the light shed on the subject will increase the general level of understanding of not only the word “truth”, but of all of reality — since the word “truth” applies to everything.