

## Science, Faith and Truth

Most people claim an intuitive understanding of what they mean by 'the truth', and much of human endeavour is driven by a quest for truth, yet its precise nature is hard to define. The Doctrine of the Trinity, Einstein's Theory of General Relativity and the Fundamental Theorem of Calculus are all true, but the meaning of 'truth' is different in each case. To say that a statement is true is to claim that it agrees with some external objective reality. This is clearest for so-called scientific truths, for which the corresponding external reality is the physical universe. However other objective realities exist and lead to other forms of truth. No-one would dispute the truth of proven mathematical statements (allowing for Gödel's Incompleteness Theorems, which I will discuss later), but these describe a different *kind* of truth to scientific statements. There is considerable debate as to whether the objective reality of mathematics exists only in our brains, or whether it has its own separate existence [1], though in either case it is clearly distinct from the reality described by the natural sciences. By his very nature God, who is also truth, is over and above all other domains and interacts with all other activities, including those which we cannot begin to conceive. As we read in the First Book of Kings "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!" [2].

Science holds a special place in our quest for truth; maybe because observers tend to agree on the fundamentals that are shared by scientific and mathematical truths. While scientists may debate the merits of different theories there is usually less disagreement about the observations on which the interpretations are based. Repeatable observations such as "objects fall to the earth when dropped" or "children tend to look like their parents" are uncontroversial. In contrast, mathematical truths are not accessed by our physical senses, but by our 'sense' of logic. However, here again different mathematicians will usually agree whether a given proof is valid or not. This appreciation of the inherent logic of these intuitive truths has facilitated progress in science and mathematics, but it has also led to the view that scientific and mathematical truths are the only forms of truth. Yet, Christians believe that truth extends far beyond what can be experienced with our physical senses and by strict mathematical logic.

Throughout human history many people have experienced a sense of God's presence and from this a sense of His moral law. As C S Lewis wrote "Morality, like numinous awe, is a jump; in it, man goes beyond anything that can be 'given' in the fact of experience." [3]. However, many people have never experienced the presence of God and even among members of the same religion there are substantial disagreements over moral issues, which show little sign of resolution. How then can our spiritual and moral senses provide paths to truth, when there is such disagreement? Maybe we

should start by remembering that there are common factors to most religions' concepts and experience of God: God as love; God as creator; God as the source of beauty and morality, and these may outweigh some of the differences. Nonetheless we also remember that God will always be beyond human comprehension, and this will go some way to explaining why people experience Him in different ways.

The quest for truth is a fundamental part of our human nature, and has surely brought great humanitarian benefits, but it will never be satisfactorily finished (in this world, at least). As discussed above, some truths are simply beyond our comprehension and even our understanding of science and mathematics is necessarily limited. Gödel's Incompleteness Theorems [4] tell us that any formal system sufficiently sophisticated to contain basic arithmetic (such the mathematics used in the natural sciences) contains true but unprovable statements; such a system cannot prove its own self-consistency. This limitation places an inherent limit to our understanding of science, which is written in the language of mathematics. We are also part of the truths that we are trying to understand, and we cannot simply step outside the physical universe, or step outside of God, to take a look, because we are part of both. This limits the extent to which we can observe and understand the world around us, and transforms us from mere cosmic observers into human beings with moral and spiritual responsibilities.

So far, I have painted a fairly bleak picture of our chances of accessing any kind of meaningful truths. However, in addition to science, mathematics and natural theology, God has given us revealed theology. In the Bible, God steps in and tells us truths about His nature; the morality He has given us and our own nature and destiny. I find the clarity of the moral law revealed by Jesus particularly striking. The truth of teachings such as "Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back" [5] takes us much further into the love of God than does our instinctive sense of morality alone. Ultimately, we are called to move beyond simply searching for the truth and into a relationship with God.

1. Balaguer, M. (1998) *Platonism and Anti-Platonism in Mathematics*. Oxford University Press.
2. The Holy Bible (English Standard Version) 1 Kings 8:27
3. Lewis, C. S. (1940) *The Problem of Pain*. William Collins
4. Gödel, K (1962) *On Formally Undecidable Propositions of Principia Mathematica and Related Systems*. Dover.
5. The Holy Bible (English Standard Version) Mathew 25:40

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