

Modern Approaches to Truth

Quote of the Day:

“Once science has been established, once a scientific truth emerges from a consensus of experiments and observations, it is the way of the world. What I’m saying is, when different experiments give you the same result, it is no longer subject to your opinion. That’s the good thing about science: It’s true whether or not you believe in it.”

-- Astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson

Emphases of the different approaches and their reactions to previous ones:

premodern

faith

revelation

authority

custom

deference

tradition

obedience

modern

reason

evidence

science

data

freedom

progress

universal

postmodern

power

cynicism

subjectivity

relativism

language

narrative

discourse

Readings for next time

How did the modern approach to truth arise?

Historian Brad Gregory, on the role of Christianity in Europe on the eve of the Reformation, and which still held as of 1600:

Christianity “played a central role in everyday life—from the primary relationships between family and kin to the practice of politics and commerce. Social relationships and gender expectations were inseparable from Christian norms. And both public and private morality were conceived in Christian terms. Rather than standing apart from government or courts of justice, religion informed both politics and law. At the same time, Christianity was not aloof from the buying and selling of goods and pursuit of profit; Christian ethical teachings sought to shape economic transactions and restrain greed. Education, from the teaching of ABCs in humble small-town primary schools through instruction in one of Europe’s sixty or so universities, was imbued with Christian ideas.”

So what changed to bring the modern era and the modern approach to truth?

- **The Reformation divided Christendom politically and religiously. A premodern approach to truth cannot survive a fragmented group of authorities.**
- **Also, the European Wars of Religion (1522-1712) prompted new thinking about how to keep the peace.**

One result was downplaying religious appeals within intellectual life. Hugo Grotius (1625) sought to identify the principles of international law that would hold even if “there is no God” or “the affairs of men are of no concern to him.”



René Descartes (1641): not all people have faith, but all people can use reason. Use reason as the foundation of knowledge. “I think, therefore I am.”

John Locke (1695): “Reason must be our last guide and judge in everything.”

Note that Grotius, Descartes, and Locke were all Christians of varying stripes. However, they helped shift the culture away from the premodern approach to truth and toward the modern approach.

A precursor of the modern approach had already developed during the Middle Ages for science (then called “natural philosophy”).



Jean Buridan (1300-1358): “in natural philosophy, we ought to accept actions and dependencies as if they always proceed in a natural way.”

Nicole Oresme (1320-1382): “there is no reason to take recourse to the heavens, the last refuge of the weak, or demons, or to our glorious God as if He would produce these effects directly, more so than those effects whose causes we believe are well known by us.”

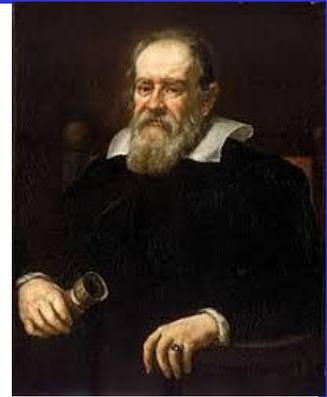
Buridan, Oresme, and other theologians believed God could intervene if he wished (a miracle), but he established the ordinary course of affairs, saving his miracles for special occasions.



Methodological naturalism: explain natural phenomena with natural causes. All scientists today, regardless of their religious beliefs, follow this principle for their scientific work.

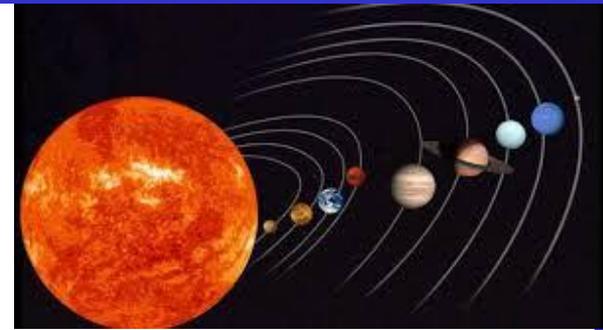


However, scientists in the premodern era were restricted from reaching conclusions the Church opposed, as Giordano Bruno, Galileo, and others learned the hard way.



Beginning in the 1600s, European countries gradually established a greater degree of freedom of religion with the end of the Inquisition, the ability for minority religious groups to worship openly, citizenship for Jews, etc.

By the 1700s, scientists could do their work without expecting persecution for making claims opposed by religious authorities. Pierre-Simon Laplace (1749-1827), on why his account of the solar system did not include a role for God: “I had no need of that hypothesis.”



Methodological naturalism proved successful in helping science to advance. As scientific knowledge accumulated, it eventually became possible to subscribe to metaphysical naturalism—the belief that the natural world is all that exists.

Phenomena previously explained through religion (e.g., natural disasters, disease, and human emotions and decision-making) increasingly had scientific explanations through geology, biology/medicine, neuroscience, etc.



Meanwhile, religion itself came under the scrutiny of scholars working within the modern approach to truth. Human origins of holy books; cognitive science of religion; etc.

Maybe God is still necessary for morality? We'll revisit that question at the end of the quarter.

Another key part of the modern approach to truth lies in deemphasizing tradition and challenging authority, beginning with religious and political authorities.

Challenging authority comes easily to most Americans. American Revolution, Protestantism, new branches of Christianity and new religions, distrust of the government, etc.

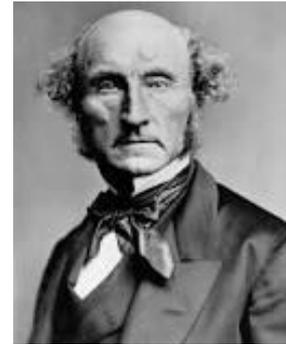


The modern approach to truth emerged side-by-side with republics/representative democracies. Political authority was now grounded in the people, not kings through the divine right of kings.



The modern approach to truth is also connected to individual rights, self-expression, etc.

John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859). Classic statement of the need for public engagement with unpopular ideas. Mill makes a utilitarian case, not one based on rights.



Suppose “all minus one” agree on an important topic. Is everyone else justified in silencing that person through government censorship or social ostracism? Mill says no.

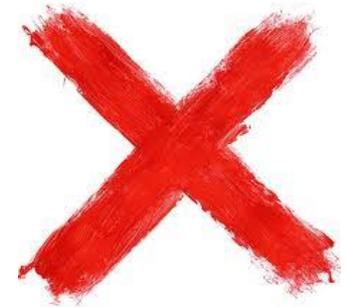
Mill works through three possibilities regarding where the truth lies. For each possibility, he argues, people should give the dissenter’s position a fair shake.

**1. The dissenter could be correct.
Silencing the person means everyone else loses “the opportunity of exchanging error for truth.”**



- **No one is infallible.**
- **The majority, even an overwhelming majority, could be wrong.**
- **Ideas rejected in one era have often been accepted in the next, and vice versa.**
- **In a climate where dissenters are ostracized, we lose out on creativity and bold ideas because people are afraid to speak out.**

2. The dissenter could be wrong. Even so, it benefits everyone else to hear that person's perspective.



- **If you never encounter objections to your position, you hold it “as a dead dogma, not a living truth.”**
- **“He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that.”**
- **You need to hear the other side from someone who believes it and presents it in its “most plausible and persuasive form.”**

3. The truth could lie between the dominant position and the dissenter's position. If so, we need to hear the dissenter to learn that "the conflicting doctrines share the truth between them."



- **Mill thinks #3 is the most common case.**

Today's readings and how they take the modern approach to truth.

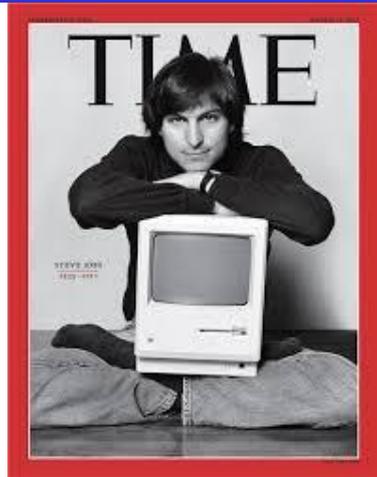
Basing knowledge on reason, evidence, and dialogue is just one part of a larger phenomenon known as secularization.

Secular: “not connected with religious or spiritual matters”

“belonging to the world and its affairs as distinguished from the church and religion; civil; lay; temporal”

secularization (Bryan Wilson definition): “that process by which religious institutions, actions, and consciousness lose their social significance”

Under secularization, we have a *Time* magazine view of life: religion, science, politics, family, arts, culture, business, leisure, entertainment, etc. as separate domains



After the 1600s, as religion gradually became only one domain among many, the modern approach to truth replaced the premodern approach within those other domains.

And yet religion didn't fade away, as some social theorists expected. Instead, it changed in form.