

Study Guide #1: Does Truth Exist?

Introduction

In order to address religious truth, we must first seek to discover three primary foundations. *First* is the question of whether or not objective truth exists. In other words, is there any truth that exists apart from our own private opinions—truth that everyone does, *or* ought to, acknowledge is truth? *Second*, if objective truth exists, can it be known with reasonable certainty? Finally, for reasons that will become apparent in Explorer I, Study Guide #2, does the material universe actually exist, or is it a misperception? If the answers to all of these questions is “yes,” then we will be ready to learn if God exists. CAUTION: You may want to read this Study Guide two or three times because language is difficult to convey philosophical truths.

Question #1: How old is the idea that objective truth does not exist?

Answer: The first known group of thinkers who taught that objective truth does not exist were called Sophists. Sophistry arose in the 5th-century B.C. (the 400s B.C.) in Greece. The most famous of the



Protagoras

Sophists was Protagoras (ca. 490-421 B.C.). He, and the other Sophists, taught that truth is only subjective. That is, truth is whatever an individual chooses to believe that it is. Therefore, Sophists became famous for being able to devise arguments to support *any* belief. The important thing to Sophists was winning an argument, not pursuing an objective truth that they didn't believe existed.

The famous Greek philosopher Plato (ca. 427-347 B.C.) responded to the Sophists by declaring that anyone who disagreed with Protagoras' idea that objective truth does not exist would also have to be true since everyone's “truth” is equally true. In this way, Plato refuted the entire notion of Sophistry as being illogical.

Question #2: If Plato debunked Sophistry about 2,400 years ago, why is the idea that objective truth does not exist advocated today?

Answer: Beginning in the late 19th century, most philosophers turned away from what had been their long search for truth for reasons too complicated to discuss here. At the same time, the idea of long ages involved in the geology of the earth and the rise of Darwinian evolution resulted in many Christian scholars beginning to doubt the history and the supernatural elements of the Bible. Finally, World War II and the rise of the Cold War soon after led many to doubt that science itself could solve our human problems and to also doubt that certain truth could be known. By the 1960s, these developments had given rise to what we call Postmodernism, which is basically a restatement of the ancient Sophistry position.

In this postmodern culture, people often talk about *my* truth, *your* truth, *his* truth, and *her* truth, as if truth were subjective, especially in the areas of moral and religious truth. Often people say things like that because they don't want to argue with or insult someone who might have a different view from theirs. But in doing so, they are confusing opinions with facts or truth. And there is a big difference between opinions and truth. Daniel P. Moynihan became famous for saying that everyone is entitled to his own *opinions*, but *no one* is entitled to his own *facts*. Unfortunately, we live in a culture where his words largely go unheeded.

Just challenge anyone to drive a car from Oklahoma City on I-35, either north or south, never get off I-35, and wind up in Los Angeles, California. It just cannot be done on that highway with those directions. This truth is objective because *everyone* who knows American geography knows with certainty that it is impossible. Therefore, truth or facts are objective, that is, they exist independently of anyone's opinions. The implication is clear: we ought to seek to discover truth!

Question #3: Even if objective truth exists, can we really know what it is?

Answer: Some philosophers agree that objective truth must exist, but they insist that no one can possibly know what it is. These Total Skeptics originated as far as we know among some Greek thinkers in the 3rd century B.C., not long after the death of Aristotle (d. 322 B.C.). The best-known argument of the early Total Skeptics went like this: We only know what our physical senses tell us about an object. But how do we know that our senses give us the whole story, or even that our perceptions of an object are accurate? We cannot know the object as it is in itself because we are not the object itself. We will respond to Total Skepticism in the next 3 questions (#4, #5, and #6).

Question #4: What did David Hume say about knowing the truth with certainty?

Answer: David Hume (d. 1776) was the Scottish Total Skeptic of the 18th century and the most famous Total Skeptic since the modern era of philosophy dawned in the 17th century. He had several arguments for Total Skepticism. However, one of them was that no one can know anything with certainty because no one can know the future. To illustrate his point, a boy throwing a baseball up in the air in order to catch it cannot know for certain that the 1,001st time he does so, the baseball will fall back to earth so he can catch it. He cannot know this because he cannot know the future. Therefore, Hume said that you cannot establish a cause-and-effect relationship between any two things.



David Hume

In a technical sense, Hume was correct. But scientists understand and accept thousands of facts that represent very high probabilities that they are true. How can anyone live in a world where many facts are not known with certainty? Doesn't reason tell us that if that boy throwing a baseball into the air and saw it fall to earth 1,000 times, that he *knows* it will fall to the ground (or in his glove) on the 1,001st time also? That's just common sense.

Question #5: If we cannot know the future, then isn't there almost always room for doubt about an alleged fact?

Answer: Yes. But the real question is whether any such doubt is *reasonable* or *unreasonable*. It's true that the definition of "reasonable" and "unreasonable" is subjective because each person must decide for himself whether a doubt is reasonable or unreasonable. But our courts ask juries to decide exactly that in every criminal trial. And most, even if not all, juries end up agreeing about whether an alleged fact is reasonable or unreasonable.

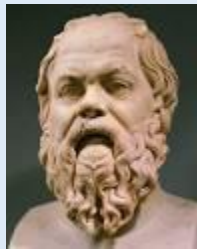
Question #6: If any level of doubt exists about something's truthfulness, doesn't that mean that faith is required? And doesn't that imply a religious element?

Answer: Yes and no. Yes, if any level of doubt exists, then by definition, you need to exercise faith in order to believe something is true. Many people believe that "faith" is a religious word. Actually, it's a word that applies to *all* situations in which doubt exists as to the truthfulness of an alleged fact or truth. So it is not an exclusively religious term. Moreover, the word "faith" neither states nor implies that it is necessarily blind. If it is reasonable faith, then that is not blind faith. Therefore, reason and faith are not automatically in opposition to each other, as most secular people often say.

Question #7: But doesn't science provide us with certain knowledge?

Answer: Virtually all types of knowledge are based on evidence, which in turn is based on specific assumptions. This includes the sciences. Unfortunately, sometimes the nature of some assumptions is such that it cannot be verified as *certain* truth. In the 1960s, the term "establishment" came into vogue. Every field of study has its establishment, which consists of the research institutions, scholarly journals, and foundations that finance research projects. Those that operate these organizations are naturally considered the experts in their field of study.

Scholars in any field of study should be seeking the truth wherever it may lead. It was the Greek philosopher Socrates who declared this to be the goal of anyone searching for truth. But when secular scientists (or



Socrates

others) automatically exclude the possibility of a transcendent, supernatural agent as a cause for anything, they are not following Socrates' sound advice. It's true that a transcendent, supernatural agent cannot be deduced from purely scientific data because science, by definition, operates only in the natural world. However, sometimes scientific data points beyond the natural world even though it can never prove its existence. In other words, if all natural explanations fail to explain something to a level of "no reasonable doubt," then even the scientist should allow for the possibility of a supernatural explanation.

The secular mindset often leads people to assert that eventually science will find a natural cause for everything. We agree that science will eventually find a natural explanation for most things in nature. But when we are talking about origins of the universe or of life, then we are beyond the realm of science because no person lived and/or recorded any data about those origins. Therefore, the scientific method has its limits

because it cannot be used in the area of origins without making certain unprovable assumptions. Of course, those who favor a supernatural Being (God) as the Cause of origins must also make unprovable assumptions. That brings us back to our earlier point: the person needs to determine whether his or her belief is more reasonable than any alternate explanation or not.

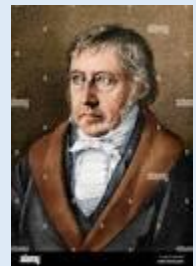
Question #8: Wasn't there a famous philosopher who taught that the material universe does not exist?

Answer: Yes, there were actually two such famous philosophers. We will briefly discuss one of them under this question and analyze his argument. Then we will discuss the other one under Question #9. George Berkeley (d. 1753) was an Irish bishop who made the most famous argument for what is called Idealism. Berkeley argued that since we can only experience an alleged object indirectly through our sensory perceptions, we cannot even know whether the object actually exists outside our minds. Then he concluded that our sensations, perceptions, and ideas exist only in the mind, so that material objects outside our minds cannot exist. From there, he stated that since all sensory beings perceive “things” in pretty much the same way, God must exist to give everyone those sensations, perceptions, and ideas.

However, precisely because almost all sensory beings perceive objects largely the same way strongly suggests that it's because those objects actually exist outside the mind. Moreover, there is a major flaw in Berkeley's argument that makes the existence of material objects certain truth. Philosophers rightly believe that what is true is also real, and what is real is true. This is obvious because what is true can't be a lie. Those who believe in God understand Him to be Ultimate Reality because He is what they believe to be eternal, without beginning or end. Thus, if God exists, then He must also be Ultimate Truth. Ultimate Truth is truth to the Nth degree, which means that if God exists, He must be completely consistent and can never deviate from the truth. But if God were the source for everyone's perceptions and ideas, then He is constantly engaging in deceit because He is causing beings to see objects that are not really there. Furthermore, He is inconsistent since some people do not see certain colors while others see them all. And you could not say that some are color blind since Idealism says that their eyes do not exist either (only a spiritual mind). Thus, God would be causing some people to perceive things differently, and this is inconsistent with the very definition of a God who is Ultimate Truth.

Question #9: Who was the second famous philosopher who argued against the existence of material objects?

Answer: Georg Hegel (d. 1831) was a German philosopher who argued for Absolute Idealism. He went even further than Berkeley did. Hegel insisted that reality is not only what we think *about*, but it is also the *thinker*. From there it was an easy jump to the idea that what is most real—Ultimate Reality—is the Ultimate Thinker thinking about itself. He called this Thinker the Absolute, for he viewed it as a kind of impersonal cosmic intelligence rather than as a personal being. He also argued that reality can't be independent truths about this or that subject. Rather, he said Ultimate Truth must be the entire connected system of truth. For Hegel, then, material objects don't exist in themselves; they are merely the ongoing



Georg Hegel

expression of Infinite Thought (the Absolute) thinking about itself. If this is a bit confusing, let's just agree that Hegel was a bit confused.

Absolute Idealism was so significant that Western philosophy has never been the same since Hegel. Philosophers moved away from the entire notion of trying to analyze the nature of reality and sought other paths to follow. One of them was existentialism, the idea that the universe and everything in it has no purpose for its existence, and the only thing that counts is that each person should decide on a path of dealing with this purposeless world in the best way he can. Others turned to science as the provider of truth. And still others turned to mystical attempts to experience the reality of objects by blocking out all sensory information until they achieved a kind of mysterious oneness with them.

Question #10: What is the fatal flaw in Absolute Idealism?

Answer: The fatal flaw in Hegel's thinking is that if each individual mind is a receptor for Infinite Thought (the Absolute) expressing itself, then shouldn't we expect that every single intelligent mind knows all things (or thoughts)? After all, Hegel argued that each mind is connected to the Absolute. If we are honest with ourselves, all of us know that we do *not* know *everything*. Having, therefore, rejected both Idealism and Absolute Idealism, we can safely conclude that we have no reasonable doubt but that the material universe and everything in it actually does exist outside any being's minds. It's an objective reality or truth.

Question #11: But couldn't the universe and everything "in" it simply be the result of the matrix?

Answer: The first of the popular "Matrix" movies was released in 1999. In these movies, people experienced what they thought was reality only because their brains were being manipulated with some kind of electrical stimulus. However, real physical people were placed in real physical containers, hooked up with real physical wires, and operated by real physical people. Even if someone might argue that this "matrix" concept is what we think of as reality, that still leaves the origin of the physical nature of people and objects to explain. Therefore, the "matrix" idea cannot be the solution to avoid the existence of God.



The Matrix

Question #12: Would you summarize what we have learned in this Study Guide?

Answer: We can summarize what we learned in this Study Guide in terms of three points:

- Objective Truth *does* exist outside of or apart from anyone's mind.
- We can know most truth with *reasonable* certainty.
- The material universe actually *does* exist outside anyone's mind.

With these three questions answered, we are now ready to discuss the question of the existence of God. This will be the topic in Explorer I, Study Guide #2.