

10. "Context is all" (Margaret Atwood). Does this mean that there is no such thing as truth?
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Theory of Knowledge Essay

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To what extent does the statement 'Context is all' determine or qualify the existence of truth? Throughout history, the world has been marked by conflicts which arise between people over the concept of a universal truth- the fundamental 'knowledge' to which a communities beliefs conform to. Whether it be in politics, history, or science; people have striven to uncover an essential idea or model which confirms and validates our perception of experiences in everyday life. As a result there are many *categories* of truth; each is dependent on the area of knowledge from which one chooses to view the truth from. One should also expect the way we approach these truths (ways of knowing) to have a profound influence on the very nature of the truth- if it at all exists. But if a truth is dependent on the area we apply it to, and from what angle we approach, is there ever an absolute truth?

In its most general sense truth is the relationship between theory and reality. If we have a theory or idea which happens to stand in agreement with reality,¹ it is regarded as a truth. The implications of this definition give rise to a fundamental problem- is the connection between theory and reality dependent on the context?

We think of truth in different ways depending on the area of knowledge. In the social sciences a truth may be thought of as a norm held by the majority of the people of a community² which is in turn accepted by the individual. One could say that these truths are "constructed" by the views of the people. This kind of truth is susceptible to change with time. As time passes we encounter paradigm shifts which replace or qualify former truths, in effect reducing them to non-truths, as a result of the context of time. For example, the slave trade in the 18th century is a documented truth- the fact that people were treated as property was accepted as a truth in higher areas of society, and there were actual laws governing slave trade. In the present world we have laws which speak for universal equality; the possibility of a group of humans being less valued is generally unacceptable (formally) and so here we see a change in a social truth. However in certain cultures such as the predominately Hindu faiths, it is still believed that the individual is bound to their social class or *caste*. In this respect the truth that we have freedom in society is one which depends on the context of time and culture, and thus social/cultural perception.

Alternatively, in the natural sciences a truth may be thought of as that which lies "outside" the boundaries of the individual's or community's intervention. It can be thought of as an "existential fact," independent of the way we perceive our surroundings. There are certain truths which must be "absolute" because they form the basis of our reality. There must be an "answer sheet" to what we experience in our world, from which we can compare and relate our observations to. Personally, I find my work in experimental sciences a pursuit of explaining such a truth. For example, finding the gravitational constant is an investigation which results in finding an inherent characteristic in our reality- a truth.

Consequently, perhaps the question should read "Are there areas of knowledge in which absolute truth is *more likely* to exist?" Atwood's statement is compelling, however ambiguous in the sense that it should hold valid for all areas of knowledge. We should expect to find instances where the reasoning above applies more readily to a certain area. One must be aware of the implications put forth by the all-encompassing "context is *all*."

¹ reality refers to what we experience in the community which can act to validate or dismiss a concept/ theory.

² social environment of the people.

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The sometimes subtle, but nevertheless striking differences of the social sciences such as economics and natural sciences serve to illustrate the contextual existence of truth. In the natural sciences, the scientist aims to uncover or enlighten an inherent characteristic of the system he/she studies. Let this 'characteristic' be thought of as a 'truth.' Using this idea we see that the scientist is only trying to explain the behaviour of a system, based on objective observation. Consequently, when we refer to science we commonly hear people say that "the wave-particle duality of nature was *discovered* by Louis de Broglie or Albert Einstein," but we never say that "Isaac Newton *invented* gravity." In many respects this distinction between a discovery and invention applied to science shows how truth exists, it is only a matter of finding it.

In contrast, the social sciences involve the construction of models and theories in an attempt to predict or describe the behaviour of a population in society. The immediate difference is that the validity of a model in social sciences is dependent on the complex behaviour of humans. The act of simplifying an economic model into an ideal world impedes on its practical use, while a physical model will always show a systematic relationship between theory and practice. Ideally (for simplification) a hanging spring will obey Hook's law in Europe, just as it will in North America. Any deviations in this case can be explained in physical terms or by experimental error, because we are dealing with *naturally occurring* phenomena. However, an economic model linking the sale of pork to agricultural production will undoubtedly produce conflicting results when applied to North America and the Middle East. Economic theories deal with collective human action, which is highly uncertain due to the wide array of cultural backgrounds, ideologies, religions, etc. which in turn influence the system. According to Arthur Williamson³, we commonly experience 'market failures' in economics, and he continues by saying that the equivalent to the natural sciences would be a 'reality failure.' Does this lead one to think that truth is only existent in natural sciences?

Despite this, not all scientific discoveries must be thought of as definite and true. In reality what we can deduce within science is that a truth *does* exist out there, but the idea that we can somehow reach an understanding of the whole picture, to ascertain this truth, is questionable. In the context of science we may say truth exists, but to go to the extent of saying that our theories at this juncture are absolutely true is most likely false. Certainly, with the course of time, our current theories will be refined and modified with the advent of new discoveries and technologies. We can say we are approaching the truth step by step, reaching the final truth is open-ended. For example, one may argue that Einsteins theory of gravity as a result of the curvature of space-time is an abstruse concept which has been cleverly "invented," and so is it true? One would counter-argue by saying that these theories have been confirmed practically through experiments, and that they can be made applicable to the real world- therefore the theory is a truth. However, with the advantage of hindsight we must be wary of such claims. In tomorrow's world a new Copernicus may very well boldly put forth a new theory, which in a matter of minutes will have destroyed our accepted conventions. It is with the context of time which ultimately validates a natural scientific 'truth.'

Furthermore the main difference many people associate with the natural and social sciences, is the role of the observer. In economics or history, the claims we make are based on the context of our individual perception and the general mindset of the period in subject. This explains why for example Palestinians and Israelites are in conflict over who is entitled to Jerusalem. It is impossible to discern on which side of the conflict the truth lays because it is

³ Article "Is economics a science?" from "Theory of Knowledge" Nicholas Alchim John Murray Publishers, 2003.

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dependent on our point of view. Contrary to what one might think, there are some cases (albeit not common) where the role of the observer influences the outcome in natural science. The mind experiment devised by Erwin Schrödinger, known as 'Schrödinger's Cat'⁴ illustrates this idea. Put very simply, it plays with the idea that the act of observing itself affects the outcome, and in fact there is no outcome if no observation is made. This is of course a paradox but the interesting part is how it can be extended to this discussion. If we continue along this line of thought we realize that natural science does not concern itself with the occurrence of an externally, independent nature. Instead we, the observers, are intricately involved in the world we study. This strengthens the idea that even in the natural sciences, truths and theories are subjected to the context of perception.

In conclusion one can see that context has a profound impact on the existence of truth. Context can be seen as the different areas of knowledge in which truths exist or as the way we choose to observe a truth (perception.) The differences of natural and social sciences underline the key idea that the context determines the existence of truth in the sense of it being 'something that can be applied universally', independent of the observer. There are different levels of context, not only from one area of knowledge to another, but also within the area of knowledge which can qualify the truth. What Margaret Atwood may have intended with her statement is that there are truths, but we must also be aware of how these truths can suddenly change into 'non-truths' depending on the context. Perhaps a truth does *exist* however it may not be *unique* in the sense that it is the only truth when viewed from all perspectives.

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⁴ Internet article. 11/12/2007 17:18 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schrodinger_cat