

The nature of truth critical thinking example

[Religion](#), [Buddhism](#)



One of the most shadowy figures in the history of religious experience is Pontius Pilate, who just happened to be the Roman prefect over Judea when the Jews in that province happened to become very upset about the teachings of Jesus. As prefect, Pilate was in charge of determining Jesus' fate when it became clear that the Jewish leadership wanted Jesus executed, because only the Roman authorities could order a death sentence. One of the more uncomfortable meetings in all of history ensued when Pilate brought in Jesus for an audience. The Gospels agree that Pilate did not find anything wrong in what Jesus had done, but he still hands Jesus over to the Jews for execution. In the Gospel according to St. John, Pilate and Jesus get into a longer conversation, in which Jesus tells Pilate that he "came into the world to bear witness to the truth; and all who are on the side of truth listen to my voice"(John 18: 37). Pilate's response is the question "What is truth?" Jesus does not answer, which indicates that Pilate may have been speaking sarcastically, or Jesus may have already seen through Pilate's cowardice. In either event, Jesus' life is virtually over by this point. The search for truth began long before the recording of written history and still continues, on many different fronts, in the present day. The fact that the search for truth also transcends cultural boundaries is evidenced by the fact that the Buddha, Plato and Rene Descartes all spent a considerable amount of time in its contemplation. Ultimately, the truth put forth by the Buddha is _____ when compared to that of Descartes and Plato.

As with much of Buddhism, the notion of truth is highly personal and highly internalized. Growing up as a crown prince, Siddhartha Gautama (who would become the Buddha) had all of the material advantages that one could want.

However, the ease of wealth quickly bored him, and he headed out into the wide world, looking for truth. Among the first people he met were an elderly man, a sick man, a dead body and an ascetic; the lessons that they taught Gautama included the notion that, at the end of all effort and existence, all that awaits one is suffering (PBS). He came back home, abdicated his claim to the throne, and left his worldly possessions behind him, in the hope that these gestures would bring him peace and understanding. After some study, he came up with the Four Noble Truths, all of which revolve around the idea of suffering. These tenets include the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the end of suffering, and the truth of the path that leads to the end of suffering. Another way to express is to acknowledge that suffering exists, and has a cause and will eventually come to an end (PBS). For Buddhists, suffering is caused by desire – for material possessions, physical pleasures and eternal life. Because these desires cannot be fully satisfied, they lead to frustration – and suffering. This frustration breeds such evils as anger, jealousy and hatred. The ultimate state, for the Buddhist, is Nirvana, in which one leaves these desires behind. There is no more suffering, as one has left behind the cycle of birth and death for a permanent state of enlightenment.

The sort of truth that Rene Descartes sought was much different than that pursued by the Buddha. For Descartes, the idea of truth comes down not to suffering, but to knowledge and its pursuit. First, he defines knowledge not with regard to anything permanent, but instead to doubt: “knowledge is conviction based on a reason so strong that it can never be shaken by any stronger reason” (Newman). This is quite a bold claim for something so

ethereal as knowledge, from the Buddhist perspective; after all, most of what the world has considered to be scientific knowledge from the beginning time has ended up “ shaken” by much stronger science centuries or millennia down the line. Going further, though, Descartes asks this question: “ What is it to us that someone may make out that the perception whose truth we are so firmly convinced of may appear false to God or an angel, so that it is, absolutely speaking, false? Why should this alleged “ absolute falsity” bother us, since we neither believe in it or have even the smallest suspicion of it?” (Newman). This brand of truth indicates a much stronger sense of individualism than what one finds in Buddhism, which is built on truth that comes from experience. Descartes’ truth comes instead from conviction which, even when based on some scientific validity, has the danger of future overthrow

Socrates’ notion of truth fell somewhere between Descartes’ and the Buddha’s. Instead of relying so securely on certainty, as Descartes, or denying one’s internal impulses, as the Buddha did, Socrates takes a middle ground, using instead reason and a series of questions to come to the truth (“ Socrates”). This questioning strategy involved beginning with a set of questions (or even just one question) and then using the answers one receives to come up with further questions. As the process goes on, the series of questions reveals more and more about the topic, until what is true remains. By divorcing emotion from the process as much as possible, and relying instead on reason, the idea is that the truth will be less swayed by affective factors.

The Buddha's notion of truth is farther from either Descartes' or Socrates' than the other two are from each other. The Western meanings tend to begin with the individual and the capacities of the individual, either to find truth through reason or to generate a more affective sense of certainty. The Buddha's path is much more difficult, because it requires a realization that many of humanity's impulses are wrong-minded, doomed to only short-term gratification. Happiness and contentment in the longer term, then, come through denial of the self. Of course, waiting for longer term gratification can also make sense rationally – so maybe these schools of thought are not so far apart as we'd thought but weren't we certain?

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