

The topic at hand is the Good, the True and the Beautiful. The conception of these transcendental properties of Being originates with Plato and his Ideal Forms, spreads throughout then known world of the Mediterranean and central Asia with Aristotle, then reenters Western Christian Theology via Neoplatonism.

Even though Unitarian Universalism is no longer explicitly Christian, these concepts are deeply embedded in our theological lineage. Last month I talked about the Good.

Today I'd like to share some thoughts on the True, and as we'll see, this subject and how we think about it are also rooted in ancient Greece.

It is of particular importance to us for a couple of reasons: First, that our 4<sup>th</sup> Principle calls us to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning; and second, we understand that revelation is not sealed – which is to say that there is always more truth out there.

First, a very broad definition: Something is true if it is in accordance with fact or reality. The question then becomes one of what is factual or real, and how we determine that.

Let's start with Protagoras. Protagoras is a pre-Socratic philosopher who is reputed to have said that "Man is the measure of all things: of the things that are, that they are, of the things that are not, that they are not."

By this, Protagoras meant that each individual is the measure of how things are perceived by that individual. Therefore, things are, or are not, true according to how the individual perceives them. He was referring to things like properties, social entities, ideas, feelings, judgments, which originate in the human mind. He did not claim that humans must be the measure of the motion of the stars, the growing of plants, or the activity of volcanoes.

Plato opposed this relativism, and argued that there are transcendent, objective values that lie outside of the individual and are not dependent upon their perception or belief.

Both Plato and Aristotle argued that by asserting that truth is relative, Protagoras could say that whatever further theory he proposed must be true.

Here we are, 2500 years or so later, and this matter of what is true has been chewed over like a dog with a bone. The subjective/objective split is still present. Theories about the nature of truth have become even more refined and more contentious. They each have weaknesses and some limitations. Let me relate just a few of these theories:

The ancient world ascribed to what is now called the correspondence theory of truth, which assert that true beliefs and true statements correspond to the actual state of affairs – objectively either real or ideal.

Consensus theory holds that truth is whatever is agreed upon by some specified group. Of course, the larger the group, the harder it is to achieve consensus. Pragmatic theory holds that truth is verified and confirmed by the results of putting one's ideas into practice. That's hard to do a moral way – lots of sentient beings tend to get hurt.

Social constructivism holds that truth is constructed by social processes, is historically and culturally specific, and that it is in part shaped through the power struggles within a community. Constructivism views all of our knowledge as "constructed," because it does not reflect any external "transcendent" realities. Rather, perceptions of truth are viewed as contingent on convention, human perception, and social experience. It is believed by constructivists that representations of physical and biological reality, including race, sexuality, and gender, are socially constructed.

That sounds pretty familiar, as it is invoked a lot in academic circles, but it has some really big flaws. First, it easily devolves into pure relativism. Second, it is impossible to make comparative judgements about each constructed worldview, because the criteria of judgement will themselves have to be based on some worldview or other. If this is the case, then it brings into question the idea that any universal human values are possible. We recoil, for instance, at the idea that something like female genital mutilation is ok in any worldview, or that we cannot object to it on the grounds of universal human rights.

And then there is belief. Belief is the attitude that something is the case or true, without justification. Closely related to faith. A topic for another sermon.

Which brings us to cognitive bias. Cognitive biases make our judgments irrational, and we all have them. There are dozens of them. Here are just a few.

Confirmation Bias - The tendency to search for or interpret information in the way that confirms our preexisting beliefs.

Fundamental Attribution Error - We judge others on their character, but ourselves on the situation.

Belief Bias - If a conclusion supports our existing beliefs, we'll rationalize anything that supports that conclusion.

The Curse of Knowledge - Once we understand something we assume it to be obvious to everyone.

In-group Bias - We unfairly favor those who belong to our group.

The Halo Effect - How much we like someone, or how attractive they are, influences our other judgments of them.

I could go on and on. The list is very long. These shortcuts in our thinking, which are often useful, also often make it harder to arrive at what is really true and meaningful. In our search for truth and meaning, we always need to be aware of these biases in ourselves and others.

Which brings us to this thing called reason. And the process of reasoning, not to be confused with rationalizing.

Simply put, reason is the capacity for consciously making sense of things. We want the world to make sense, and that the reasons for things make sense. How we go about this what we call reasoning. And reasoning is something we do better together.

The process of reasoning is associated with thinking, cognition, and intellect. There are a number of ways of reasoning – some with strict rules, like formal logic and inductive and deductive reasoning – and other modes of reasoning considered more informal, such as intuitive reasoning and verbal reasoning. Most of us use the informal modes, which nevertheless share certain rules with more formal systems.

How this shows up in actuality is through discussion and argument. I use argument here in the formal sense: the act or process of forming reasons and of drawing conclusions and applying them to the case under discussion.

This can be contentious, and frequently must be for us to arrive at any truth.

And we also suffer from the unconscious use of logical fallacies. A logical fallacy is a flaw in reasoning, and they're often very sneakily used by politicians and others with power and

authority to fool people. We simply don't recognize many of these fallacies, and so we don't know how to counter them.

The most prevalent in our social and political discourse is the 'ad hominum' attack, which is attack on someone's character or personal traits in an attempt to undermine their argument. Example: Sally presents a compelling argument for banning assault weapons, and Betty Jane counters by asking why we should believe a woman who is divorced, was once arrested, wears too much bad perfume, and is also a Democrat.

Another version of this is the origins attack: Something is judged good or bad, valid or invalid, on the basis of where it comes from, or from whom it came, such as race, gender, class, sexual or political orientation.

There's a lot of that going around.

Then there is the argument from authority. AKA the "trust me, because I said so, mother knows best" fallacy. I could claim that because I am a minister in this pulpit, you should accept what I say is true without question. You should not very politely show me the door if I ever do that. The president can, and frequently does, make this claim. As do many others in authority.

Instead of giving valid reasons or evidence for a position, someone says some version of "Because I said so". The individual making the claim is essentially stating that their position, who they are, is enough of a reason for compliance, regardless of whether or not their position is valid.

There are a lot more of these. The Strawman Argument, the Appeal to Ignorance, the Circular Argument, the Red Herring Fallacy, the Fallacy of Sunk Costs, the Appeal to Pity, the Bandwagon Fallacy... and many, many more.

Formal and informal systems of logic and reason have arisen independently across the world. In Africa, China, India, and Islam. Buddhism has extensive systems of logic and debate. Western systems of logic and reason have contributed to the overthrow of empires and religions. In a pre-Enlightenment world dominated by authority based on revelation, superstition, fanaticism, and inherited privilege, reason was the key to freedom because it allowed normal people to discern truth for themselves. It is still the key to religious and political freedom.

Reasoning is fraught with the pitfalls of cognitive bias and logical fallacies. Reason takes time and effort. But so far, human beings have yet to come up with anything better in our search for truth and meaning.

And it all depends on our trust and confidence in reason and reasoning together, as individuals, as a congregation, as a denomination, as a society.

For those of you paying attention to the goings on in our denomination, there was a recent controversy at General Assembly, in which Todd Eklof, the local UU minister, distributed a book titled "The Gadfly Papers." The reaction to book was immediate and fierce. Claims of harm were made by many who hadn't even read the book. He was asked to leave, which he did. 500 UU ministers wrote and signed a letter denouncing the Rev. Eklof and the book as white supremacist. Some ministers advised others not to buy or even read the book. Here's the most disturbing quote: "We recognize that a zealous commitment to 'logic' and 'reason' over all other forms of knowing is one of the foundational stones of White Supremacy Culture."

Attempts at reconciliation apparently broke down when Rev. Eklof couldn't find a good officer to witness meetings with representatives of the UUA and UUMA. There are other accounts of what happened, and there is a lot of spin still going on from various people, and a lot of silence from the UUA.

In the last couple of months, sides have hardened. On Friday, the UUMA issued a letter of censure to the Rev. Eklof, stating that “The content of your book has caused great psychological, spiritual, and emotional damage for many individuals and communities within our faith.” This is said with offering proof, and the letter states that proof claims in our current way of doing things are themselves “white supremacist.”

Now, I have read the book. I don’t necessarily agree with all of it. He’s mostly pushing back against recent developments in Unitarian Universalism that he feels are not in keeping with UU traditions and polity. Perhaps a case can be made for the UUMA’s claims, but they are not inviting any discussion, only orthodoxy by fiat.

To censure someone, and call for the suppression of their writings and ideas, is antithetical to hundreds of years of Unitarian history, philosophy, and practice. It undermines our trust and confidence in our leadership. It calls that leadership into question.

Our 4th Principle calls us to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

Free means the right to ask questions. To question authority. To expose every idea to the process of reason. Not to submit unquestioningly to any theory, dogma, or ideology. And that includes questioning our own beliefs and those of our co-religionists.

To be responsible means to be able to personally answer for one's conduct and obligations, not answer to some self-styled authority. It means to be able to choose for oneself between right and wrong, true and false, good and bad.

To be responsible means to be response able. To have the ability to respond. To reply, to debate, to discuss, and to have the right to disagree in how we do things.

When we cannot raise questions, the ability to respond is denied. When claims are made without proof or reasoned discussion, all of these violate our 4<sup>th</sup> Principle.

Now, unlike some other ministers have done, I invite you to read the book, read the two letters, and explore this controversy. In other words, make up your own mind – not take anything on the word of authority. I trust that you are able and capable of doing that.

I think our denomination is at a crossroads, perhaps on the edge of splitting apart. That's ok. Religious schisms happen all the time. It would be a shame, but not the end of the world.

There are deep divisions surfacing in our faith, and you need to be aware of them and make up your own minds on how you want our faith to proceed in its search for truth and meaning, and speak up.

Otherwise, someone else may decide it for you, or perhaps they already have.