How Can We Obtain Truth?

An Inquiry Through the Eyes of Enlightenment Thinkers and Writers

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Old Western Culture: Early Moderns - 11:00 am

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Throughout history, man has sought to find the Truth, but to this day there is no single universal understanding of it. Yet, somehow, history has various interpretations and answers to this question, from the Bible to Milton, or Descartes to Shakespeare. Some say the ultimate truth must be revealed, while others insist one must reason for it. Thus, which brings one to truth, is it just one, a combination of both, or something completely different? While God is the ultimate truth revealed through the Bible, authors like Descartes, Hume, and Kant argue that only reason can move one to truth. Whereas others, like Burke, Milton, Pope, Shakespeare, and Tocqueville, argue for a creator or divine orderer to have given man all knowledge to seek truth from.

While there is a vast ocean of interpretations, the Bible gives an ultimate answer for those to believe. The Bible teaches that truth is revealed to man from his word. As John says, "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'"[1] The truth John is discussing here is the word of God. Again, as Timothy says, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness."[2] Thus, God's word is the truth that is revealed through the Bible. It is revealed both through the words and the Holy Spirit. With the Bible as the ultimate truth, how do non-biblical authors from the Enlightenment period differ from or agree with this worldview?

In *What is Enlightenment?,* Emmanuel Kant argues that truth was something one gains from reason and experience, but not only from reading and believing what others have said, he calls this mental dependency on others' laziness:

> Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why such a large part of mankind gladly remain minors all their lives, long after nature has freed them from external guidance. They are the reasons why it is so easy for others to set themselves up as guardians. It is so comfortable to be a minor. If I have a book that thinks for me, a pastor who acts as my conscience, a physician who prescribes my diet, and so on--then I have no need to exert

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[1] John 14:6 (ESV).
[2] Timothy 3:16 (ESV).

myself. I have no need to think, if only I can pay; others will take care of that disagreeable business for me.[3]

Kant's focus here is to prove that the common man needs to use his reason to think for himself, rather than relying on others to do it for him. This also ties into the motto Kant frames for the Enlightenment: "*Dare to know*! Have the courage to use your own understanding."[4] Kant not only wants more people to use reason, he wants them to use it all the time to find understanding. Kant's answer to the question is that one gathers truth solely through reason.

Unlike Kant, John Milton believed that truth comes from God, and ultimately obtainable through man's obscured reason:

Think only what concerns thee, and thy being;
Dream not of other worlds, what creatures there
Live, in what state, condition, or degree;
Contented that thus far hath been revealed
Not of Earth only, but of highest Heav'n.[5]

Rational liberty; yet know withal,
Since thy original lapse, true liberty
Is lost, which always with right reason dwells
Twinned, and from her hath no 'dividual being:
Reason in man obscured, or not obeyed.[6]

Milton says that one "dreams" of not other worlds, but Heaven. In these "dreams," when one applies their "obscured reason" and "free reason" can find some sense of truth that has been revealed to him by God.[7] Milton is holding the idea that truth is a revelation to man from God, but only through reason can one find, or rather understand, it. But, once man removes God from this method, the serpent slips though and lets man believe that, "our reason is our law."[8] Thus,

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[3] Emmanuel Kant, "*What is Enlightenment?*", trans. Mary Campbell Smith, in *The Enlightenment: Old Western Culture*, vol. 15, ed. Daniel Foucachon (Moscow, ID: Roman Roads Press, 2021), 1-2.
[4] Kant, "*What is Enlightenment*", 1.
[5] John Milton, *Paradise Lost in Rise of England: Old Western Culture*, vol. 12, eds. Daniel Foucachon, and Claire Escalante (Moscow, ID: Roman Roads Press, 2019), 641.
[6] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 755.
[7] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 755-776.
[8] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 675.

Milton is advocating that without God, there is no truth—only obscured and unfair laws man makes up.

Similar to Milton, Alexander Pope believed that truth ultimately came from God and his design of the universe. Man must believe and accept what he cannot understand. Pope says in his Epistle III, "Let this great truth be present night and day, but most be present, if we preach or pray."[9] Pope says that one can find this "great" truth day and night, but it's more "present" or revealed to him by God when preaching or praying. Man cannot find this truth without God, as Pope says, "Though man's a fool, yet God is wise."[10] With Milton, Pope believed that reason was also required to find truth, since truth is a riddle: "Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurled the glory, jest, and riddle of the world"[11] While God may reveal to truth, man is a fool, and cannot understand said truth without the power to reason to understanding.

Contrary to what Pope believed, Edmund Burke believed that truth came from this Divine orderer. Burke—the father of conservatism—believed that in order to continue and find truth, one must not quickly throw out the old. As he said, "A spirit of innovation is generally the result of a selfish temper and confined views. People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors."[12] One finds truth in what has been written and done, not solely in nature. Burke says in proving that religion is the foundation to the English constitution that all men move in the same direction, with a single ancient truth: "To the great and all-powerful God who rules this whole universe, of the things that take place on earth nothing is more pleasing than the gatherings and societies of men united by law, which are called states."[13] Burke says that

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[9] Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man in Poetry and Politics: Old Western Culture*, vol. 14, ed. Daniel Foucachon, (Moscow, ID: Roman Roads Press, 2021), 48.

[10] Pope, *An Essay on Man,* 48.

[11] Pope, *An Essay on Man,* 39.

[12] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France in Poetry and Politics: Old Western Culture*, vol. 14, ed. Daniel Foucachon (Moscow, ID: Roman Roads Press, 2021), 199.

[13] Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 268.

all men, even in different places, move in the same direction and feel this "great ancient truth" which comes from God, the Divine order.

Alternatively, William Shakespeare implies that nature, while rare, reveals the truth. He states that the "cruel hand" of time cannot kill this truth, its "verse shall stand."[14] In "*Sonnet 55"* Shakespeare argues that lopsided, powerful princes cannot outlive time. But truth can, truth stands, it is a "living record of your memory." Truth is not only man's memory and ideas, but God's.[15] Even in *King Lear*, Shakespeare hints to this. One instance is when the fool states, "Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise."[16] Shakespeare hints that truth, or rather wisdom, is found from experience, and self-awareness and reason. This differs from the others, as truth—wisdom—does not come from God, or reason. Rather, Shakespeare emphasizes one must have experience to seek the truth and reason well.

While Tocqueville's primary goal in this work is to evaluate and understand American Democracy to incorporate it into European society, he also has some insight. The first instance is in the introduction, where he states, "...we see that every addition to science, every fresh truth, and every new idea became a germ of power placed within the reach of the people…and all the gifts which Heaven scatters at a venture turned to the advantage of democracy."[17] Tocqueville states, every "new" add-on to truth will germinate another idea for man. Regardless, Tocqueville states, man has poetry, and memory, and the first of imagination. And additionally the gifts of Heaven–God–which have been scattered for mankind to find.[16] Similar to others here,

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[14] William Shakespeare, "*Sonnet 60" in Rise of England: Old Western Culture*, vol. 12, ed. Daniel Foucachon (Moscow, ID: Roman Roads Press, 2019), 3.

[15] William Shakespeare, "*Sonnet 55" in Rise of England: Old Western Culture*, vol. 12, ed. Daniel Foucachon (Moscow, ID: Roman Roads Press, 2019), 2.

[16] William Shakespeare, *King Lear in Rise of England: Old Western Culture*, vol. 12, ed. Daniel Foucachon (Moscow, ID: Roman Roads Press, 2019), Act II, 44.

[17] Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America in Poetry and Politics: Old Western Culture*, vol. 13, ed. Daniel Foucachon (Moscow, ID: Roman Roads Press, 2021), 464.

Tocqueville sees that truth is here, but scattered and one must seek to find it, so it can germinate into an idea for mankind through the poetry, memory, and elegance for generations to come.

On the other side, David Hume argues that there is no way for one to know there is a physical world, however he also said that there are certain truths that "would retain their certainty and evidence" such as things demonstrated by Euclid.[18] Later, Hume says that one way one can find truth is to "attempt to demonstrate its falsehood" because if one can find a falsehood, he therefore finds a contradiction.[17] But if he cannot find a falsehood, then there is no contradiction and therefore, it must be true. Differing from the others, Hume believes truth emerges from reason, not a divine creator.

At last, René Descartes, famous for saying "I think, therefore I am," has an interesting interpretation of this question, "what is the truth?"[19] In Descartes' *Discourse on Method*, he said this, "But immediately upon this I observed that, whilst I thus wished to think that all was false, it was absolutely necessary that I, who thus thought, should be somewhat; and as I observed that this truth, I think, therefore I am (COGITO ERGO SUM), was so certain and of such evidence that no ground of doubt."[20] Descartes said that truth is found by using reason to find something that is, without a doubt, true, like his statement above. Unlike Hume, Descartes assumed that reason was trustworthy, and not faulty in itself, which allowed Descartes to come to a more definite conclusion, unlike Hume.

Following this, it's simple to categorize these authors into two clear groups. The first group consists of those who believed only reason brings one to the truth. The second group is all those who believed that a creator—Divine orderer or God—gave one truth, but they must use

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[18] David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding in The Enlightenment: Old Western Culture*, vol. 13, ed. Daniel Foucachon (Moscow, ID: Roman Roads Press, 2021), 246.

[19] René Descartes, *Discourse on Method in The Enlightenment: Old Western Culture*, vol. 13, ed. Daniel Foucachon (Moscow, ID: Roman Roads Press, 2021), 127.

[20] Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 127-28.

reason to achieve understanding. This first group includes Descartes, Hume, and Kant. While each of these men believed truth is only found through reason, none believed there was a God who ordered all truth. This group contradicts the Bible, while Descartes and Kant do not outright disprove the existence of God, they say there had to be a God. Hume had a hard time with his own existence, let alone attempting to prove the existence of God.

Fortunately for the modern and post-modern era, there were plenty of authors on the opposite side of the spectrum to beg more thought. This brings the second group up, which was filled with Burke, Milton, Pope, Shakespeare, and Tocqueville. These authors agree that truth, ultimate truth, has to come from a divine creator. Yet, they do not agree on how, for instance, Milton, and Pope take a more Biblical perspective stating that it is revealed to man and man must reason to understand it. In similar fashion, Shakespeare, and Tocqueville stated that truth is all around and one must find it. Shakespeare takes this a little further, stating that some reason or wisdom comes from experiences. Finally, Burke's view, while similar, differs because he believed one does not reason to find a truth from nature, rather they have to learn from those past, build upon what has already been done.

Finally, critics argue that these men are old, and do not apply today. While this is outrageous just as a statement, it is even worse in practice. If one never takes what has been given to him, then how can he learn anything worth learning? If one never looks back to what has already been done, how can one move forward? This is exactly what Edmund Burke was getting at with his conservatism. Burke argued that culture should not be hastily toss out the old, replacing it with the new. This is especially helpful today with all the problems that culture is facing. Culture has forgotten the very roots it was created on, stepping out on a weak branch, hoping it does not snap under their weight. Regardless of their delusions, the branch they support

themselves on will inevitably snap, bringing culture back to the proverbial stone ages. Yet, if

culture heeds the warnings, teachings, and truth of Old Western Culture and the Bible, it will

slowly bring them back to sturdy branches being directly supported by the roots of all culture.

Throughout history, or specifically the Enlightenment period, there are various answers to

this question, "What is truth, and how can I find it?". The Bible is the divine and ultimate truth

from God revealed to mankind. Yet philosophers like Descartes and Hume argue that truth is

achieved through reason, leaving out the Divine. While authors like Burke and Milton argue that

truth ultimately comes from God, and through different methods, one can understand it.

Ultimately, while various authors present different methods and ideas for obtaining truth, the

ultimate answer remains rooted in the Bible and God's revealed word.

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