

Three levels of reality, truth and faith

The Friend, 26 April 2018, <https://thefriend.org/article/god-words-and-us-three-levels-of-reality-truth-and-faith>

In the seventeenth century, Isaac Penington and Isaac Newton were searching for something similar. As Penington described it: 'the end of words is to bring [us] to the knowledge of things beyond what words can utter'.* Drawing on Eastern and Western philosophy, the British-Indian philosopher Roy Bhaskar identified three levels of reality, and these men reached the third level. They could not time their search, which depended on seemingly chance movements of inspiration or imagination or, as Penington wrote, 'if the Lord open thy spirit, and cause it [the new insight] to sink in'.

The three levels of reality are often mixed together in discussions about topics ranging from science to religion, whereas Bhaskar shows how it is vital to recognise their differences. Level one is our thinking-feeling experience: observing, analysing, reflecting, explaining, remembering, believing, hoping, fearing, interpreting and so on. If attempts to establish the reality of religion are confined to this level, then differences within and between faiths and sects can become obvious, leading many to scepticism if not cynicism from an early age. 'Christians believe Jesus was born in Bethlehem', a five-year-old who attended a Church of England school informed me, her airy relativism seeming to place Jesus on the credibility level enjoyed by Father Christmas. Problems arise if we assume that reality can be discovered in our minds alone, and that disagreements about reality can be resolved if only we can think and debate more cogently and calmly.

The second level involves actual existing objects, people, behaviours, events and structures. These might offer more hope of establishing proven bases for agreement, such as in archaeological records of Noah's flood. However, the unfortunate emphasis in religious education on the level of actual reality, on religious leaders, books, rituals, meals, garments, buildings and taboos, again emphasises differences between faiths. And if traditions that matter so much in one place are irrelevant in another, might this not mean that they can all be ignored without any loss to human wellbeing? My colleagues working in religious education report this widespread scepticism in schools. In the era of post-truth and fake news, my colleagues in science education meet with further attacks on reality. 'Yes, it looks as if when you mix those two chemicals you get that result,' their students say, 'but you can't be certain that will always happen. New discoveries might disprove it. Scientific knowledge is always provisional and fallible.'

To reach the independent third level of reality, Isaac Newton had to share some of these doubts. He moved beyond the first level of empirical thinking, and the second level of actual evidence, to what Bhaskar termed the third level of 'the real', of unseen causes only known in their effects. For millennia Aristotle's view held, that objects fall because of their weight or gravitas. Instead of tracing the falling objects and patterns between them to search for visible evidence of the cause of the falling, Newton imagined a stupendous unseen force, gravity, which holds everything in place, from the murmurations of starlings to the multitudes of stars.

Dr John Snow made a similar leap of imagination after he plotted the many cases of cholera in London in 1854, and traced the possible source to a water pump in Soho. Cholera infection was assumed to be airborne, and Snow not only had to wonder if cholera is waterborne, but also that seemingly clean water from the pump could contain invisible infection. This was already known by a few, but was generally dismissed, and ridiculed by most doctors until the 1860s. The third deepest level of causes, from microscopic bacteria to seemingly infinite gravity, is unseen to ordinary vision and partly unknowable and incomprehensible. It holds the promise of further discoveries, for example, Einstein's rethinking of Newton's theory.

The concept of the three distinct levels of reality can assist with understanding truth. At the thinking-talking experience level, people claim to speak the truth but they may be mistaken or misled, or they may lie and deceive. Harry Frankfurt considered they all know about and respect or deliberately abuse truth, whereas others do not care about truth when they 'bullshit'. At the second actual level, truth is further challenged in countless ways, such as when promises are broken,

politicians renege on manifestos, advertisements mislead, business betray their customers and staff, and scientists cannot replicate published findings.

My sociology and anthropology research students have been taught respectful relativism: 'Each truth varies,' they say. 'It emerges out of local beliefs and behaviours, and can only be understood in its context.' When I ask them if truth exists, they dutifully say, 'No, there is no truth, only local truths, which people believe in different ways.' The logical reply is that this statement cannot be believed, because either it removes all grounds for believing its truth 'there is no truth', or else it is a lie. The students are of course surprised that their truth should be queried, because like almost everyone they rely on the real third level of infinite, unseen, causal forces, which include truth.

Truth and trust are default positions between people and between us and the world. We walk downstairs assuming we'll tread on weight-bearing wood, not sink our feet into stairs of treacle. Babies work out the truth about time and space, cause and effect, love and justice well before they can talk. These countless tacit assumptions about real truth make daily life and relationships possible. Confusion, fear and pain follow if truth is betrayed, although truth cannot be missing, because lies are defined in relation to truth. Satan has been named the father of lies.

Truth and religious faith, dimly expressed at the thinking-talking and actual activity levels, take their meaning from the deeper reality level of immense, largely unknowable, unseen forces. Quakers are especially aware of looking beyond empirical beliefs and actual behaviours towards these life-giving depths. Pennington advises that do so we have to

wait on the Lord, that thou mayst, from him, feel the right limit to the mind...[that is too] busy and active, willing to be running beyond its bounds...Distinguish between God's opening to thee words concerning the kingdom...and thy own apprehensions about them; that the one may be always cast by, and the other always embraced by thee. And always wait God's season...he alone is able to preserve the true sense and knowledge in thee [and] guide thee by his certain, infallible Spirit...[that] thou mayst see light, and enjoy life...it is one thing to understand words, testimonies, and descriptions; and it is another matter to understand, know, enjoy, possess, and live in *that* which the words relate to, describe, and bear witness of...the power, the fountain of living waters, the everlasting, pure well, is above the words concerning it.*

Religious and scientific education and debate would counter fake truths more by starting from the deeper, dense, real, third level, whether it is seen in sacred or secular terms, than by staying at the first and second thinner levels of reality.

* The Works of Isaac Pennington, Quaker Home Press, pp 485-6,
<http://www.qhpress.org/texts/penington/>

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