8.5: Truth

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So, what does Epistemology tell us about the concept of Truth? In Epistemological terms, Truth is absolute, the same for everyone, never relative. Truth is the complete accuracy of propositions, statements, sentences, assertions and beliefs.

Truth is a word best avoided entirely in argumentation, except when placed in quotes or with careful qualification. Its colloquial use has so many shades of meaning from, 'it seems to be correct,' to the absolute Truths claimed by religion.

Truth becomes confused with opinion, that is, a statement is True only because the person believes it is True. The idea of allowing such a view is that it rules out the views of anyone else. Truth becomes intensely personal.

To look for the Truth in any argumentative situation is to look for the one and only correct answer. The process of argument usually ends up in frustration, when conflicting Truths are at the center of the argument. This is because the parties involved in the argument both believe that their position is the one and only Truth and that any other position...
advocated must be a false or untrue one. Thus, the only way an argument over conflicting truths can be resolved is for one of the argumentative parties to give up their untruth and accept the other party's Truth. In this context, all argument must be viewed as a win/lose proposition. The arguer who feels he or she knows the Truth can never be open to new ideas and is therefore dogmatic. They will never intellectually grow.

Consider that once accepted so-called "Truths" have changed: at one time the earth was believed to be flat, at one time it was believed that the Earth was the center of the universe, at one time everyone thought that asbestos was safe and did not cause cancer, and at one time heroin was thought to be a non-addictive alternative for the painkiller morphine. The list of these changed "Truths" is endless and ongoing. Why? Because personal certainty does not equate to Truth. Personal certainty is based on information that might be inaccurate or incomplete.

When we say that an argument is valid we are referring to its internal consistency. Validity is the strength of our conclusions, inferences or propositions based on the logic of the argument. Critical thinkers need to think in terms of arguing over the validity of opposing viewpoints, as opposed, to arguing over which of the opposing viewpoints is the truthful one.

Only when you make a commitment to validity can you free yourself to accept more than one position as being logical and reasonable. Effective argument can only take place when people are willing to accept the possibility that their current position on the subject may be wrong. If a person believes that his or her position is the one and only Truth, no constructive argumentation can take place. At best, some destructive form of communication takes place like, bickering, quarreling or fighting. At worst, violence erupts.

The critical thinker needs to realize that while his or her position is valid, other valid positions may also exist. This understanding allows critical thinkers to engage in the process of argumentation with others, in order to test the validity or reasonableness of their respective arguments. Critical thinkers need to remember that there is no necessary or inherent connection between Truth and validity.

As Professor of Argumentation James Sawyer writes,

“All of us reach decisions and take actions that are based upon strong probability: strong information or evidence to establish the likelihood that something happened, is happening, or will happen. So many variables exist that to be certain of anything is a very rare situation.”

For example, in trying to explain weather changes, experts looking at the data came up with several valid, reasonable, conclusions: the early effects of global warming, warm Pacific Ocean currents known as El Nino, cold Pacific Ocean currents known as La Nina, increased effects from the weakening of the ozone layer, or just normal weather variability. All of these conclusions are supportable with factual data. They are all valid, and any one of them may be the "True" explanation, or none of them may be the "True" reason.