

The Elephant and the Truth

Julio Borges

We live in an era where more and more decisions seem to be driven by visceral sentiment, prejudice, and labels rather than reflection. My intention is not to add more noise to what already exists, but to try to understand what underlies an increasingly polarized and divided world; a world where the word “truth” has either been emptied and turned into something invisible or transformed into a highly uncomfortable word that needs to be destroyed.

I don’t believe that classifications of right versus left, progressive versus conservative, underdeveloped versus developed, or even democracy versus totalitarianism can capture the underlying problem.

A simple, yet accurate way that I have always used to get to know someone, is by asking them whether or not they believe that truth exists. I believe that this basic question can reveal much more than any of the labels we live with, which are usually limited to proclaiming, “that is your truth, but I have my truth, and all truths deserve respect”. It is upon this debate that I would like to elaborate in the following lines.

A civilization crisis

The atmosphere of global chaos that has been brewing for decades is fundamentally a crisis of the notion of truth. As

expressed by C.S. Lewis in his article “The Poison of Subjectivism”: *Before the arrival of Hegel, the majority of the philosophical tradition agreed that one could access a degree of truth whose nature was immutable. Accidental truths change over time, but the essence of our nature, for example, as human beings, is immutable. Even though the human heart can change over time, the laws of causality do not. When poison becomes fashionable, it does not cease to poison*¹.

Building a civilization under the premise that truth does not exist or that everything can be true is a highway to self-destruction. However, this trend of the impossibility of truth is overwhelmingly expressed today in every corner of public opinion, and we can simplify it as the belief that outside our own minds, no truth binds and obligates us. This view has come to dominate all expressions of society to the point of legalizing relativism, even in the United States Supreme Court. Astonishingly, in the case of *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*², Justice Anthony Kennedy established that at the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.

As we can see, we are simplistically faced with two options, black or white: either there is a truth to be discovered outside of our own minds, separate from our likes and feelings, as has been defended since Plato, or, on the contrary, truth is something that each individual defines, even to give meaning to the world and human life, as Justice Kennedy declared.

1 C.S. Lewis, *El veneno del subjetivismo*, 1943.

2 *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, 505 U.S. 833 (1992).

How did we get here?

With the arrival of scientific modernity, with Descartes and company, the notion of truth was limited to the notion of certainty. Truth is what is certain and mathematically verifiable, for example, through physics: the acceleration due to gravity will always be 9.8 meters per second squared, or through chemistry: water will always be two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom. The truth is what is certain and mathematical; anything outside of mathematical certainty is mere words.

By believing that science is the only path to truth, we start abandoning the other path of over 2000 years of human tradition, which sought to deeply comprehend truth by understanding reality beyond the certainty of science and mathematics.

Adopting the position that truth is exclusively scientific certainty and that everything else is subject to individual preference leads to amputating and reducing our value as human beings. Let's see: when C.S. Lewis expresses that *truth is what is beyond and within ourselves*, he expresses the same sense as Saint Augustine when he asks God, "*Let me know myself and know you*". This self-knowledge, which stems from the same thread as Socrates' "know thyself," does not mean that Socrates, Augustine, or Lewis are inviting us to consider that there are two types of truths: 1) the truth that I wildly and sovereignly discover within myself, as expressed by Justice Kennedy, and 2) the mathematical truth of the sciences. It is a different dynamic: to the extent that I can read in reality, in addition to the mathematical order of science, that there is an order in the universe that I do not fabricate, but rather must discover and decipher, to that same extent, I am capable of discovering myself as part of that order, as a dignified person, that is, as a unique and irreplaceable individual, the owner of

my freedom, but at the same time the possessor of a nature and purpose beyond myself and deep within me. In other words, I am part of that order, and reason and my conscience in the innermost part of myself are the doors that open to the entire universe and to others; they are not a dark room where the meaning of the world is manufactured.

As C.S. Lewis reminds us, the search for truth consists of going beyond truth as adequation/conformity³ and achieving a comprehensive understanding of reality. This implies trying to see reality from different perspectives. Truth is much larger than the simple here, and now that surrounds us at this moment. For Lewis, truth as adjusting is about reality, it reflects reality, but it is not reality itself. Let's replace the word "truth" and use the word "science" to understand it better: science is about reality, it reflects reality, but it is not reality itself, there is something beyond and greater than the data of science. To attain a comprehensive sense of reality, we need not only truth as adequation/conformity, and science but also other paths such as imagination, faith, and myth.

3 Truth as adequation is the classical thesis of common sense that defines what truth is. Maritain (*Introduction to Philosophy*, II, 4) summarizes the tradition clearly: Knowledge consists of a conformity/ adequation between my understanding and the reality that surrounds me. Truth is that which aligns what my mind perceives with the reality outside of my mind. I look out the window and see and perceive a tree on the street. The tree is true and real. The important thing is that, from this perspective, reality is the cause, source, and measure of intellectual truth. In other words, there exists a real world outside of my mind. This may sound obvious, but an important part of philosophy, with respectable arguments, argues the opposite: there is no tree outside or the tree is more of what I fabricate in my mind than what objectively exists outside of my mind.

Truth and Reason

An important part of the problem regarding truth lies in how we value reason in order to comprehend reality. Does reason lead us to truth? Modern and postmodern thinkers have radically questioned the human capacity to deeply understand reality. Modern thought reduced reason to a mere scientific calculator of means to achieve ends, and in the case of postmodernity, frustrated by the modern scientific worldview, reason has been further diminished. If reason was once seen as a calculator, postmodernists view it as a flickering candle that can only weakly illuminate the fleeting here and now of a subject within their culture, without the capacity for universal thinking. Therefore, we can summarize our discussion as follows: the crisis of truth is largely a crisis of how we understand reason. According to modern thinkers, we are merely calculators, while according to postmodernists, we are shortsighted individuals in the darkness. Both views lessen the power of reason.

What's important is to reposition reason as a starting point to open ourselves to reality. As Mariano Fazio expresses, there are two ways to conceive reason: *one open to transcendence and another closed to immanence*⁴. We are not simply a calculator of means to achieve ends, as modern thought believed, nor are we a small candle deciphering shadows in the middle of the night, as postmodernity suggests. We need, as reiterated by Ratzinger time and again, a broad reason, that is, a reason open to transcendence and capable of grasping and valuing truths of existence that can never be isolated in a test tube or under a microscope, nor fabricated out of nothing within our own minds. We are referring

4 Mariano Fazio, *Secularización y crisis de la cultura de la Modernidad*, obtained from: <https://www.unav.edu/documents/58292/7179289/2.+V%C3%81ZQUEZ+DE+PRADA.pdf>

to self-evident truths of life such as justice, the dignity of every human being, beauty, love, or the meaning of existence. That broad aspect of reason is what the medieval thinkers called *Intellectus*, the eyes of the mind, which allows us to see truths that are evident in themselves. According to the medievals, reason has two components: *Intellectus*, which intuitively grasps these great principles, and *Ratio*, which is subordinated to *Intellectus* and deals with the capacity to calculate means for practical ends. Some simple examples that are still questioned help us understand these intuitions of *Intellectus*: parents must take care of their children and children must take care of their parents, violating is wrong, beauty is preferable to ugliness, or I can give my life for a friend or for my country. From the modern era, primarily from Descartes onwards, the decision was made to close off this part of reason, considering it imprecise and uncertain compared to mathematics. However, history has taught us that without this broad reason, capable of appreciating and valuing life beyond our immediate concerns, human beings end up lost in the nihilism that dominates life under the apparent happiness of photos and filters, celebrities, serotonin inhibitors, fentanyl, and likes on social media. Life withers away when it comes to the grand themes that are not the object of the sciences and technology.

Nihilism, nothingness, is the most direct consequence when it is assumed that truth does not exist. As expressed by one of the leaders of postmodernity, Gianni Vattimo, *the focus is not on verifying what objectively exists, as is the case with adequation, but rather on agreeing, reaching a consensus on what is being discussed under a rhetorical horizon of truth*⁵. In other words, a postmodernist like Vattimo will say that in the end, truth is what we all agree it is because there is no truth outside of ourselves. But what is

5 Gianni Vattimo, *El pensamiento débil*, (1988).

more serious is that Vattimo will argue that this agreement is not constructed through logical arguments, but through pure seduction. Since truth does not exist, neither does logic; only the seduction of rhetoric exists, according to Vattimo. In short, whoever tells the best story in the most attractive way, whoever posts the best content, gets the most likes, and gains the most followers, is the one who determines what is true and what is false in the world. It is a truth without any pretense of going beyond the here and now, always remaining provisional. It is a truth with a lowercase “t” tied more to our gut than to our head. Truth is what I like, falsehood is what I don’t like.

Are Vattimo and Justice Kennedy right?

Surely, at this point, many of you will say: “What Vattimo and Justice Kennedy think is true, subjective freedom is the truth. Each person is free to feel and interpret what is true and what is false!” However, I must caution you before rushing into this choice. Let us consider what implications this way of viewing existence has for social life and politics. If we accept that our reason is weak, not universal, or merely a limited calculator with few functions, to the same extent, human life is reduced to something more resembling a confused herd than a dignified and strong individual who has the right to rise above time and space through reason and emotions⁶.

6 When I speak of emotions, I do so in a radically different way than feelings. I refer to emotions as that experience that moves us, makes us tremble, and puts us in tune with something good like beauty or something bad like injustice. Emotions place us, they capture not only our minds but also our hearts, focusing us on something that is good or bad, something that needs to be evaluated, that matters. I use the term “feeling” to refer to the subjective, the instinctive, the visceral, the gut reaction.

Vattimo's postmodern view of truth clearly expresses his Nietzschean heritage and represents not a strengthening of personal freedom but its reduction. Nietzsche inaugurates an era of interpretive plurality in a relativistic landscape where nothing is true or untrue. There are no facts, only interpretations. Truth, for Nietzsche and Vattimo, is merely interpretations (hermeneutics), and it is the only way to access a truth that is constructed by the individual and not discovered outside the subject. Truth is subjective interpretation; *it is not the conformity of the mind with an objective datum of reality, but an ephemeral and changing response to any fact of life, a constant shifting from one sign to another without accessing the thing in itself*⁷. Ultimately, this is the nihilism embraced by Vattimo: *the end of belief in an objective reality with its structures attainable through thought*⁸. It is, as Ratzinger critically puts it, the subject locked in a room full of mirrors.

Thus, truth and interpretation are necessarily linked as a result of these postmodern considerations in a very peculiar way. Truth is what is interpreted as useful for life, that which empowers and resolves it most conveniently. Vattimo argues in favor of this view, stating that *those who fail to become autonomous interpreters in this sense perish: they no longer live as individuals, but merely as numbers, statistical units within the production-consumption system*⁹.

However, I understand it differently. Let's take a closer look: this gloomy portrait that Vattimo warns about could be the unintended result of his own postmodern ideas. From the moment nihilism leads to denying any possibility of objective knowledge or

7 Gianni Vattimo, *Diálogo con Nietzsche*, 2002, obtained from: <https://ebiblioteca.org/lecturas/?v/133813>.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

value, that void can be filled by utilitarianism¹⁰ through the law of the strongest. With the impossibility of knowing something true or having a binding value that obliges us, the only criterion becomes the choice of what is most useful for the arbitrary purposes of those who hold more power: the superman, the superior race, the state or the single party, the imposition of lobbying.

At this crucial point, Ratzinger would argue to Vattimo and postmodernity that if truth is not an inherent value, if truth is not pursued as something intrinsically good, the only measure for knowledge will be calculation and benefit. Therefore, truth does not have value in itself, but it is valued based on someone's agenda: *If man cannot properly know truth, but only the usefulness of things, then consumption will be the sole parameter for all actions and thoughts, and the world would be reduced to material for construction*¹¹.

In short, the individual ceases to be a subject with dignity and becomes malleable material under the will of control and domination of any tyrant, technocrat, or influencer. Let's imagine a world where justice means whatever "the president" decides; a world where truth is whatever the ruling party feels like; a world where the powerful determine what is good. That is nihilism, what happens right after I say no truth binds and obligates us all. Human dignity disappears in the local, the contingent, the fleeting, as it cannot be rooted in a more universal and unquestionable essence. If freedom means doing whatever I want without being rooted in any truth, then Hitler or Maduro have arguments to do as they please.

10 We use utilitarianism in the sense of prioritizing utility over any other value when making choices.

11 Joseph Ratzinger, cited by Eslava, 1993b, p. 37.

To summarize once again: by attempting to separate truth and freedom, human dignity is left at the mercy of whatever is useful to any tyrant, be it political, technological, or communicational, who seeks to fulfill any whim. The crisis of truth, more than being a crisis of misunderstanding reason, is also a crisis of misunderstanding freedom.

What is true in human beings

Therefore, we must understand that the antidote to utilitarianism is respect for what is true in human life, that which has inherent value, that cannot be bought, sold, or rented. Contrary to what the postmodernists believe, without truth, it is impossible to fully exercise human freedom because everything is reduced to the arbitrariness of the desires of the strongest. Truth must be a prerequisite for freedom because it is only when I accept what is true in human beings, that which does not change, that which constitutes us, such as our dignity, our right to free conscience, our inviolable human nature, our communal character, that I can be free and responsible at the same time. We are dignified individuals solely because we are free to act, and if we are free to act, we are also responsible for what we do or fail to do, and responsibility can only be measured by how committed we are to what it means to be human.

The tribunal of conscience constantly challenges us regarding this. Freedom is not about doing whatever I want; freedom is the responsibility to become as fully human as possible. The freedom of man, as explained by Berdyaev following Dostoevsky, becomes slavery *when someone rebels and tries to ignore what is above them. And if there is nothing above, the human being disappears. If freedom loses its*

*content, then man is also lost; because if everything is permitted, freedom becomes slavery*¹².

Despite the apparent freedom implied by each person being free to define their own world, meaning, universe, and life, the real consequence in flesh and bone will be the control of the strongest over the weakest, nullifying any notion of freedom. For this reason, Lewis warns that *the best way to dominate someone is to make them believe they can do whatever they want*¹³.

The passage from the Gospel of John (8:31), stating that *the truth will set you free*, indicates that only because truth exists can humans aspire to freedom once they have discovered the truth that lies beyond appearances and within our conscience. Vattimo, on the other hand, ironizes: *the truth that sets us free is true because it sets us free. If it doesn't set us free, it must be discarded*¹⁴. It is clear that for Vattimo, pure freedom implies the rejection of any bondage to a higher reference point above our desires. This equivalence of freedom as the elimination of constraints dangerously aligns with conceptions of freedom as a mere revolutionary break from all established authority, as expressed in Marxist interpretations of freedom as anarchy, once again the law of the strongest. This narrow conception of truth ends up being more weak than illuminating. In the words of John Paul II, *once truth is taken away from man, it is pure illusion to pretend to make him free. Indeed, truth and freedom either go together or perish miserably together*¹⁵.

12 Nicolas Berdiaeff, *El credo de Dostoievski*.

13 C.S. Lewis, *La abolición del hombre*, 2016.

14 Gianni Vattimo, *Ecce Comu: Cómo se llega a ser lo que se era*, 2009, obtained from: <https://es.scribd.com/document/189231223/183963534-Vattimo-Ecce-Comu>

15 Juan Pablo II, *Encíclica Fides et ratio*, 1998, obtained from: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/es/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.pdf

How to rediscover meaning?

The world after the fall of the Berlin Wall has experienced, up until today, an emptying and general discrediting of political doctrines. In many past and present contexts, the debate over ideas has fueled the fury of passions and political hypersensitivities. The problem of distortion of values leads to a false freedom that conceals, behind hermeneutics, the law of the strongest. This is the enormous danger of a postmodernity that disregards any relationship between truth, freedom, and human reality. Both Nazism and Chavism were movements that promised a transformation and reinterpretation of truth through a new way of telling history, sweeping away the status quo, or applying justice. They promised to redefine all traditions and history as oppressive, eliminating truth because the revolutionary event possesses its own truth derived from its “free” interpretation of reality, which has resulted in oppression, violence, millions of murders, and millions of displaced individuals. If truth is disregarded, there is no real democracy, only the monopoly of how to understand reality by the current Hitler, Putin, or Maduro, as masterfully taught to us by Orwell in 1984: *Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past.*

There are no individuals, only a mass to mold and use

Fortunately, the great thinkers of humanity, such as Plato and Aristotle, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, and more recent authors like Lewis or Chesterton, teach us that the best philosophy is that of life and common sense. When speaking of truth, we do not refer to imposition, dogma, or fundamentalism. We are referring to the existence of a small island of truths in a sea of opinions and relative perspectives that allow us to anchor truth in reason and freedom, which is not mere oppressive subjectivism but the

capacity for the transcendent and the universal. St. Augustine explains this reality of truth in a simple and unsurpassable way: If both of us see that what you say is true, and both of us see that what I say is true, where, I ask, do we see it? Certainly not in you within me, nor in me within you, but both of us see it in the same unchanging truth that is above our minds.

Now, to reach that place above our minds where truth resides, it is possible to follow different paths that are not mutually exclusive: science is one path, faith is another, reason is another, intuition is another, hermeneutics is another, myth is another, and so on, opening different paths to the same destination. The problem arises when one wants to assert only one path, outright excluding all others. At that moment, it ceases to be a path to truth and becomes an ideology.

Finally, the elephant

To conclude, how can we begin to address this crisis of truth? Firstly, it is important to understand that these different paths to truth are complementary and do not imply a relativization of truth. Rather, truth can be observed and reached from different angles and perspectives without embracing a relativistic stance. Perhaps the human drama lies not in the absence of truth, but in an overabundance of truth.

Additionally, the pending task is to broaden and widen human reason. To reclaim reason's capacity to perceive principles that do not require eyes but are self-evident, serving as the foundation to demonstrate human truth by rescuing the beautiful, the good, the true, the worthy, and the free in an era filled with disenchantment and emptied of meanings and purpose. Life has ceased to be an

adventure and has become flat, which is why escapism from the mundane has become the norm rather than the exception.

Rescuing the meaning of existence and truth may seem daunting and abstract, but it is not at all. On the contrary, it is a simple decision about how to live and approach daily life with awe, passion, and a sense of transcendence towards truth, focusing on the small things rather than grand treatises or books. Rescuing life is rescuing truth, and rescuing truth is rescuing life. Truth liberates; it does not oppress. Responsibility liberates; it does not oppress. Truth, beyond the realm of sciences, enlarges rather than diminishes existence.

There is a story that Ratzinger recounted in a conference at the Sorbonne¹⁶, which reflects the situation of the modern human being: One day, a king from northern India gathered all the blind inhabitants of the city in one place. He then brought an elephant before them and allowed some to touch its head, saying, "This is an elephant." Others touched the ear or the tusk, the trunk, the leg, the rear, or the hairs of the tail. Afterwards, the king asked each person, "What is an elephant like?" And based on the part they had touched, they answered: "It is like a wicker basket," "It is like a container," "It is like a plowshare," "It is like a deposit," "It is like a pillar," "It is like a pestle," "It is like a broom"... Then, as the parable continues, they began to argue and shout, "The elephant is like this!" "No, it's not! It's like this!" until they started throwing punches at each other, much to the king's amusement.

16 Joseph Ratzinger, *¿Verdad del cristianismo?*, conference, The Sorbonne, Paris, 1999, obtained from: <https://rsanzcarrera.wordpress.com/2012/09/11/conferencia-del-card-joseph-ratzinger-en-la-sorbona-de-paris-27-de-noviembre-de-1999/>

Our current world, like the king who finds amusement, wants us blind, unable to think of the entirety of the elephant, but diminished and fighting over small parts that we believe represent the whole. Only the possibility of truth, of knowing the elephant from all its angles, will give us a full sense of ourselves, our life, its meaning, our responsibility, and what transcends us as human beings.