

## Text 2: The question of absolute truth

|                                                       |   |
|-------------------------------------------------------|---|
| Text 2: The Question of Absolute Truth .....          | 1 |
| 2.1. Fundamental concepts and problem statement. .... | 1 |
| 2.2. The meaning of the word 'truth'. ....            | 2 |
| 2.3. The meaning of 'absolute truth'. ....            | 2 |
| 2.4. The meaning of 'dogma'. ....                     | 3 |
| 2.5. Solution .....                                   | 5 |

### 2.1. Fundamental concepts and problem statement.

#### ***The meaning of the word 'absolute'.***

The Latin word 'absolute' has two meanings:

(1). Independent: e.g. the authority of the 'absolute' monarch (absolutism);  
(2). Total (all-encompassing): an absolute rule knows no exceptions; an absolute solitude knows no presence whatsoever (it is a 'pure' or 'unclean' solitude); an absolute trust in authority or in a person. In those two ancient meanings lies a pair, namely absolute/relative (= completely/relative): that which has no relation to anything outside itself is 'absolute' (independent and/or exception-free) (it is relation-free); thus it is understood that it is said that "God is absolute" (the absolute being or something like that).

Philosophy, at least in its main discipline, ontology or the study of being, that doctrine concerning reality, is concerned with the absolute 'truth'. Since Parmenides of Elea (-54/-...) the expression ' kath'heauto ', secundum, has existed. seipsum , according to itself.

For example, one regards a child, the upbringing, or the like 'according to (him or her) oneself, that is, as the child is in itself, as the upbringing is in itself (i.e., as upbringing, as such, as such). In other words, one then regards the child 'absolutely' (or the upbringing), i.e., its 'being'. This means that there is a child, upbringing, etc., independent (see the first Latin meaning) of ourselves who are engaged in it, and/or total (see the second Latin meaning: all child-being, all upbringing without exception). Platon called that independent and/or total aspect of something the 'idea' of it (hence his theory of ideas). He called the contemplation of that total and independent reality ' theoria '. This is the core of all classical philosophy (and the discipline in that sense).

## 2.2. The meaning of the word 'truth'.

Traditionally, the word 'truth' in classical philosophy is used in the sense of correspondence between reality (being) and knowledge, or thought.

Several variants can be distinguished.

### (1) Epistemological and theoretical.

Is 'true' any knowledge and thinking that corresponds with reality? In that sense, 'true' stands in opposition to 'false' or even to 'undecidable' ("It will be summery weather next Monday" is such a judgment that is undecidable until it happens.) This applies to concepts, but especially to judgments about propositions.

### (2) Metaphysical.

A certain philosophy, since Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, assumes that reality as we find it corresponds to one or more higher, indeed, divine principles (Pythagorean numerals, Platonic ideas, Aristotelian 'forms' or the like), which, transcending their nature, constitute its foundation. Thus, Saint Augustine will say that things correspond to, or agree with, God's ideas. In that metaphysical sense, things are 'true', in conformity with God's thought.

### (3) Ethical politician.

Behavior, individual and/or social, obeys (responds to) norms (rules of conduct): in this sense, one speaks of ethical-political 'truth'. If one applies the laws of the state in one's life, that life is 'true' in the political sense. "A true son respects his father" means that the son, insofar as he corresponds to the ideal, normative form thereof, is 'true' in the ethical sense of the word.

**Note:** On several occasions, 'true' is also that which is independently a totality: "what is 'true' is discussed in the language of an honest person". The things here are the truth, that is, their reality, as they are in themselves. Cf. above regarding 'absolute'.

## 2.3. The meaning of 'absolute truth'.

Only now can we describe the subject purely. 'Truth' is reality and 'absolute truth' is

a/ reality insofar as it

b.1./ independent, non-affiliated, exists in itself and

b.2./that in its unblemished, perfect, complete nature. That is the starting point.

Transferred to a concept, judgment, reasoning, theory, etc. In epistemological and conceptual theoretical terms, one can say, for example: “Two plus two’ is an absolute truth”. This means that:

**1.** independent of anything whatsoever, certainly of our subjective impressions, opinions, etc. and

**2.** in all cases (entirely exception-free) amounts to two plus four (four is the abbreviated name of the summarizing set of two sets, each with two elements). In that sense, there are absolute truths.

### ***The difficulty.***

As long as people speak

**a.** concerning reality in itself (cf. Parmenides), independent and integral, in general and

**b.** Regarding clear examples thereof, such as two plus two equals four—as applications, therefore, of absolutely true knowledge and/or thought—there is no difficulty. However, in very many cases, the subject matter is not so clear and obvious. For example, is anti-authoritarian upbringing a good upbringing or not? It is difficult to cast the answer to this in an absolute, independent, and exception-free form. That is the difficulty. The not-so-clear, indeed, the unclear cases. That is where our capacity for interpretation or explanation falls short.

**Consequence** : there is more than one opinion regarding a single fact. Something that the archaic poet Homer already observed in Greece .

## 2.4. The meaning of 'dogma'.

'Dogma' is a typical Greek word. It means 'opinion'; later, because 'doxa' also means 'opinion', it acquires the meaning of 'legal precept' and 'imposed doctrine'. Thus, for example, when the Stoics or the Epicureans speak of their dogmas, they mean the propositions that are accepted collectively within their school: one cannot belong to the school without adhering to those opinions. Likewise: the doctrine of papal infallibility in the Catholic Church; it is even a dogma agreed upon conciliarly. The ordered collection of all dogmas is called 'the' dogma or 'dogmatics'. In Stoicism or Epicureanism and in the Catholic Church, this is accompanied by a teaching authority, i.e., a number of persons who are decisive interpreters and normative for the adherents.

**Note:** In itself, dogma, dogmatic teaching authority, etc., is an intellectual and neutral concept that the classical Greek thinkers introduced into the world with their intellectualism (emphasis on intellect) and/or rationalism (emphasis on reason). In itself, it is a method like so many others. That is meliorative language use.

However, the difficulty begins when this method exceeds its own limitations ( Hubris , arrogance ) and, to use a contemporary word, becomes 'ideology'. This gives rise to pejorative terminology: 'literary', 'political', 'social' dogmas are movements imposed in an authoritarian manner. Such behavior is 'dogmatizing' behavior or 'dogmatism' or 'dogmatic'. Thus, in psychology, the word means 'absolute', 'authoritarian', 'despotic', 'totalitarian', or the like. Someone, for example, speaks in an absolute 'tone'.

### ***The meaning of 'dogmatism'.***

Besides the pejorative meaning in the humanities, 'dogmatism' has two meanings.

**(a)** In ancient Greece this means that attitude of knowledge and thought which believes that man can arrive at absolute certainties which transcend the immediate given (i.e. the phenomenon or appearance); e.g.

**1.** that the sun has risen and set regularly since time immemorial,

**2.** However, that this regularity is due to divine providence (as Stoics or Catholics teach) is not immediately given (phenomenal); in this sense, dogmatism stands in opposition to skepticism, which asserts that man, regarding absolute certainty, does not get further than the phenomenal (and its description, called 'phenomenology');

**(b).** In modern philosophy, 'dogmatism' means that epistemology or epistemological opinion which asserts that human knowledge has real value and even absolute real value, without paying any attention to the question of whether this is actually the case; - in this sense, (naive) dogmatism stands in opposition to the critique of I. Kant (1724/1804) - that such a dogmatic 'sleep' (according to Kant) ought to be critically examined, - which shows that Kant represents a modern form of ancient skepticism.

Kant is a phenomenalist : **1.** he accepts the immediately given **2.** Without expressing an opinion as to whether an absolute reality or truth corresponds to it; in this respect Kant resembles Homer , who indicates more than one opinion (interpretation) regarding the same given (phenomenon) without ever taking a position; thus he engages in the suspension of judgment or ' epochè '—an attitude of which the first Sophists in Hellas were the forerunners.

## 2.5. Possible solutions

Practical starting point. The fact that even today the question of absolute truth elicits more than one answer is proven by phenomena such as, on the one hand, pluralism (making more than one answer socio-culturally acceptable), tolerance, indeed, relativism (accepting no form of absolute truth—which cancels itself out because the one who claims: “There is no absolute truth” (“Everything is pure relation”), is himself making an absolute, indeed, dogmatic statement); on the other hand, the Inquisition (witch hunts and heresy hunts), excommunication (exclusion from school or church group), and gag orders.

Regarding the Dutch church, reference should be made in recent years to S. Konijn /J. Dekkers, *\*Bouwstenen (overpeinzingen bij een groeien polarisatie)\**, Hilversum, 1972, especially p. 21 (overview of the points of polarization: authority, obedience, (true) doctrine; tradition; dogma; thinking vertically (from teaching authority (and God)) and horizontally (from man and basis); old and new: generation gap; statistical assessment). Outside the Catholic Church, the situation today is similar: there is dogmatic Marxism and so-called pragmatic Marxism. Does Michel Oukhov not complain here in 'The Year of Liberalism' (1980) about the fact that 'pluralism' is dismissed by the older guard from socialist and liberal circles as 'dirty' or 'dangerous', and that “that tolerance must finally come to an end”? Does he not write an 'Avenue' about right-wing socialists and progressive liberals? The relationship between dogmatism and skepticism is more than a religious ecclesiastical problem: it is a cultural problem in itself.

### ***The traditional rules of conduct in the church.***

- Mgr. L.A. Van Petegem , in *Kerk en leven* , 1973: 15 (12.04.19 178), commenting on the episcopal letter concerning the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (30.08.1968), formulates the rule of conduct as follows: The question is: “What becomes of that doctrine of the encyclical, although not infallible, yet very weighty, if someone were to arrive at a judgment of conscience regarding his case, which deviates from that doctrine?”

The episcopal statement says: if, however, someone who is knowledgeable and capable of forming a firmly founded personal judgment before God after serious investigation—which always presupposes the necessary information—comes to a different conclusion on certain points, then he is entitled, in this

matter, to follow his conviction. He must nevertheless remain prepared to always continue his investigation and reflection honestly.

### **Double interpretation of this ecclesiastical rule of conduct.**

- The Bishop of Ghent relies on the premise that the rules , according to the Belgian bishops, apply only to the “ knowledgeable and competent,” “thus to the competent moralists in the matter .” These competent ethicists may, he says, if necessary, based on their study and competence, have arguments that make their agreement with papal doctrine difficult: in that case, they may, in conscience but only 'for themselves,' adopt a dissenting position. This implies that publicizing their opinion is forbidden to them. In theological Latin, this is called 'silentium obsequiosum ' (respectful, submissive silence). In awareness of fallibility, they ought to remain prepared for further investigation and study. Any other person who is not knowledgeable and competent to personally determine the truth of papal doctrine must adhere to the encyclical, and any publicity, for example among fellow believers, is forbidden to him. After all, the divine law is absolute truth, and this is “authentically interpreted” by the ecclesiastical teaching authority—that is, correctly understood and explained. Ecclesiastical teaching authority and divine law are, for Mgr. Van Peteghem, identical .

The interpretation of the same ecclesiastical rule of conduct is different among, for example, existential theologians: for them, expertise and competence are not exclusively limited to qualified moralists. The reason: expertise and competence are more than the training of Catholic ethicists , which is strongly dogmatic and intellectual, and academic.

The diversity of situations, i.e., subjective and objective circumstances, is the rule here. An ordinary person, for example an industrial worker who has no scholastic education, can, if necessary, be a skilled and competent person in his situation. Everything revolves around the question: “What exactly constitutes skill and competence?” “Is this to be found exclusively among Catholic moralists?” It is the exclusivity that is questionable.

The correct relationship between the two (exclusive and inclusive) viewpoints. – These are not so irreconcilable. Insofar as Catholic existential theologians and moralists, respectively, adhere purely to situational ethics, going no further than each for themselves in their individual and concrete situation, they remain somewhat within the elitist interpretation, which limits expertise to the select group or elite of Catholic moralists who possess

universal (and thus dogmatic) validity if they purely advocate the official doctrine, and situational validity only if they deviate. However, the situational existentialists extend the principle of permitted deviation to every human being in a given situation.

**Note:** Something different is the frontal stance taken that simply establishes an anti-dogma, namely one that, instead of granting every individual the right to deviation for their specific situation, grants every individual general or universal validity. For example, one posits that contraception or abortion is permitted in principle—that is, everywhere and at all times (absolutely)—and as such ought even to be included in legislation. By doing so, one unequivocally stands outside the Church as the valid interpreter of the divine law, which considers the life of a child as an absolute value.

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