

CHAPTER 1

CAN WE HANDLE THE TRUTH?

BEFORE STARTING THIS CHAPTER

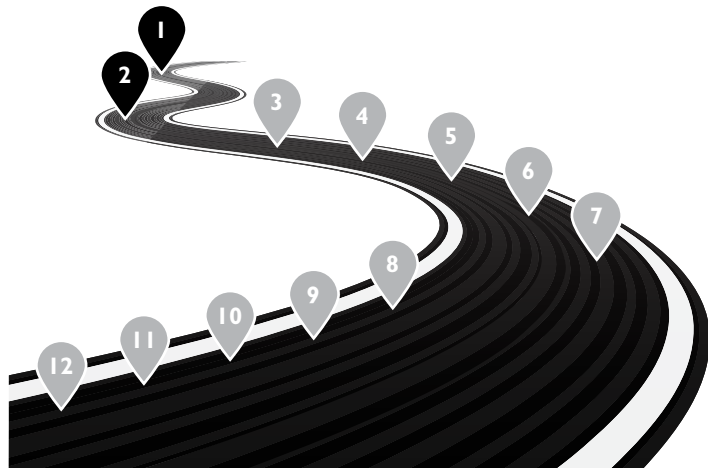
- Read chapter 1 of *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist* (IDHEF), pages 35–50.

ROAD MAP OF THE “TWELVE POINTS THAT PROVE CHRISTIANITY IS TRUE”

This chapter covers the following points:

1 Truth about reality is knowable.

2 The opposite of true is false.



KEY TOPICS

After completing this chapter, you should be able to:

- Explain why knowing the truth is important.
- Define *truth*.
- List seven truths about truth.
- Recognize self-defeating statements.
- Describe the Road Runner tactic and explain how to expose self-defeating statements with it.
- Answer the question *Can all religions be true?* and defend your answer.

KEY TERMS

Write the definitions for these words found in your reading:

Absolute

Self-defeating statement

Skeptic

Pluralism

Tolerance (give both the original and modern definitions)

Truth (give all three definitions from pages 36–37)

QUESTIONS THAT GRAB YOUR MIND

Humans are truth seekers, but sometimes truth can be hard to find. People spend thousands of hours in courtrooms every year trying to uncover the truth. We listen to TV and radio advertisements, read articles on the Internet, and hear government leaders telling us that what they are saying is the truth. All too often we find out later that what we saw, heard, or read was not really the truth at all.

So why is truth so important to people? Why do we seek out mechanics and computer

technicians we can trust? Why do we hate hearing lies from politicians? Why do we want our doctors to tell us the truth about our health, or our pharmacists to be truthful about the side effects of our medications? Why do we expect the bank to tell us the truth about our money? Why do we want our family and friends to be truthful with us? It's because knowing what is true and what is false impacts every area of our lives!

Unfortunately, while people say they want to know the truth about their health and money, they often deny or suppress the truth about morality and religion—issues that call them to change their behavior. Augustine said, “We love the truth when it enlightens us, but we hate it when it convicts us.” The apostle Paul makes this point in Romans 1:18–32, especially when he writes “men suppress the truth by their wickedness.” In other words, people suppress the truth so that they can feel free to do what they want.

So while people are truth seekers, we are often also truth suppressors as well. Are you a truth seeker or a truth suppressor? Do you *really* want to know the truth? Can you handle it?

1. Can you think of any areas in your life where you aren't as careful as you should be about discovering the truth? Explain.

2. Why is it dangerous to live your life based on half-truths or unverified assumptions?

SO WHAT?

Finding the answers to the biggest questions in life depends on knowing the truth: *Where did we come from? How did this universe and everything in it get here? What happens when our lives on earth are over?* If you have wrong ideas about truth, then you have wrong ideas about life too. If you live your life based on faulty ideas or assumptions, then you can seriously hurt yourself and others. That's because there really are moral standards and laws in the universe which, if broken, have harmful or even fatal consequences. Such truths are absolute—that is, unchanging throughout history—and knowable. These moral standards are not dependent on our opinions, feelings, or preferences.

So knowing the truth is important to us. However, some people are quick to say there is no real truth when it comes to areas of life such as morals or religion. We do this at our own peril.



Painting of Augustus: Botticelli

One of the most influential thinkers of the Middle Ages, Augustine was a philosopher and teacher whose ideas bridged the gap between the classical age and the medieval age and had a significant impact on the theology of the church.

Born in AD 354, Augustine grew up in a Roman colony in what is now Algeria in Northern Africa, speaking Latin as his native tongue. Although his father was a pagan, Augustine's mother, Monica, was a devout Christian who had a profound influence on Augustine. At the age of sixteen, Augustine was sent away to school in Carthage where

he got his first taste of worldly life and was exposed to a wide variety of intellectual positions.

Augustine most wanted to learn why evil existed in the world. If God created all things, did He create evil too? Drawn to a sect that declared that evil was the result of an eternal battle between Light and Dark,

Augustine eventually grew disenchanted with the sect's leaders, who were unable to answer his questions satisfactorily. He then became interested in skepticism, reasoning that maybe he couldn't find the answers because they simply didn't exist.

Augustine traveled to Rome to start a school of rhetoric, or philosophical reasoning, but was disappointed by his students' lack of desire to learn. At the age of thirty, he accepted the post of professor of philosophy in Milan, a highly prestigious position. Through the influence of the Bishop of Milan, with whom he became friends, Augustine began to see that only Christianity could truly answer his questions.

He officially converted to the Christian faith in AD 386 after reading a passage in Romans where Paul urges his listeners to stop paying attention to the things of the world and focus on Christ (Romans 13:13–14). Augustine gave up his prestigious post and returned home to Africa. He sold the majority of his possessions, keeping only his family home for use as a monastery. He was ordained a priest in AD 391 and four years later was named Bishop of Hippo.

For the next thirty-five years, Augustine studied, preached, and wrote about philosophy and theology. He ultimately recognized that although God created all things, He did not create evil because evil is not a thing—it is a lack or privation in a thing. In other words, evil exists only as a parasite to good. (To use a modern example, evil is like rust in a car—if you take all the rust out of the car, you have a better car. If you take all the car out of the rust, you are left with nothing.)

Now considered one of the greatest theologians of all time, Augustine made it his mission to counteract the teachings of heretical sects such as Pelagianism, which claimed that humans are born without a sin nature. He wrote numerous books, more than a hundred of which survive today, including the classics *The Confessions of St. Augustine* and *The City of God*.

3. Why is it important to know truth?

4. Why do many people demand absolute truth in every area of their lives except religion and morality?



BOOK

FACTS IN THIS CHAPTER

Every day, decisions are made in the courtroom, the government, and in our own lives, and these decisions rely on knowing what is true. Unfortunately, many people think truth is flexible, like rubber, able to be twisted into any definition they see fit so they can accomplish their personal goals. But truth is absolute, exclusive, and knowable—as hard to bend or wish away as a steel beam holding up a skyscraper. As we will see, to deny absolute truth is self-defeating. And our ability to function as individuals, businesses, or governments depends on knowing and acknowledging absolute truth.

In chapter 1 of the book, Geisler and Turek talked about how we can know truth, pointing out that truth is not dependent on our feelings or preferences, and that statements denying that truth can be known are self-defeating. Once you realize this, it is easy to expose self-defeating statements using what the authors call the Road Runner tactic. Just like the Road Runner would make the ground disappear from under



his nemesis, Wile E. Coyote, you can make the ground disappear from under the statements of relativists you talk with. As we'll see below, you can show them that many of their beliefs and statements are groundless because they are self-defeating and therefore cannot be true.

5. List seven truths about truth and explain why each is important (see IDHEF, pages 37–38).

6. What do the authors mean when they say, “Contrary beliefs are possible, but contrary truths are not possible”? (See IDHEF, page 38.)

7. Discuss one or two real-life situations where false ideas about truth can lead to false ideas about life.

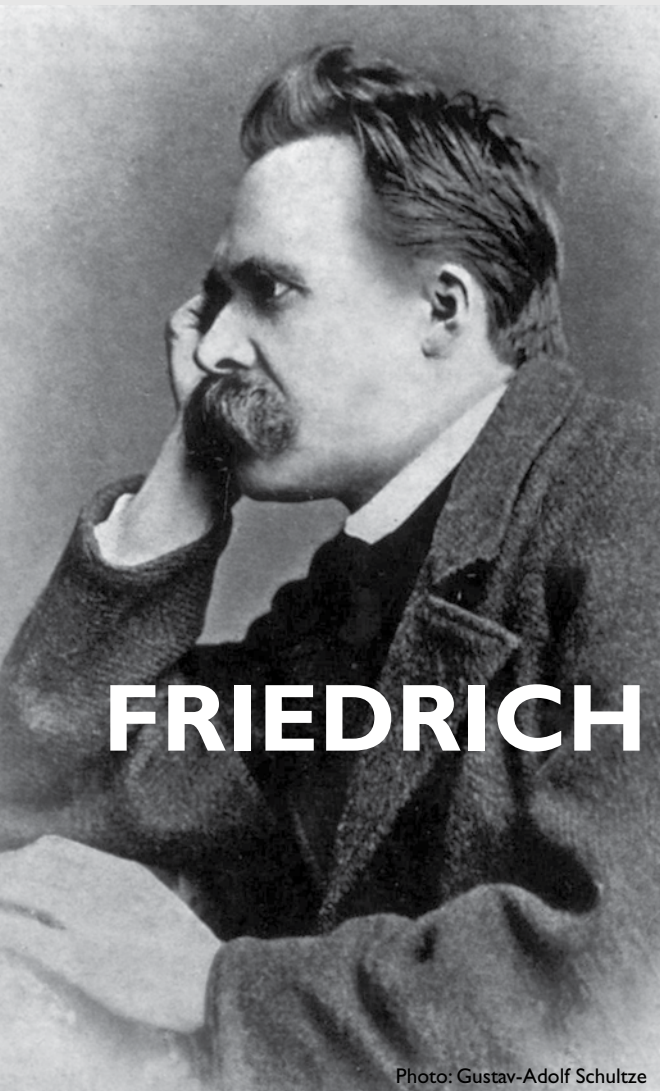


Photo: Gustav-Adolf Schultze

German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) was born near Leipzig in what was then Prussia. His father, a Lutheran minister, died when Friedrich was only five years old. His two-year-old brother died just six months later. Though he himself was prone to illnesses, especially headaches, Friedrich was accepted into a prestigious boarding school at age fourteen because of his prodigious aptitude for music and languages. There he was trained in classical Greek and Latin and philology, an area of study that included Greek and Roman history, philosophy, and literature.

When he was twenty, Nietzsche entered the University of Bonn to study theology and philology. But he soon renounced the Christian faith of his youth, having become more interested in the new philosophies he came into contact with at

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

college. He was particularly taken with the writings of Arthur Schopenhauer, a German philosopher whose atheistic and turbulent vision of the world—and his highest praise of music as an art form—captivated Nietzsche. After graduation, Nietzsche entered military service and was assigned to an equestrian field artillery regiment. But he suffered

TRUTH IS NOT RELATIVE: THE ROAD RUNNER TACTIC IN ACTION

All truths are absolute truths. Even truths about preferences—such as “John likes chocolate better than vanilla”—are absolutely true when referring to the person with the preference. It’s absolutely true for all persons, at all times, in all places, that when referring to John, he prefers chocolate over vanilla right now. That’s absolutely true.

To say that truth is relative is self-defeating. In other words, the statement doesn’t meet its own standard. If all truth is relative, then that statement should be relative as well, but it is absolute instead—which contradicts the point the person making the statement is trying to make! Why should any thinking person take such statements seriously?

It’s important that you know how to point out self-defeating statements like these, because often people don’t even realize they’re making the kinds of statements that contradict the rules of logical thought. The key is to apply every statement to itself to see if it meets its own standard. Those that don’t are self-defeating and thus false. You can expose these false claims by turning the claim on itself. The authors call this the Road Runner tactic.

a serious chest injury while attempting to leap-mount into the saddle, and he was placed on sick leave. Nietzsche then accepted a position as professor of philology at the University of Basel where he would teach for ten years. During this time, he became close friends with composer Richard Wagner, who acted as a friend and father to Nietzsche.

In 1870, Nietzsche served for three months as a hospital attendant during the Franco-Prussian war. His experiences of war, coupled with his intellectual pessimism, led him to publish his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in 1872. The book was not well received, but Nietzsche continued to write, publishing a series of four major essays critiquing German culture.

By 1879, his health had worsened, forcing Nietzsche to resign his post at the university. Seeking a climate that would improve his health, Nietzsche gave up his German citizenship and toured Europe, never residing in any place longer than several months at a time. Nietzsche found himself losing friends, including Wagner, and quarrelling with his family. Nevertheless, he was productive, completing ten books in almost as many years, including *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and *Beyond Good and Evil*, in which he advocated tearing down the Christian morality and biblical authority that supported so many European cultures. None of his titles sold particularly well, and Nietzsche found he couldn’t return to teaching because most universities thought his ideas too subversive.

Nietzsche’s rejection of Christianity seemed more volitional than rational. He once wrote, “If one were to prove this God of the Christians to us, we should believe Him all the less.”

In January 1889, Nietzsche suffered a mental breakdown and spent the next few years in mental hospitals before returning to his childhood home under his mother’s care. When his mother died a few years later, Nietzsche’s sister Elisabeth became his nurse as well as his editor. Nietzsche died in August 1900. It was not until nearly a generation after his death that Nietzsche’s ideas became popular with a society reeling from two world wars.

Today he is considered one of the nineteenth century’s most influential philosophers. Ironically, Nietzsche predicted that the loss of belief in God would lead to the twentieth century’s being the bloodiest in history. He was right.

Claim: There is no truth!

RR tactic: Is that true?

Claim: All truth is relative!

RR tactic: Is that a relative truth?

Once you know the Road Runner tactic, you can refute many false claims against Christianity. For example, a skeptic might say, “That’s true for you but not for me.” A Christian using the Road Runner tactic might answer, “Is that statement true for everyone?” The Christian could also use real-life examples to show why the claim is absurd. “If you went to withdraw \$5,000 from your bank account, knowing you only had \$50 in it, would the teller hand over the five grand if you told her that the \$50 balance was only true for her but not for you?”

8. What makes a statement self-defeating?

9. List some of the self-defeating statements used as examples in chapter 1 of the book. How would you respond to them?

WHY CAN'T ALL RELIGIONS BE TRUE?

When it comes to identifying and applying truth, one of the areas where people are most sensitive is religion. We all take our personal beliefs very seriously, even if we don't have any evidence to back them up!

It's common in today's culture for people to claim that "all religions are true." This is sometimes called "pluralism." You may have even heard someone say, "It doesn't matter what you believe, just as long as you believe." Unfortunately, most people don't realize that world religions contradict one another's beliefs more often than they profess similar ones. Even those religions that share basic moral concepts disagree on other major issues such as the nature of God, the nature of man, sin, salvation, heaven, hell and creation. Because of these mutually exclusive beliefs, it is impossible for all religions to be true.



10. Explain what you would say to someone who claimed:

a. "All religions teach basically the same things."

b. "You shouldn't judge me."

c. “You shouldn’t force your beliefs on other people.”



LOOK

YOU DO THE DIGGING

Even though relativism is popular in our culture, truth remains absolute. Take mathematics, for example. Mathematical truths are the same no matter what country or culture you live in. Some people perceive truth differently, just as some people get their math sums wrong, but the truth remains the same. Contrary *beliefs* are possible (since believing something doesn’t make it true or false), but contrary *truths* are not. And if something is true, then anything that contradicts it must be false.

Truth is the correspondence between belief and reality. If merely believing in something made it true, then the pluralists would be right and Christians would have to accept the views of atheists, Muslims, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and other belief systems as true, too. But sincerity is not the same as truth. Mormons, for example, are sincere in their belief that the *Book of Mormon* is another testament of Jesus Christ. But they cannot produce anywhere near the same level of historical authentication that exists proving the reliability of the New Testament. (Upcoming chapters will talk about the historical proof for the New Testament.) The reality is that the New Testament is the only true testament of Jesus Christ. Just because a Mormon believes with all his heart that the *Book of Mormon* was given to them by God doesn’t mean that it was.

As we have seen in this chapter, not all religions can be true. Although pluralists claim that all religions are true, the fact is that since mutually exclusive principles cannot all be true, so it doesn’t make any sense to pretend that all religions teach the same things. Contrary to popular opinion, all truth claims are absolute, exclusive, and knowable, even those about religion.

Now it’s time to for you to do some digging on your own. Pick at least one of the following assignments and complete it before moving on in the workbook.

Assignment 1: Give at least two examples of people who have chosen not to believe the truth in order to accomplish their personal goals or pursue their desires.

Assignment 2: Look for self-defeating statements in the media or on the Internet. Choose at least three examples and write a report on each using the following parameters:

- Describe the situation or circumstance the person used to justify his or her self-defeating viewpoint.
- Quote the statement (or describe the action) used.
- Describe the reaction to the statement. Did anyone point out a problem, or did listeners just nod and accept the self-defeating statement as truth?
- Briefly explain how the Road Runner tactic could have been applied in this situation and how it might have changed the person's argument.

Assignment 3: Conduct a brief study about the differences between the three major theistic religions—Christianity, Islam, and Judaism—then write a one-page report on each religion and its beliefs. Use the chart on the next page to compare their teachings on the following topics:

- Jesus (Who was He?)
- Sin (What defines sin?)
- Salvation (How can we be saved?)
- Heaven (What happens when we die?)
- Hell (What is the punishment for sin?)
- Creation (How did the universe come to be?)



	CHRISTIANITY	ISLAM	JUDAISM
JESUS			
SIN			
SALVATION			
HEAVEN			
HELL			
CREATION			



TOOK

WHAT DO I DO NOW?

This chapter is extremely important because the material will help you to establish a critical baseline not only for how you live, but also for how well you will understand and absorb the principles covered in the rest of this course. Without a foundation of truth, there is nothing to talk about—if nothing can be discovered, nothing can be decided.

Getting people thinking about truth—if it exists, if it is understandable, if it applies to all people everywhere—opens them up to new possibilities concerning God, what He expects from us, and how we should live our lives.

THINKING ABOUT WHAT YOU LEARNED

Answer the following questions to sum up what you have learned in this chapter.

A. Why can it be dangerous to pretend that all religious beliefs are true?

B. Why are pluralists just as exclusive as those they accuse of being narrow-minded?

C. People often say, "All religions teach basically the same things." Explain why that is not true.

D. What is the Elephant Parable and how can you answer it?

E. Would most pluralists agree that all religious beliefs are equal, even those that support violence or harm children? Why or why not?

DON'T FORGET!

As you challenge people to really think about the truth behind their morals, personal beliefs, and values, you will get mixed responses. People want to do what they want to do, and they often view truth as a restriction stopping them from having fun. Sometimes you will need to challenge people gently. Other times you may have to be more direct, though always speaking the truth in love. Jesus boldly confronted the religious and political leaders of His day (see Matthew 23). Using the right approach for each situation and person can greatly increase your success and may open doors for future opportunities to speak with them.

Pluralism is all around us. It permeates television, movies, newspapers, and the Internet. You will need to be ready to recognize pluralism and relativism and defend the truth. People who have been bombarded with “untruth” tend to accept and believe what they hear without thinking it through. You are God’s ambassador. Your job is to be equipped with good answers and to guide people to Jesus Christ, the only truth that can set them free from their bondage to sin and death.