

## The Most Comprehensive Truth Available to Living Humans

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**Abstract:** Human beings by their very nature make judgments of “true”, “false” and “hypothetical” with reference to the various aspects and sectors of existence. Great numbers of these judgments conflict or contradict each other, with no possibility in sight whereby such discordance can be resolved. In view of this situation, the one most comprehensive truth accessible to humans is simply the inclusive, overarching metajudgment that all differential judgments have indeed been made. The conscious perception of this metajudgment marks in theoretical terms the determinate limit of the indeterminate extent of human knowledge of the total fabric of objective reality. [*Life Science Journal*. 2006;3(2):66 – 72] (ISSN: 1097 – 8135).

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One of the fundamental activities of living higher organisms, most profoundly in the case of human beings, is their inherent proclivity for making judgments of “true”, “false”, or “hypothetical” with reference both to themselves and to other sectors and aspects of existence. Within this framework the present paper will undertake to identify the single most comprehensive truth accessible to humans.

The reader may smile at the folly of attempting to cope with a topic of such magnitude. The ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuang Zi observed that life is limited, while knowledge (needed to perceive ultimate truth) is unlimited, so using the limited time of one’s life to chase after unlimited knowledge (needed to perceive ultimate truth) is dangerous. Nonetheless, both Eastern and Western thinkers have continuously and tirelessly pondered the intriguing question of ultimate truth, and many persons continue to wonder how close humans can come to grasping one grand inclusive truth deriving from our own judging activity, and we feel the question still deserves the attempt to supply an answer. One possibility that might occur to anyone who considers the matter is that the apprehension by individuals of one maximally comprehensive truth would first require their mastery of the various established fields of learning. However, this approach is seen on the least reflection to be infeasible, for no person can assimilate during one lifetime the enormous range of specialized information now

available-in the fields, say, of astrophysics, South Asian history, the etymology of African languages, electrical engineering, and a vast array of others. Moreover, even if such an assimilation by one person were possible, there is no warrant for supposing that accomplishment would yield one consolidated comprehensive truth rather than a vast clutter of findings. Nor can we suppose that experts from the many different fields of learning, assembled for the purpose of coalescing their widely separate esoteric findings into one grand coherent truth, would fare any better. In the following discussion, then, we will take a more promising approach to disclosing the one maximally comprehensive truth actually obtainable by living humans.

We would like first to recall the common assumption of a basic dichotomy in existence in terms of “what has happened in the past” and “what happens in the present”. On close examination this distinction appears to be of little consequence, for any division between past and present shrinks to the vanishing point; on a strict view what happened some indefinitely divisible fraction of a second ago is as much a part of the past as what happened a billion years ago or an infinite time ago. Thus the past has included everything that has occurred up to the ever-receding present moment; but that moment is so abidingly elusive that it is not incredible to maintain that the past includes virtually all occurrence through all time. This is the meaning we have attached to the term “past” in the following discus-

sion.

More specifically, we conceive of the past as fundamentally twofold in character: thus the "past-as-actuality" comprising what has occurred, may be contrasted with the "past-as-understanding" comprising what has been apprehended through the agency of human judgment about that occurrence (Gottschalk, 1958). Or more precisely, since human judgments have themselves occurred, the past-as-actuality may be taken to include all that has occurred exclusive of such judgments. Moreover, due to an inherent characteristic of the human disposition for rendering judgments, the latter have been made on the differential basis of "true", "false", and "hypothetical". The past-as-actuality has been neither true, nor false, nor hypothetical; it has been, simply, "there"; truth, falsehood, and the quality of being hypothetical are exclusively properties of the human understanding of that actuality. Judgments of the past-as-understanding which to the satisfaction of certain persons have corresponded closely with given sectors of actuality in some sense of identifying, describing, or explaining them, have constituted for those persons particular truths. Judgments which to the satisfaction of given persons have not so corresponded, have constituted for those same persons particular falsehoods, while judgments concerning which, to the satisfaction of given persons the degree of correspondence has been uncertain, have for those persons constituted hypotheses. (We use the term "hypothesis" less in the technical scientific sense of an inference drawn from accumulated data in order tentatively to explain a general principle of nature, life, or society, than in the wider sense of any judgment regarded as being inconclusively true or false.)

The past-as-understanding in the broad sense here intended comprises judgments relating to the many sectors or aspects of actuality, and includes the judgments of everyday experience, as well as, on a more formal basis, the judgments of the natural and social sciences, the various technologies, philosophy, theology, etc. Thus the past-as-understanding has reference not only to judgments issuing from those disciplines of inquiry that provide knowledge in a positivistic sense, but also judgments of intuition and faith. From the vantage point of maximal generality judgments of "knowledge" and judgments of "faith" deserve equally the designations of true, false, or hypothetical; at this level of generality distinctions in kind between judgments relate simply to the sense of conclusiveness, whether as to truth or falsity, or to the sense of hypothetical possibility, involved in given judgments.

The past-as-understanding also includes the judgments of the field of learning known as "history". It might seem on first consideration that the latter subsumes the former. However, history as a discrete discipline of inquiry, the research methods of which constitute historiography, yields specialized judgments concerning political, social, economic, military, and other particular aspects of the past-as-actuality, and is thus simply one among other components of the past-as-understanding.

The pursuit of the past-as-understanding on the differential basis of true, false, and hypothetical judgments has often led to controversy; frequently different persons of equally good intention have rendered incompatible judgments in reference to the same sectors of actuality. Disagreements have been less extensive in some areas of understanding than others. For example, some judgments within the area of physical science (say with regard to the atomic weights within the periodic table of the chemical elements) or within the area of political history (say with regard to lines of succession within particular ruling dynasties) have enjoyed virtually universal concurrence among interested parties. At levels of greater complexity within such fields, however, judgments have differed from one interested party to another (say in reference to the evolution of the physical universe, or to the causal configuration of major political episodes).

Within other areas of understanding, notably philosophy and theology, disagreement has remained widespread and stubborn (Hopfe, 1983; Levi, 1949). On the one hand, there has not been general agreement among people concerning the possible means to be employed in making judgments which correspond with actuality, or concerning the degree to which the filter of humans' own perceiving apparatus, or their proclivities for symbol formation (use of language), may distort such correspondence. In other words, in the exercise of judgment with reference to the nature of that part of actuality that is their own judging capacity, people have not achieved universal accord. Different persons have reached different conclusions in regard to the authenticity and efficacy of modes of judgment known as "empirical", "rational", "intuitive", and "mystical". Nor has there been general agreement concerning the essential nature or varieties of the perceived actuality itself. Different persons have been variously persuaded that their judgments have corresponded with sectors of actuality known as the "material", the "mental", the "conscious", the "subconscious", the "metaphysical" or the "divine". The past-as-understanding has been rich in disparate judgments concerning these matters,

without there having been discovered any criterion by appeal to which the differences could be resolved to the satisfaction of all concerned.

The opposition between some judgments of the past-as-understanding has been direct and complete, as in the case of the judgments "There is a god" and "There is no god". In other cases the contradiction has been partial, yet significant, for example between judgments both of which maintain there is some divine actuality, but one of which asserts polytheism, the other monotheism; or, granting the latter, one judgment which asserts pantheism, the other transcendence; or, granting the latter, one judgment which asserts providentialism, the other deism.

We submit that the past-as-understanding, as constituting a record of often discrepant and irreconcilable judgments, suggests that the one judgment which comprehends all others is that all other judgments have been made; that is, the one maximally comprehensive truth apprehensible by all parties to all conflicts of understanding consists in the recognition that there have been differential and often conflicting judgments rendered during the past. This concept is apprehensible, we should think, by any person who pauses to consider that his or her own judgments have in some cases been incurably at odds with the judgments of other persons in reference to the same reputed sectors of actuality – or who considers the extensive public record (to be confirmed in any library) of similar disagreements on the part of others – but who nonetheless yearns for some over-arching truth which accommodates all human judgments. The one maximally comprehensive truth as here conceived derives, then, not from the synthetic grasp in substantive terms of the judgments of all fields of learning, something which, as noted previously, is impossible of attainment. Rather the one maximally comprehensive truth is a "second order truth". While the less comprehensive judgments of the past-as-understanding have direct reference to given sectors of actuality, the one maximally comprehensive truth derives from a metajudgment in reference to the occurrence of those other judgments, and stands thus at a second remove from actuality.

The making of judgments on the differential basis of true and false involves the ancient Chinese principle of "*yin* and *yang*"; any judgments whatever that are asserted as "true" can have any significant meaning only in conjunction with the awareness that various other judgments are asserted as "false". If all judgments rendered by humans were automatically conceived of as true, such truth would be pointless. Thus the concept of one maxi-

mally comprehensive truth has been arrived at not only through recognizing that other judgments have been rendered, but just as crucially through ascertaining (on the basis of some degree of substantive understanding and through logical discernment) that those other judgments have been differential; that is, some of the other judgments have been true in contrast to some that have been false. And it follows that the rendering of judgments on the differential basis of true and false must hold as well for rendering the metajudgment of one comprehensive truth. On the metajudgmental level the judgment which contradicts the judgment of one maximally comprehensive truth is a form of solipsistic argument to the effect that no judgments whatever have been made beyond the consciousness of the individual offering the latter argument, a view which thoroughly violates our own intuition, and which we thereby judge to be false; and thus I hold the metajudgment of one maximally comprehensive truth to be itself differentially true.

The one maximally comprehensive truth is confirmed through the consideration that the past-as-understanding has ever been an expanding process. For example, humans did not discover and make judgments in reference to bacteria until the nineteenth century, or to viruses until the twentieth century – and so on in a vast number of equivalent cases. Moreover, while this ongoing process inspires of itself no anticipation that it will cease, it implies that human understanding has always remained limited to an indeterminate degree, in that humans have not been able at any point in the past to realize with what portion of the total fabric of actuality, from microcosm to macrocosm, their accumulated judgments have at that point corresponded. In other words, at all successive points in the past existence of humans their judgments have been, in substantive terms, collectively incomplete. But in that case the one complete (maximally comprehensive) truth available at any one of those successive points has resided in the metajudgment that a set of collectively incomplete other judgments has up to that point been rendered.

Some of the judgments subsumed within the one maximally comprehensive truth are of course both more comprehensive in their scope, as well as being more universally acknowledged as true, than are others. For example, within the area of scientific understanding the Principle of Conservation of Energy (the judgment that material energy as encountered by humans in the world can be neither created nor destroyed, but only converted from one form into another, while the total amount of energy remains constant) is both regarded as true by virtu-

ally all interested parties, and is universally applicable in its reference to actuality. Yet the Principle of Conservation of Energy (like many other comparable scientific judgments) is far from approaching the status of a maximally comprehensive truth, for it incorporates no judgments from many areas of profound and intimate concern to humans.

At the same time, among judgments that are relevant to such concerns, including those from the sectors of metaphysics and theology that purport to disclose, in terms even more comprehensive than scientific findings, the fundamental wherewithal or underlying dynamics of all actuality, are typically beset with abiding problems of mutual contradiction. For instance, what the universe cannot have been designed and determined is its operation by a transcendent Prime Mover, who has been perfect from all eternity, in the usual Christian sense, and at the same time be a universe which is coterminous with a dialectically evolving god in quest of its own identity, in the Hegelian sense. As contradictory world-formulae these judgments cannot alike be true, except as they are equally components of the one maximally comprehensive truth. At the same time the judgment, stemming from the philosophy of logical empiricism, that such formulae (being neither logical tautologies nor empirically verifiable) can be neither true nor false, nor even genuinely hypothetical, but only nonsensical (Ayer, 1952, 1991) is in the larger perspective of the one maximally comprehensive truth only one more contradictory judgment beside others (beside judgments which deny that supraempirical formulae are nonsensical).

As a further illustration of the concept of one maximally comprehensive truth, consider the sector of the past-as-understanding known as logic. Broadly speaking, work within the field of logic may be conceived of as an instance of humans standing over and against the actuality of themselves and attempting to understand themselves – to understand, in this case, the mechanism of that aspect of their judging capacity known as rational. More specifically, logic involves the establishment on an abstract level of the inferences of truth or falsity that certain kinds of judgments have for others. For example, within the sphere of deductive logic, premises of the type “All a is b” and “Some a is c”, when taken together infer unavoidably the truth of the conclusion “Some c is b”. As another example, the principle of contradiction (which is the essential factor at the core of the system of human differential judgments) can be expressed in the terse fashion of formal logic as “No sentence of the form ‘p and not p’ is true.”

But while the specific findings of logic (an extensive and intricate array of findings far in excess of the simple examples given above) have been widely agreed upon by interested parties, if one presses for an answer as to what the deeper grounds of logical understanding are (Why do logicians think the way they do in arriving at their abstract principles?), one encounters a range of disagreement reminiscent of other sectors of the past-as-understanding. Some logicians have judged that logical understanding is empirically derived, that it reflects our experience in the world, that it echoes our consistent past observations of how the world actually works. Other logicians have judged that logical understanding, while indeed accurately reflecting the operation of the empirical world, is nonetheless derived on an *a priori* basis; it is an understanding purely rational or introspective in origin, which yet informs us about the nature of the external world. Still other logicians have maintained that logical understanding is a reflection of how the human mind itself compulsively functions; humans make the logical distinctions they do as a result of their minds being so constituted that they can make no other kinds of distinctions (this interpretation tends to transform philosophical logic into a branch of scientific psychology). Yet other logicians have concluded that logical understanding, rather than reflecting the necessary operations of human minds, or rather than being informative about further reaches of actuality, is based on verbal custom; logical insights are arbitrary conventions arising from the growth of language, and simply reflect the habitual meanings which humans have for convenience attached to words such as “and”, “or”, “all”, “some” and “not” together with their syntactical relations (Barker, 1965).

Thus it appears that whatever the ground of logical understanding may be, the exercise of that understanding discloses that the several judgments concerning its basis are themselves mutually contradictory; they are judgments concerning which there are no available means of achieving a resolution irresistibly persuasive to all interested parties. We submit, however, that what must be persuasive to all interested parties is the occurrence of the debate among logicians in the exercise of their rival judgments. And the various sides to this debate, as well as to those of other debates from other areas of understanding, form components of the one maximally comprehensive truth to the effect that all such debates have occurred.

Questions of logic aside, within the past-as-understanding various judgments have been offered concerning the general type of judgments that de-

serve in turn the designation of "true" (such theories of truth being themselves, thus, metajudgments of a sort). The particular concept of truth that we ourselves find persuasive, as suggested by the foregoing discussion, is the "correspondence theory" according to which judgments are true if they agree with or parallel certain sectors or aspects of actuality. By contrast, the "coherence theory" of truth maintains that it is only judgments which are *consistent* with some wider system of judgments which deserve to be called true; such a system, within which particular constituent judgments imply the others, may be a broad metaphysical or theological scheme, or it may be the accumulated judgments of empirical science, or it may be a "definitional" system as in the case of pure logic (assuming that the ground of logical understanding is linguistic rather than empirical). On the other hand, the pragmatic theory of truth (in the one version of William James) holds that only those judgments which prove in the ongoing experience of humans to be satisfying deserve the designation of "true"; if a judgment is discovered to be personally or socially rewarding or useful in its consequences then it is true (James, 1988).

The circumstance that contradictory theories of truth have been advanced, and that we have admittedly derived the concept of one maximally comprehensive truth in part from one of these theories rather than another, does not, however, threaten the validity of the concept. For whatever rival judgments might be advanced by way of challenging an assumption from which the one maximally comprehensive truth has been derived are paradoxically embraced by the very truth they seek to challenge – the truth, namely, that all contradictory but less comprehensive judgments than itself have been rendered. Concerning the example in hand, insofar as rival theories of truth are themselves metajudgments, the one maximally comprehensive truth is a meta-metajudgment in reference to their occurrence.

The concept of one maximally comprehensive truth also derives in part from a certain view of time. As with other questions about the fundamental nature of existence, the question of time has engendered a long (and in this case especially tangled) record of contradictory judgments. The views of many persons have constituted some variation of one of the following notions. Some persons have inclined to the view that time is a self-subsistent entity or process "within" which substances change or move. Others have held that time has no existence apart from the motions which substances undergo, and is a construct devised by humans out of their

perceptions of those motions. Still other persons have maintained that time is purely intuitive, or *a priori*, constituting one of the means whereby human beings impart order to their own experience. In the view of relativity physics time is one integral dimension of an empirically verifiable space-time continuum (Gale, 1967).

For our own part we accept the truth of the latter judgment, which I believe is consonant with statements made above to the effect that events have occurred in the past and that human judgments about those events have in the past been made. Relativity physics calls into question the concept of absolute time, through demonstrating that the temporal interval between events, or the simultaneity of different events, varies according to the spatial locations of different observers (such is the case, that is, at a "deeper" level of reality than can be perceived, or that need be considered, in the practical affairs of everyday life) (Barnett, 1950). But even relativity physics acknowledges an "absolute earlier" and an "absolute later"; for example, Einstein lived during an interval of time absolutely later than the interval during which Newton lived; any mother is born at a point in time absolutely earlier than the point at which her own child is born, and so on. And this concept is sufficient to support the one maximally comprehensive truth, which may be stated as follows: it is true that within a space-time continuum contradictory judgments in reference to time have been rendered, some of them absolutely earlier, or absolutely later than others (and for all practical purposes many of them concurrently). But while we thus utilize a particular judgment of the past-as-understanding in deriving the concept of one maximally comprehensive truth, the latter exceeds the particular judgment in question in the sense of also incorporating within its metajudgmental reach the occurrence of any or all contradictory judgments concerning the nature of time.

We further submit that what is commonly referred to as the "future" has for living humans no reality status apart from anticipations made up to and including the ever-receding present moment; there is no "future-as-actuality". Given anticipations have been, in the view of different persons, true, false, or hypothetical, as have been the later confirmations or revisions of those same anticipations, while all anticipatory judgments and their subsequent confirmations or revisions are subsumed within the one maximally comprehensive truth.

As mentioned above, there are no contradictions in the past-as-actuality – or, as some people might prefer to say, in "objective reality" – which

contains or exhibits no truth or falsehood, but simply exists; it is simply "there". Truth, falsehood, and the quality of being hypothetical are products solely of the human assessment of given aspects of the past-as-actuality, and the frequent conflicts within those differential judgments result from the limitations and imperfections of the finite human judging capacity. But while the one maximally comprehensive truth subsumes all differential judgments within the past-as-understanding, even the one maximally comprehensive truth is not *totally* comprehensive, because, as noted previously, that truth acquires the status of being itself differentially true only through reference to a contradictory metajudgment which it does not subsume. The one maximally comprehensive truth is only the *most* comprehensive truth available to finite human understanding. Hence, it might seem on first consideration that living humans could possess totally comprehensive truth only if they were omniscient. Yet, such an omniscient total truth, being in its own character completely non-contradictory, that is non-differential, could ironically be neither true nor false in the sense unavoidably employed by beings of merely finite understanding.

But if some of the judgments which are subsumed by the one maximally comprehensive truth, namely those of religious convictions, assert a correspondence with the actuality of one or another omniscient god, need such judgments vitiate for persons who make them the validity of the one maximally comprehensive truth? We think not, for the believers in an omniscient god do not claim that their own understanding is equal to that of god, but only that they apprehend some portion of god's understanding (say, for example, god's intentions toward humans). In other words, such human beliefs remain finite (and, taking into account all persons who hold such beliefs, often contradictory) judgments in reference to limited aspects of putative divine actuality, while only an omniscient being him/her/itself could know to what degree such human judgments approach omniscience. Thus the one maximally comprehensive truth accessible to any given sectarian group of living religious believers, at the level of their unavoidably finite understanding, is that they, in company with other groups of believers in various conflicting religious doctrines, have made the judgment that there is one or another omniscient god (limited aspects of which they understand). Even the judgment made by some believers that humans can in their post-death experience enter into a communion with an omniscient god whereby they too will attain complete understanding, remains only an anticipatory

judgment made by mortals of finite judging capacity, and thus fails to exceed the bounds of the one maximally comprehensive finite truth available to living humans.

As presented thus far, the concept of one maximally comprehensive truth has had reference to what may be called informative judgments dealing with matters of fact or faith (whether in reference to the realms of the natural or the reputed supernatural levels of existence) as distinct from evaluative judgments dealing with the moral and aesthetic opinions of humans. But with little modification the concept applies as well to the latter types of judgment as to the former. There have been many instances of agreement among humans regarding questions of good and evil, and of beauty and ugliness, but also many cases of dissension; at no time have all humans coincided in their evaluative judgments, with those judgments being made in line with universally persuasive moral and aesthetic criteria (Hammer, 1966; Richter, 1967). There remains, however, the comprehensive informative judgment that all particular moral and aesthetic judgments have been made. One might offer as a maximally comprehensive evaluative judgment the assertion that it is good that all specific evaluative judgments have been exercised (that is, it is good that human beings have been creatures disposed to rendering differential moral and aesthetic judgments), but any meaning which even this evaluative metajudgment might have depends upon its prior assumption of the truth (informative metajudgment) that all evaluative judgments have indeed been made.

Although within the past-as-understanding many of the judgments (informative and evaluative) of given persons have been incompatible with those of other persons, human beings have nonetheless gained their measure of personal equilibrium, and societies have gained their measure of stability, through the circumstance that various judgments have with confidence been subscribed to in common by certain persons during given periods of time. In daily life the factor of mutual reinforcement of judgments by at least some segments of one's fellow human beings, on at least many items of common concern, rescues the human condition from one approximating universal insanity, in which no judgments would be sustained with any more assurance than any others. And certainly the individual who finds the concept of one maximally comprehensive truth to be persuasive will meanwhile have derived his or her own measure of personal equilibrium through accepting in common with at least some other persons the reliability of

certain judgments. There is no incongruity in the acceptance by an individual of various of the component judgments of the past-as-understanding together with the affirmation of the larger perspective of the one maximally comprehensive truth. However, the latter affirmation might be expected to increase for the individual in question the ratio of his or her own differential judgments that are maintained as hypothetical rather than true or false.

Perhaps we can anticipate some of the reservations which readers may have about the concept of one maximally comprehensive truth. Even those persons who may grant its cogency at the level of abstract discourse may perceive that truth, because it consists only of a metajudgment about the occurrence of other judgments, to be at best an empty truth. Such persons may remark that human living requires practical decisions and commitments in arriving at which humans must make specific judgments, but in the making of which judgments a grasp of the one maximally comprehensive truth could be of no help. These persons may further point out that the search for one maximally comprehensive truth seems to imply the desirability or need for one unified overarching truth, whereas the factor of continuing contradictory judgment-making may be the catalyst of creative progress in human understanding, and deserves thus to be encouraged rather than in some sense to be superceded.

We acknowledge the point of such reservations. In daily living we ourselves continually experience, of course, problems which cannot be solved, and satisfactions which can be neither clarified nor enhanced through reference to the one maximally comprehensive truth. Moreover, we place the same premium on creative contradiction as do other people. But meanwhile we find one type of satisfaction (along, surely, with some other persons of similar temperament) in producing a specific formulation of the inclusive reach of truth accessible to mortals. I submit that perception of the one maximally comprehensive truth marks the determinate limit of the indeterminate degree of human understanding; and any concept which identifies that limit cannot be philosophically trivial. Higher orders of living creatures, and most strikingly human

beings, are inherently disposed to render judgments of true, false, and hypothetical; and indeed, the human attainment of prosperity, if not indeed the very survival of the human species, depends upon the skill with which they make those judgments. Meanwhile, perception of the one maximally comprehensive truth discloses, from the vantage point of greatest possible detachment, something fundamental about the total enterprise of human differential judgment-making; to apprehend that truth is to perceive the theoretical limit of human finite understanding.

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