

# The Theologian's Socratic Role in today's Scientific World

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THIS ARTICLE sets out to support theology as a discipline and the role of theologians within the current framework of academia. However, this support does not stem from an assumption of theology's exclusive insights into God's divine knowledge. We will take a detour by looking into the field of aesthetics, truth theories, and the Socratic motif of irony to illustrate theology as a discipline that is well aware of not only its blind spots but also of humanity's blind spots as such. By asking rather than answering profound questions about human existence, theology plays the necessary role of reminding other disciplines in academia of their limits of knowledge.

## WHAT IS TRUTH?

Looking at current politics and public debates and controversies, the idea of truth is profoundly challenged, and quite often the question emerges whether or not truth still matters. This question points at something serious insofar as the idea of truth is not a given or self-evident: Truth is a key motif of human existence, and yet, what counts as truth is highly debatable, as Pontius Pilate knew when he interrogated Jesus Christ (see John 18:38).

In the debates about truth's status as a concept, philosophy developed three truth theories that dominate the philosophical landscape so far. The first theory, the *correspondence theory*, dates back to Aristotle and finds in Thomas

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Aquinas its most prominent and influential promoter:<sup>1</sup> ‘*Veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus.*’<sup>2</sup> It translates that a proposition is true if the (perceived) thing corresponds with the mental representation, *e.g.*, in a sentence. Yet, this theory does not have truth as such in mind; instead, it refers to something as true, like in a true statement.

Secondly, the *coherence theory* can count as a late development of the correspondence theory, since the coherence theory does not refer to one single item as true. Instead, this theory refers to something as true if this item fits without any contradiction into a complete system of true propositions. This system of true propositions can hold an abstract notion of truth as its feature and plays a key role in the philosophy of the Vienna Circle.<sup>3</sup>

Thirdly, the *consensus theory* regards truth as the emerging effect within the performative process of common discussion and subsequent agreement as well as (scientific) acknowledgment. Instead of referring to truth as a timeless concept, Jürgen Habermas points out that he regards claims of truth as valid if their corresponding statements find acknowledging responses in a free manner.<sup>4</sup>

In sum, all three theories share the fundamental assumption that objective, realist access to reality is given to human perception to some degree. As a consequence, in these theories, the concept of truth functions as a means of control over reality insofar as reality is not a realm out of reach of humanity’s capability of understanding and knowledge.

## THE PROBLEM OF PERCEPTION

In his ground-breaking investigation into human perception, Immanuel Kant revealed that an unbiased access to the world’s phenomena never existed. Instead of an objective access to reality, Kant points out that human perception is

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1. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1011b.

2. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 16, a. 2.

3. A connection from Vienna to the English-speaking sphere comes from Alfred Jules Ayer and his elaboration on language and epistemology. See Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Penguin, 1936), p. 168.

4. See Jürgen Habermas, ‘Wahrheitstheorie,’ in *Wirklichkeit und Reflexion*, ed. Helmut Fahrenbach, FS Walter Schulz (Pfullingen: Neske, 1973), pp. 211-265, here at pp. 218-236.

always bound to subjectivity and perspectivity; it cannot sever itself from this somewhat inferior position.<sup>5</sup>

This constellation of a perceived object and subjective perception with its subsequent interpretation should not count as a defeat of human perception in contingency. Instead, we see that through this subjective connection between object and beholder a relation of meaning and existential quality can take place. This matter of relationality and meaning should exceed the idea of truth as an objective means to control reality, as we can see in Dalferth's and Stoellger's reference to relationality:

Strictly speaking, perspective is the condition of the possibility of truth. For a 'view from nowhere,' there is no truth, because nothing can be seen, understood, and judged as wrong. So, where falsehood does not only not exist factually, but cannot exist at all, there is no need for truth. Only under the conditions of contingency and perspectivity, truth matters. Only then, a person needs it, and only there, it does exist. Because only where it is possibly or actually endangered, there is a dispute about truth. And without this, there is no truth.<sup>6</sup>

This lack of epistemic sovereignty should not be accompanied by a stance of epistemological pessimism so that no knowledge of reality was ever true. By adhering neither to a naïve, pre-reflexive sensuality, abstract rationalism, nor epistemological nihilism, we illustrate humanity's ensnarement in relational perception by referring to philosophical aesthetics: aesthetics described a receptive and reflective stance towards the sensuous perception of reality that is at the same time passive through sensuous reception and active through intellectual reflection. Terry Eagleton puts it as follows:

As a kind of concrete thought or sensuous analogue of the concept, the

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5. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), pp. 177-179 (A 28-33/B 44-48).
  6. Ingolf U. Dalferth and Philipp Stoellger, 'Perspektive und Wahrheit. Einleitende Hinweise auf eine klärungsbedürftige Problemgeschichte', in *Wahrheit in Perspektiven: Probleme einer offenen Konstellation*, ed. Ingolf U. Dalferth and Philipp Stoellger, *Religion in Philosophy and Theology* 14 (Tübingen: Mohr 2004), pp. 1-28 at 13.

aesthetic partakes at once of the rational and the real, suspended the two somewhat in the manner of Lévi-Straussian myth.<sup>7</sup>

By referring to human perception in terms of aesthetics, we can illustrate how truth can become an existential matter, as the act of perception is followed by an act of interpretation.

#### PERCEPTION AND HERMENEUTICS

In perceiving something, its understanding is not immediately given. Also, its understanding does not entail timeless stability; instead, interpretation is an ever-unfinished process that includes the following steps, according to Hans-Georg Gadamer: Firstly, *understanding* in a narrow sense takes place in recognizing the underlying framework and a person's prejudices. Secondly, *interpreting* tries to handle the differences to previous understandings and findings without leveling the differences and scientific glitches. Thirdly, *implementing* means embedding the interpretations and findings into a person's worldview.<sup>8</sup>

However, hermeneutical interpretations are not a nonrecurring task with the act of interpretation succeeding every time. Rather, interpreting is an unstable process of deconstruction and reconstruction of opinions, judgments, and tenets to accomplish an increasingly reasonable position that is sensitive to epistemological, cultural, and subjective blind spots. Therefore, Gadamer regards the awareness of a person's biases as the key aspect of critical hermeneutics.<sup>9</sup> In general, Gadamer elaborates that hermeneutical understanding is an unstable and infinite enterprise that strives for meaning and tries to gain access to truth. Yet, this desired access to truth or even possession of it is nothing that lies within humanity's capacity:

Thus there is undoubtedly no understanding that is free of all prejudices, however much the will of our knowledge must be directed toward escap-

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7. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell 1990), p. 16.

8. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d ed., rev., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London/ NY: Continuum, 2006), pp. 299-306.

9. See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 271-272.

ing their thrall. Throughout our investigation it has emerged that the certainty achieved by using scientific methods does not suffice to guarantee truth. This especially applies to the human sciences, but it does not mean that they are less scientific; on the contrary, it justifies the claim to special humane significance that they have always made.<sup>10</sup>

#### ELABORATION ON THE CHRISTIAN NOTION OF TRUTH

Christ's self-revelation on the cross did not take place as a probable occurrence within the Jewish theological framework. Instead, Christ's self-revelation was not just an irritation; it was and is a profound disturbance that revealed, besides God himself, humanity's lack of sovereignty in controlling God. Humanity is unable to determine his nature, foresee his actions, or control his will. In Christ as truth himself (see John 14:6), Christ's death on the cross displays radical dispossession of humanity's control over truth.<sup>11</sup> For Paul, this lack of intellectual stability becomes especially apparent concerning those who cling to knowledge and science as a means of control.<sup>12</sup> Paul states this dispossession as follows:

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scholar? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of the proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews ask for signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. (1 Cor 1:20-25, NRSV)

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10. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 484.

11. See Florian Klug, *The Fragility of Language and the Encounter with God: On the Contingency and Legitimacy of Doctrine* (Minneapolis, MN: fortress 2021), p. 30.

12. See Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London/New York: Continuum, 2006), pp. 174-177.

Instead of understanding truth as an intellectual means to prove something as true and having thereby the capacity to determine, Slavoj Žižek refers to Paul's process of self-becoming through existential responsibility to Christ as truth himself.<sup>13</sup> Paul does not hide behind a stance of neutrality, objectivity, or undecidedness. By Paul's interpretation of Christ's death on the cross and the subsequent implementation into his existence, Paul becomes a subject and is subject to Christ. This stance of subjectivity entails Paul's accountability and responsibility towards Christ, whereas Christ becomes an existential anchor for Paul.<sup>14</sup>

#### MORE THAN NEGATIVE FREEDOM

Christ becomes in Paul's life the existential foundation and serves as an axiomatic pillar who enables freedom beyond practical constraints on how to live. In this regard, the dispossession of control over truth is a feature of existential matter that provides both responsibility and subjectivity because a neutral stance of objectivity is not tenable anymore, according to Paul. Further, through the lack of stability and the ongoing process of understanding, constant reflection, and striving for a more just position towards Christ, as truth, emerge. Paul is not held back by any traditions or social conventions as restraining forces. Through Christ's victory over sin's reign, Paul can call into question everything else and embrace his weakness:

Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ, for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor 12:8-10)

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13. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London/NY: verso 2000), pp. 141-144.

14. See Florian Klug, 'Truth and Irony. The Conception of Truth beyond Binary Patterns and the Use of Irony for Theological Reasoning', in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* (21:3), pp. 401-421, here at p. 413.

Due to this existential stance, it is fair to regard Paul as not just a prototypical theologian who strives to fathom the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection. Paul, also, counts as a paradigmatic ironist regarding Vladimir Jankélévitch's conception of irony:

In reality, irony is a false falsehood, a lie that destroys itself (as a lie) when used. It puts the lost ones back on track; it is the disentanglement of the entangled ones; or rather, it provides the instruments for this disentanglement. [...] irony does not want to be believed in – it wants to be comprehended. In other words, 'interpreted'. Irony makes us not believe in its words, but in its meaning.<sup>15</sup>

In a further elaboration on irony and Paul, we can refer to Kierkegaard and his depiction of Socrates. Socrates wanted to be a midwife for others to establish a more harmonious relation to truth. Therefore, Socrates called the conventional beliefs and assumptions of that time into question through his ironical approach. His irony has a purifying function for both himself and Athenian society to liberate each one from societal constraints and enable intellectual freedom.<sup>16</sup> Kierkegaard attests that Socrates, by his radical questioning with an axiomatic anchor, knew no limit of ironical deconstruction of reality: beauty, truth, and goodness were only liminal concepts that could only have virtual validity.<sup>17</sup> Kierkegaard's critique of Socrates states that he does not have real freedom; Socrates is only negatively free. To become a real self and step back from purely negative freedom, Kierkegaard regards an axiomatic anchor as absolutely necessary that provides a foundation and stability. With this anchor, irony is not free-floating and radically unstable; Kierkegaard sees *controlled irony* as a preferred stance in an age marked by the ubiquity of scientific insights and stupendous numbers of findings:

Particularly in our age, irony must be commended. In our age, scientific

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15. Vladimir Jankélévitch, *L'ironie* (Paris: Flammarion 1964), 60.

16. See Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony: With continual Reference to Socrates*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1989), p. 191.

17. See Kierkegaard, *Concept of Irony*, pp. 192-197.

scholarship has come into possession of such prodigious achievements that there must be something wrong somewhere; knowledge not only about the secrets of the human race but even about the secrets of God is offered for sale at such a bargain price today that it all looks very dubious. In our joy over the achievement in our age, we have forgotten that an achievement is worthless if it is not made one's own. But woe to him who cannot bear to have irony seek to balance the accounts. Irony as the negative is the way; it is not the truth but the way. Anyone who has a result as such does not possess it, since he does not have the way. When irony now lends a hand, it brings the way, but not the way whereby someone fancying himself to have the achievement comes to possess it, but the way along which the achievement deserts him. Furthermore, if our generation has any task at all, it must be to translate the achievement of scientific scholarship into personal life, to appropriate it personally.<sup>18</sup>

Socrates and Paul share a similar attitude about social constraints and existential liberty. In reference to Kierkegaard,<sup>19</sup> it is fair to state that Paul's questioning of assumed religious certainty is a gesture of *controlled irony*. Yet, irony entails an inherent danger insofar as that could collapse into unrestricted, unlimited negativity. This irony, concerning Kierkegaard's understanding, transforms itself into cynicism or even nihilism.<sup>20</sup> The paradigm of proper irony in its controlled form appears in Paul's theology as he is existentially grounded to call into question everything that could distract him from living a fulfilled life in Christ's grace. Paul is free from the need for self-justification or the social acknowledgment of personal worthiness. His freedom stems from Christ's death and resurrection. In his dispossession of control, Paul is free to strive for a greater meaning in life and can reject every stance of superiority.

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18. See Kierkegaard, *Concept of Irony*, pp. 327-328.

19. See Kierkegaard, *Concept of Irony*, p. 432.

20. See Kierkegaard, *Concept of Irony*, p. 261: 'Here, then, we have irony as the infinite absolute negativity. It is negativity, because it only negates; it is infinite, because it does not negate this or that phenomenon; it is absolute, because that by virtue of which it negates is a higher something that still is not. The irony establishes nothing, because that which is to be established lies behind it.'



Paul may be seen as a *Christian ironist* while his way of living could be called *Christian irony*. He rests in God without the desire for control or sovereignty but with profound existential freedom. By being a Christian ironist, a person has faith in God as the living truth who renders something true relating to truth. Through the stance of controlled irony, a person holds a means and a mode of reflection to strive for ever greater insight and fulfillment. In this stance of irony, it is nothing but an instrument of reflection and has no end in itself.

The ironical liberation from social and intellectual constraints opens up an untapped approach to strive for a greater purpose in life. By having an axiomatic foundation in God, a person can ask him- or herself what it means to have a fulfilled life. Further, this person can fathom the value of being alive and how to live one's life with Jesus' resurrection granting existential freedom. By doing so, the Christian ironist can question ethical and intellectual misconceptions in society by the praxis of free speech or truth-telling (*parrhesia*) in a Socratic manner. Instead of being a deliberate nuisance, the Socratic praxis of *parrhesia* is a service to society as it tries to uncover and repair an incongruity between a person's actual life and his or her relation to truth without any force or compulsion.<sup>21</sup>

This stance of constant striving for reflection and gaining a deeper understanding as well as insights marks not only a single Christian as a paradigm of being a Socratic ironist. On an institutional level, this stance of reflection and questioning should be a constitutional feature of theology as an academic discipline and general theological reasoning. Concerning the ironical questioning of answers handed down, current theology should not only take a critical stance towards other traditions and religions, as Tertullian argues against other faiths and beliefs.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Christian theology ought to consider itself without any

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21. See Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001), pp. 114-127.

22. See Tertullian, *Ad Nationes*, book II, ch. 1 (ANF 3:12): "Truth is beleaguered with the vast force (of the enemy), and yet how secure she is in her own inherent strength! And naturally enough when from her very adversaries she gains to her side whomsoever she will, as her friends and protectors, and prostrates the entire host of her assailants. It is therefore against these things that our contest lies – against the institutions of our ancestors, against the authority of tra-

epistemic superiority. Constant critical self-reflection should be its priority.

### *THEOLOGIA VELUTI REGINA SCIENTIARUM*

Theological irony does not entail only a rejection of superiority on a level of individuality. Further, one of the conceptual pillars of Jewish-Christian self-understanding is the lack of control of God. Neither a person nor a theological approach can fathom God's mystery. Yet, the encounter with the risen Christ enables Christianity to have existential freedom and can elaborate on their understanding of ontology and the good life in *parrhesia*.

However, theology has neither an epistemological foundation nor an academic legitimacy for a stance of supremacy. A former misconception of theology, as the 'queen of the sciences' that stems from Aquinas's view of theology as the noblest science and the reigning mistress over other sciences,<sup>23</sup> must be rejected. Yet, this rejection of supremacy does not entail a lack of academic confidence or self-esteem in theology. In opposition to isolation or separation of theology in the academic sphere, theology asks the very profound questions about the value of human life, the meaning of existential bliss, and the necessary care for creation; in its relation to God, theology needs to accept its responsibility that is not limited to God.

Likewise, theology has a social responsibility that stems from the double love commandment (see Matthew 22:34-40), love of God and love of neighbour. This neighbor can be seen in the various sciences and scholarly fields

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dition, the laws of our governors, and the reasonings of the wise; against antiquity, custom, submission; against precedents, prodigies, miracles,—all which things have had their part in consolidating that spurious system of your gods. Wishing, then, to follow step by step your own commentaries which you have drawn out of your theology of every sort (because the authority of learned men goes further with you in matters of this kind than the testimony of facts), I have taken and abridged the works of Varro; for he in his treatise *Concerning Divine Things*, collected out of ancient digests, has shown himself a serviceable guide for us. Now, if I inquire of him who were the subtle inventors of the gods, he points to either the philosophers, the peoples, or the poets.'

23. See Gijsbert van den Brink, 'How Theology Stopped Being *Regina Scientiarum* – and How Its Story Continues,' in *Studies in Christian Ethics* (2019), Vol. 32:4, pp. 442-454, here at pp. 443-444.

within the academic sphere which all contribute to deeper insight and understanding of human existence. Instead of narrowing down theology's scope to niche questions, everything that touches the meaning of human existence (see *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 1) is worth investigating by theology. These scholarly inquiries should not come from a stance of superiority; instead, theology should make use of its existential liberty to pursue the course of Socratic irony.

In conclusion, theology can be a well-meaning nuisance for the improvement of human life as such and broaden the perspective in academia for not losing sight of truth.

*Vatican II, a legacy – The role of Pope Francis in changing the narrative about Vatican II comes at a moment in history when the last of the fathers of Vatican II are passing away. To put it bluntly, the gifts of the council will either flourish in new hands or pass away along with them. The Church is living in a time that Canadian theologian Gilles Routhier identifies as 'the era of the heirs'. The Second Vatican Council is not something we ourselves created. It's something we've inherited. What we do with that inheritance now is the challenge. At the sixtieth anniversary, this truth is even more evident. It's not enough to run the highlight reel of what happened in 1962. We are called on here and now to be canny managers of the riches the council left us in order to make that legacy flourish.*

*Routhier points out that while there are some advantages to being an heir, there are also pitfalls. One might turn one's back on an inheritance, refusing it as too burdensome, or try to keep it intact by taking no chances with it, by preserving it under glass. Siblings may fight over an inheritance, cutting it into pieces so that only shreds remain, or they may place so little value on it that it simply gets frittered away. But just as the good servant in Matthew's parable of the talents takes what he has been entrusted with and invests it wisely, returning ever greater profit to his master, there is another, better way. All of these actions find their warrant in Vatican II. But they do not merely repeat what was said in the council documents. Francis has been giving us examples of this kind of stewardship.*

*Rita Ferrone, 'From Lived History to Living Legacy: Vatican II at Sixty'*