

Discussion Questions for *The Nature of Truth*

The Nature of Truth, by Sergio Troncoso
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<http://sergiotroncoso.com/truth/questions/index.htm>

(Chapters refer to 2014 edition.)

1. Why do you think **Helmut Sanchez** is initially intrigued and outraged by the forty-year-old essay, "Why I am Neither Guilty Nor Ashamed"? Is this initial interest related to Helmut's sense of ambiguity about who he is and where he belongs? How does pursuing a problem build your sense of self, especially if you are questioning who you are, where you came from? Or does his "unique quality of earnestness" have a primary role in his initial interest in the essay? How is Helmut's earnestness related to his questioning self? At different points in the story, why doesn't Helmut just walk away from his questions?
2. How is Helmut's pursuit of the truth about the essay and **Werner Hopfgartner** sustained and even intensified as he discovers more facts? How does Helmut's pursuit of these questions itself foster a personal connection to pursuing the questions? Is pursuing the truth a self-sustaining mania? Why or why not? What do you think the author is saying about any quest for the truth and moral agency, how someone reaches conclusions and decides to act 'for the sake of the truth'? Do you think that in order to act against a perceived wrong you need to be somehow personally connected to that wrong?
3. How and why do different characters --like **Werner Hopfgartner**, **Helmut Sanchez** or **Jack Rosselli**-- latch themselves onto a certain path of pursuit, onto a certain interpretation of the 'facts,' and then end up creating conclusions and acting on them? Is the sense of 'truth' in this novel about the irrational, emotional, and even sexual ways in which moral truth is created and sustained between individuals? What subjective factors lead you immediately to believe, or disbelieve, a certain person or a certain argument? Or does this novel explore an objective sense of 'truth' as well?
4. What is this "fanaticism of the ideal" that Helmut talks about in Chapter 1? How is justifying brutality against a person easier if you consider him or her not a person, but a category (say, a racial category, or the embodiment of evil, or the 'typical man')? What are the different manifestations of this fanaticism in *The Nature of Truth*? How is this fanaticism related to the pursuit of truth itself? To religious terrorists who kill in the name of God, for example? To racism or sexism?
5. Why do you think **Regina Neumann** does not directly confront **Werner Hopfgartner** about her sexual harassment allegations? Why does she instead send him an anonymous letter to

Switzerland? Compare and contrast Helmut's and Neumann's methods of collecting proof against Hopfgartner, what they each consider 'enough' to take action, and how they eventually take action. Why are their approaches against Hopfgartner so different? What is the right way to act against a moral wrong? Why?

6. What is the role of guilt in establishing a moral truth? Who should assess guilt when something morally reprehensible occurs, and why? The person responsible for the 'crime'? Or an 'outside' judge? What if the person responsible for the 'crime' does not see what he did as a 'crime'? Compare and contrast what Hopfgartner says about why Austria should not feel guilty about the Holocaust and the professor's apparently guiltless criminal act during the war, with Helmut's guilty righteousness at the end of the novel. If you feel initially guilty about something you did wrong, and you can overcome your guilt with time or distorted rationalizations (but not punishment), are you still really guilty? Are there different qualities of guilt?

7. In Chapter 6, Helmut says: "Why should these old words make a difference now? How could any words really matter, now or forty years ago? It's what you do that counts. Not what you think, not what you say, but what you *do*." To what extent should history matter in the present and specifically in terms of your present moral actions? When is it appropriate to leave history in the past and move on with present concerns? Do "old words" alone prompt Helmut to commit his shocking act? When should even "old actions" be forgiven? What is the author saying about the nature of history --its cycle of action and reaction-- and what is perpetuated as morally right for any given time?

8. Describe the initial relationship between Sarah Goodman and Regina Neumann, and between Sarah and Professor Hopfgartner. Why is Sarah at first unwilling to help Professor Neumann on the one hand, and yet willing to protect Hopfgartner on the other hand? In Chapter 8, Sarah says she doesn't know Neumann, but knows exactly who Hopfgartner is. Why is it important for someone to 'know' the person you might help or who might help you? How does this knowing help you to act and to give someone the benefit of the doubt repeatedly? Why does Sarah appear, in Chapter 12, to give Bharat Patel the benefit of the doubt even though she doesn't really know who he is? What has changed?

9. What is the difference between justice and vengeance? Why and how does Regina Neumann pursue 'justice' against Werner Hopfgartner? Does she do it for personal reasons or for higher principles or for both? Do personal reasons inform or affect what higher principles become relevant to her? Compare Professor Neumann's pursuit of 'justice' with Helmut's, and how their personal reasons and 'objective' principles affect each other as they pursue the truth about Werner Hopfgartner. What do you think the author is saying about the complex relationship between an individual's personal interests and obsessions and that individual's pursuit of justice and 'the truth'? How can a person's concern for higher principles ever be free of his personal interests? Or should it? What role can self-reflection play in making sure your personal obsessions do not become 'objective' principles? Is that enough?

10. Sergio Troncoso has said that he left the evidence for Professor Hopfgartner's war activity, in Chapter 13, "somewhat ambiguous" and "not quite obvious" in part because he wants the reader to participate in whether or not this evidence is sufficient for Helmut's conclusions. Why do you

think some readers will agree that this evidence is enough for Helmut's conclusions, and other readers will think this 'evidence' is not enough? Why will some readers expect blatantly obvious evidence, and others will not? How do you determine what is 'enough evidence'? Do your predispositions play any role in this decision? Or is there an objective sense for 'enough evidence' in personal moral decisions? Why do you think the evidence that Helmut uncovers in Austria is enough to convince him? Why is this evidence also enough to compel him to act on his conclusions?

11. Only the truth can cause maximum damage, **Regina Neumann** thinks in Chapter 12. How can Neumann be more effective in damaging **Sarah Goodman's** sense of self with the truth, or at least with certain parts of the truth, about Sarah's work at Yale? How different would Neumann's attack be if she, for example, vastly exaggerated a charge against Sarah? How does Professor Neumann get Sarah to do the work of her own self-destruction by planting this kernel of critical truth in Sarah's mindset? In what ways can self-reflection be destructive in a person with a weak sense of self?

12. How and why does Helmut identify with **Anja Litvak**? What causes him to see her as "his blood"? Is it Helmut's role in uncovering fact after fact while he pursues the truth about Hopfgartner's past? That Helmut has simply been working on the case for a while? Or is it a personal identification with Anja's vulnerability and innocence, and how Helmut sees himself in a similar way? Or is it Helmut's fervent desire to connect moral conclusions with actions, to not just think about what's right and wrong, but to "live in the truth" and act on it? What is the role of imagination in his seeing Anja as a person wronged, and his feeling outraged about it in the present, even though she has been dead for over forty years?

13. In Chapter 14, why does Helmut need "to cut away from all flesh" right before his shocking act against Professor Hopfgartner? Why does Ariane's impromptu knock at his closed door disrupt the "almost mechanical process" he is envisioning for his act? Compare Helmut's reflection about what he is about to do with **Jack Rosselli's** reaching conclusions about **Jonathan Atwater**, yet being unable to discuss them with other detectives.

14. Helmut says in Chapter 14: "God has cursed us! He has either cursed us or he was never here to begin with. We've pretended God was here for our own sanity! That's the truth! We've pretended evil is punished and good is rewarded. A perfect scheme!...The ultimate lie in a world of lies!" What is Helmut's moral view of the world and how does it justify, in his mind, his shocking act against Hopfgartner? Is it a matter of 'justification' anymore if you believe you should do whatever you can do? Why does Helmut believe this is how morality works? Is he right?

15. Describe the process by which detective **Jack Rosselli** reaches and revises his conclusions first about **Regina Neumann** and then about **Jonathan Atwater**. What leads him initially to suspect Professor Neumann and then to dismiss her as a suspect in the Hopfgartner case? Why doesn't the detective ever consider Helmut as a suspect? What leads Rosselli to focus on Mr. Atwater as the primary suspect? What role do Rosselli's 'gut feelings' play in his making these decisions? Actual facts? How does Rosselli attempt to correct what he wants to believe instinctually with what he has actually found about the Hopfgartner case?

16. During his interview with the detective in Chapter 19, Helmut asks Rosselli: "Well, I mean, what's going to be obvious to you? Of all the information you get, how do you decide *this* is a lead?" And Rosselli answers, "That's tough to answer. It depends. Depends on the case, the person murdered, what was found at the scene. Depends on peculiar things. I'd have to say it simply sticks out in my mind. It's *there*." Compare and contrast how 'something becomes obvious,' how it becomes 'evidence,' as Helmut and Rosselli each pursue the truth about **Werner Hopfgartner**. Do they have similar or different criteria for what is evidence? How do they correct for their prejudices vis-à-vis the facts?

17. In Chapter 22, Helmut is thinking: "His mind was his enemy. His mind might take it upon itself to question the certainty of evil in the old man. His mind might remember only the knife, in his own hands, the knife as part of an act without sense and circumstance. In the future, his mind could not be trusted to give him back his own self. His mind was *not* who he was." Why do you think Helmut is feeling guilty about something he believes was the right thing to do? Why do you think the mind's tendency to abstract, especially when reviewing what happened in the past, distorts from understanding why an act is done in real time? Is the author saying that Helmut's guilt is misplaced or simply a mental reflex? Or is Troncoso saying that it is never quite possible to understand and judge an extraordinary act simply by thinking about it?

18. How is *The Nature of Truth* an attack against too much thinking in the academy, at places like Yale and Harvard? For example, what does Helmut say about delivering the documents he finds about Professor Hopfgartner to the authorities? Why does he think we don't need "another philosophy seminar of nothing, from nothing, for the purpose of nothing"? In this novel, how is thinking often used as a way to manipulate the truth or even to prevent discovery of the truth? Is **Sergio Troncoso** criticizing a certain type of academic thinking, or the goodwill (or lack of it) of certain moral characters, or both? What can happen when you have persons who are good at thinking, but who have little goodwill toward others?

19. In Chapter 23, Ariane tells Helmut: "I know this sounds stupid, Helmut, but you need to be dishonest to function in this world. You need to lie to yourself, you need to lie to others. You need to *forget* what you really think sometimes. It's a defense mechanism. It saves you from too much honesty. It makes life easier. I know it's not perfection, but it works. You're being too hard on yourself." Is Ariane right? Is Helmut's guilt a problem of too much honesty or a certain kind of honesty? Why does Ariane still believe Helmut should 'forget' what he has done even after she discovers all the facts? In what sense is her approach 'practical' and not 'idealistic'? Is her practicality ignoring or rationalizing away every mistake?

20. Describe **Sarah Goodman's** transformation from a student with little confidence about her abilities, in a sexual relationship with a professor, to a more confident, self-propelled student who begins to excel by the end of the novel. What roles do her receiving 'help' from Professor Hopfgartner, her new relationship with **Bharat Patel**, and finally Sarah's own efforts play in this transformation? How is shadowy, even unethical behavior sometimes required to jump from a self without confidence and living on lies, to one that is stronger and more truthful and self-sufficient? In what other ways are lies sometimes necessary to achieve the truth?

21. Why does Helmut feel guilty about what happens to Mr. Atwater in the cemetery? Helmut doesn't know Rosselli did not help Mr. Atwater. Yet Helmut is haunted by the blood, and he finally succumbs to guilt and self-destruction after he sees Mr. Atwater in the hospital. What is Helmut's view of the world, and those who are guilty and those who are innocent? In what way could Helmut think his escape has 'caused' Mr. Atwater's pain?

22. In Chapter 28, Helmut reflects: "The innocent remembered the acts of the guilty, revered them. But they were not enamored with the details of these immortal acts. The guilty --oh, those ignoble idiots!--acted and were set free, absolutely free. The monstrous freedom of demons and archangels. And so the guilty were banished from the world." Since Helmut considers himself "the guilty," how is he at once set free and also banished by his act and the revelation of how the moral world really works? What is 'monstrous' about this freedom? Why does it belong only to demons and archangels?

23. According to [Sergio Troncoso](#), *The Nature of Truth* "is inspired by, but is also arguing against," Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Compare and contrast these two novels, particularly their protagonists, [Helmut Sanchez](#) and [Raskolnikov](#). For example, how is Raskolnikov's crime utilitarian and not chosen for its own sake, while Helmut deliberates over his 'crime' and chooses it as an end in itself? Does Helmut even see his act as a 'crime'? How is Troncoso's focus on questioning the nature of reason and truth-making "more radical," as he often puts it, than what Dostoyevsky does in his novel? Also, compare the different kinds of redemption at the end of the two novels. Why does Dostoyevsky end with [Raskolnikov's](#) nascent Christian redemption after his imprisonment for his crime? Why does Troncoso end with Helmut's escape and self-redemption?

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