

## Post “Post-Truth”: Are We There Yet?

by

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*Abstract:* After explaining why, after dealing with post-modernist confusions about truth in various books and articles from the mid-1990s to, most recently, 2014 (§1), Haack returns to the topic of truth. She begins (§2) with some thoughts about the claim that concern for truth is on the decline, and perhaps at a new low; a claim that, sadly, may well be true. Then (§3) she looks at some of the many forms that carelessness with the truth may take, and shows that, so far from revealing that the concept of truth is seriously problematic or that there is no such thing as objective truth, it simply makes no sense to say that lies, half-truths, etc., are ubiquitous unless there is such a thing as truth, and a legitimate truth-concept. After that, (§4) she argues that, *of course*, there is such a thing as objective truth, and a robust truth-concept. And finally, (§5) she suggests some ways to fight against the rising tide of unconcern for truth—and gives her answer to the (trick) question in her subtitle.

*Keywords:* truth, “post-truth” era, lies, half-truths, [un]concern for truth, testimony, evidence

You certainly think that there is such a thing as truth. Otherwise, reasoning and thought would be without a purpose. What do you mean by there being such a thing as Truth? You mean that something is SO... whether you or I or anybody thinks it is so or not. ... The essence of the opinion is that there is something that is SO, no matter if there be an overwhelming vote against it. So you plainly opine. For if thinking otherwise is going to make it otherwise, there is no use in reasoning... C.S. Peirce.<sup>1</sup>

Every man is fully satisfied that there is such a thing as truth, or he would not ask any question. *That truth consists in a conformity to something independent of his thinking it to be so*, or of any man’s opinion on the subject. C. S. Peirce.<sup>2</sup>

I do not have much use for notions like “objective truth.”... Richard Rorty (1992).<sup>3</sup>

### 1. *Déjà Vu* All Over Again!

It was disturbing, to say the least, when in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as I was working on the ideas that would eventually appear in *Evidence and Inquiry*, I

1 Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers*, eds. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss and Arthur Burks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931–58), 2.135 (1902). References to the *Collected Papers* are by volume and paragraph numbers, followed by the original date.

2 *Ibid.*, 5.211 (1903).

3 Richard Rorty, “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids,” *Common Knowledge* 1, no.3 (1992): 141. The contrast between this quotation from Rorty and my earlier quotations from Peirce is sufficient by itself, I believe, to undermine Rorty’s claim to represent pragmatism!

began hearing Richard Rorty, Patricia and Paul Churchland, Stephen Stich, and others confidently asserting that we were now *post*-epistemology—that this field had been revealed as illegitimate, and should simply be abandoned (Rorty), or replaced by neuroscience (the Churchlands) or cognitive science (Stich). In part, their issues were with the concept of belief; but in part they rested on a kind of disillusionment with truth.

So when I published *Evidence and Inquiry* in 1993, I included forceful replies to Stich's and the Churchlands' hopelessly flawed arguments that there are no such things as beliefs; deconstructed the false dichotomy behind Rorty's argument that truth is nothing more than "what you can defend against all comers"; and dealt firmly with the false assumptions and misconceptions behind Stich's arguments that it's mere superstition to care whether your beliefs are true<sup>4</sup>—themes to which I returned in 1996,<sup>5</sup> and again in 1998.<sup>6</sup>

In a paper published the same year as *Evidence and Inquiry* I had also identified the "passes-for" fallacy, the fallacy of arguing from "what passes for or is accepted as truth, established knowledge, or good evidence is often no such thing" to "the concepts of truth, established knowledge, and good evidence are illegitimate—nothing but ideological humbug—and should be abandoned"; and noted that such arguments are not only fallacious, but also self-undermining.<sup>7</sup> And in 1999, I amplified and extended these arguments in a critique of what I called the New Cynicism—a critique that was, in effect, a thoroughgoing repudiation of post-modernist ideas; and noted that, contrary to what proponents thought, discarding such concepts as truth, evidence, etc., so far from advancing the interests of women and minorities, would make it impossible to discover what those interests are, or what would advance them.<sup>8</sup>

4 Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979); Stephen P. Stich, *From Folk Psychology to Cognitive Science* (Boston: Bradford Books, 1983); Susan Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993; expanded ed., Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2009), chap. 9.

5 Susan Haack, "Concern for Truth: What It Means, Why It Matters," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 775, no. 1 (1996): 57–62, reprinted in *The Flight from Science and Reason*, eds. Paul R. Gross, Norman Levitt, & Martin W. Lewis (New York: New York Academy of Science, 1996), 57–62.

6 Susan Haack, "Confessions of an Old-Fashioned Prig," in *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate: Unfashionable Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 7–30; Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 86; Rorty, "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids"; Stephen P. Stich, *The Fragmentation of Reason: Preface to a Pragmatic Theory of Cognitive Evaluation* (Boston: Bradford Books, 1990), 101; Jane Heal, "The Disinterested Search for Truth," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 88, no. 1 (1988): 97–108.

7 Susan Haack, "Knowledge and Propaganda: Reflections of an Old Feminist," (1993), in Haack, *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate*, 123–36.

8 Susan Haack, "Staying for an Answer: The Untidy Process of Groping for Truth" (1999), in Susan Haack, *Putting Philosophy to Work: Inquiry and Its Place in Culture* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2008; second, expanded edition, 2013), 35–46 (text) & 269–70 (notes).

In 2003, I argued that, while there is only one truth, i.e., one phenomenon of being true, and one unambiguous truth-concept, there are many and various truths, i.e., many and various true propositions, beliefs, claims, etc., about the many different things, stuff, kinds, laws, events, etc., in the world.<sup>9</sup> In 2008, I explored the idea of claims' being partially true, both in the sense of their being true only in part and in the sense of their being only part of the truth.<sup>10</sup> And in 2014 I wrote about truth in the law, arguing that legal truths, like social-scientific truths, are made true by things people do; but that, once they are made, they are nonetheless objective.<sup>11</sup>

After all this, I thought I was done dealing with postmodernist confusions, and didn't intend to return to issues about truth. Turns out I was wrong. Soon afterwards, I began to hear the startling news that that we are now in the era of "post-truth"—a term that later became a buzz-phrase, and was even recognized by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "Word of the Year" for 2016.<sup>12</sup> Even more recently, a law librarian told me that, when he'd asked the dozen beginning law students he was helping to understand how to identify reliable sources, "how many of you believe in objective truth?", only one student raised his hand; and that, given a list of sources to appraise, *all* the students thought Alan Sokal's hoax paper, "Transgressing the Boundaries"<sup>13</sup> was reliable enough to cite in an article or legal brief.

Unlike the "post-epistemology" fad, this is no mere academic dispute; it is real-world stuff. When you probe more deeply into this recent brouhaha, however, you find those old, familiar postmodern themes—but now in a new garb, and in need of new treatment. So, like it or not, I must return to the subject of truth one more time—though the task, I confess, brings Matthew Arnold's "The Last Word" almost irresistibly to mind:

Creep into thy narrow bed,  
 Creep, and let no more be said!  
 Vain thy onset! All stands fast,  
 Thou thyself must break at last.

9 Susan Haack, "The Unity of Truth and the Plurality of Truths," in Haack, Susan *Putting Philosophy to Work*, 53–68 (text) & 271–73 (notes).

10 Susan Haack, "The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 31, no. 1 (2008): 20–35.

11 Susan Haack, "Nothing Fancy: Some Simple Truths about Truth in the Law," in Susan Haack, *Evidence Matters: Science, Truth, and Proof in the Law* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 294–324.

12 "Word of the Year 2016 is..." *Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed May 29, 2019, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>

13 Alan Sokal, "Transgressing the Boundaries," *Social Text* 46/47 (1996): 217–252.

Let the long contention cease!  
 Geese are swans, and swans are geese.  
 Let them have it how they will!  
 Thou art tired; best be still.

They out-talked thee hissed thee, tore thee?  
 Better men fared thus before thee;  
 Fired that ringing shot and passed,  
 Hotly charged—and sank at last.

Charge once more then, and be dumb.  
 Let the victors, when they come,  
 When the forts of folly fall,  
 Find thy body by the wall!<sup>14</sup>

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What is meant when it's said that we are now "post-truth"? According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the phrase denotes "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping political debate or public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."<sup>15</sup> It gives several examples, among them the earliest: "We, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world" (1992); and, later, "in the post-truth era we don't just have truth and lies, but a third category of ambiguous statements that are not exactly the truth but fall short of a lie" (2004); "Social media ... has [*sic*] become a post-truth nether world in which readers willingly participate in their own deception because it feels good" (2016).<sup>16</sup>

Truth, we're being told, doesn't matter anymore. But, while not everyone who uses the phrase, "post-truth," means exactly the same thing by it, it's clear that, as it is now commonly understood, there are two main strands. First, there is skepticism about truthfulness, i.e., a sense that lies, half-truths, economy with the truth, "spin," and the like are now ubiquitous, and that people are increasingly careless both about what they say and about what they believe; second, and implicit in the last of these quotations, there is also despair of the very idea of truth, as if the concept itself had been revealed as nothing but an antiquated relic of an earlier age.

14 Matthew Arnold, "The Last Word," in *New Poems* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1867), 148–49.

15 Oxford Dictionaries, s.v. "post-truth," accessed May 29, 2019, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/post-truth>.

16 Ibid.

So I'll begin (§2) with some thoughts about the claim that concern for truth is on the decline, and perhaps at a new low; a claim that, sadly, may well be true. Then (§3) I'll look at some of the many and various forms that carelessness with the truth may take, and show that, so far from revealing that the concept of truth is seriously problematic or that there is no such thing as objective truth, it simply makes no sense to say that lies, half-truths, etc., are ubiquitous, that statements are frequently made that are not true, that are true only in part, that are only part of the truth, or that present true claims in such a way as to convey a false impression of what they mean, unless there is such a thing as truth, and a legitimate truth-concept. After that, (§4) I'll argue that, *of course*, there is such a thing as objective truth, and a robust and defensible truth-concept. And finally, (§5) I'll suggest some ways to fight against the rising tide of unconcern for truth—and give my answer to the question in my title.

## 2. A Post-Truth Era?

No doubt about it: Outright lies, half-truths, economy with the truth, massaged data, simple carelessness with the facts, and the like, are undeniably and alarmingly commonplace today, especially in political discourse, in advertising, public relations, in universities' publicity material, and indeed in just about every area of public life.

Of course, there haven't always been advertising agencies, public-relations firms, competition among universities for funding, donations, ranking, students, etc. But lies and half-truths are certainly nothing new. The Sophists of ancient Athens might be described as having been mired in "post-truth" *avant la lettre*; in 1625 Francis Bacon wrote that some "count it a vexation to fix a belief," and some even have "a corrupt love of the lie itself";<sup>17</sup> and in 1710 Jonathan Swift wrote of "the different shapes, sizes and colours of those swarms of lies which buzz around the heads of some people, like flies about a horse's ears in summer"; and continues, "if a lie be believ'd only for an hour, it has done its work."<sup>18</sup>

Swift is especially scathing about the political liar:

There is one essential point wherein a political liar differs from others... That he ought to have a short memory, which is necessary according to the various occasions he meets with every hour, of differing from himself, and swearing to both sides of a contradiction, as he finds the persons dispos'd, with whom he has to deal.<sup>19</sup>

17 Francis Bacon, "Of Truth" (1625), in Francis Bacon, *Complete Essays* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2008), 3–5.

18 Jonathan Swift, Untitled Essay, *Examiner or Remarks Upon Papers and Occurrences*, XV (Nov. 2–9, 1710), 2.

19 *Ibid.*, 2.

It's useful, Swift continues, to have an example before one's mind, so he is imagining:

[A] certain great man famous for this talent [whose] genius consists in nothing but an inexhaustible fund of political lies, which he plentifully distributes every minute he speaks, and consequently contradicts the next half-hour. He never yet consider'd whether any proposition were true or false, but whether it were convenient for the present minute or company to affirm or deny it. . . . [Y]ou will find yourself equally deceiv'd, whether you believe him or no. The only remedy is to forget that you have heard some inarticulate sounds, without any meaning at all.<sup>20</sup>

"Falsehood flies," Swift continues, "and truth comes limping after it."<sup>21</sup>

Nor is disillusionment with the whole idea of truth a new phenomenon. Here is Peirce, writing in 1896:

When society is broken into bands now warring, now allied, now for a time subordinated one to another, man loses his conception of truth and of reason. . . . [he will] choose his side and set to work . . . to silence his adversaries. The truth for him is that for which he fights.<sup>22</sup>

And again, the same year, writing of what happens when sham reasoning—where the conclusion determines what argument is given, rather than the other way round—becomes commonplace:

[M]en come to look upon reasoning as mainly decorative . . . The result of this state of things is, of course, a rapid degeneration of intellectual vigor, very perceptible from one generation to the next. This is just what is taking place among us before our eyes.<sup>23</sup>

And, I would add, this is just what is taking place among *us*, before *our* eyes, too.

It's not just politicians, and not just outright lies, we have to worry about. As I was beginning to think about this paper, for example, I received an e-mail from somewhere in the labyrinthine bureaucracy of my university headed "Building a Learning Community." This subject-heading turned out to be a grotesquely misleading euphemism for a curt instruction from the Powers that Be that the recipient was to complete a mandatory online "sexual-harassment training" program—*now*.<sup>24</sup> And while I was writing the paper, I read of:

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 1.59 (c.1896).

23 Ibid., 1.58 (c.1896).

24 A very disturbing experience: the only (hypothetical) example involving a professor's misconduct was of someone who allegedly discriminated against a transgender student; and no distinction was made

- Pharmaceutical companies' marketing departments' having recruited ghost-writers to put their names on scientific (or "scientific") studies of their drugs.<sup>25</sup>
- Affluent parents paying large sums of money to falsify their children's academic records or sporting achievements to ensure that these young people would be admitted to "elite" universities and colleges.<sup>26</sup>
- One of those elite universities settling with the government for \$112.5 million after acknowledging that scientists in its employ had falsified results on their applications for federal grants.<sup>27</sup>
- More cases of measles (declared eliminated in the U.S. in 2000!) reported by March of 2019 than in the entire previous year<sup>28</sup>—largely as a result of a scary but obviously flawed and as it turns out, dishonest, article, long debunked, from decades before.<sup>29</sup>
- A feature article in a major newspaper the headline of which announced "Machines that Will Read your Mind," but the text of which said only over and over again, that such machines might *possibly, maybe, sometime in the unspecified future*, be possible—perhaps, or perhaps not.<sup>30</sup>

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between really serious cases of sexual assault and quite minor offenses; and now, I gathered, it was my job to get involved if one student had an issue with another student's behavior on a date.

25 Erika Schwartz, *Don't Let Your Doctor Kill You* (New York: PostHill Press, 2015), 141 (quoting "Hired Writers, Not Scientists, Behind Merck's Vioxx Studies," *medHeadlines*, last modified April 16, 2008, <https://web.archive.org/web/20090218233331/http://medheadlines.com/2008/04/16/hired-writers-not-scientists-behind-mercks-vioxx-studies/>, alluding to Bruce M. Psaty & Richard A. Kronmal, "Reporting Mortality Findings in Trials of Rofecoxib for Alzheimer Disease or Cognitive Impairment: A Case Study Based on Documents From Rofecoxib Litigation," *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association* 299, no. 15 (April 16, 2008): 1813–1817, an editorial in *JAMA* published that same year). The same, I later learned, may be true of the scientific literature on glyphosate, the suspect ingredient in the weed-killer Roundup, now the subject of numerous lawsuits. See Jacob Bunge and Ruth Bender, "Roundup, the World's Best-Selling Weedkiller, Faces a Legal Reckoning," *Wall Street Journal*, April 8, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/roundup-the-weedkiller-that-changed-farming-faces-a-reckoning-11554735900>.

26 See "Investigations of College Admissions and Testing Bribery Scheme," *United States District Attorney's Office for the District of Massachusetts*, accessed May 30, 2019, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-ma/investigations-college-admissions-and-testing-bribery-scheme>.

27 Melissa Korn, "Duke University Agrees to Pay \$112.5 Million in Whistleblower Suit Over Grants," *Wall Street Journal*, March 25, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/duke-university-agrees-to-pay-112-5-million-in-whistleblower-suit-over-grants-11553531422>.

28 Brianna Abbott, "Measles Cases Top Last Year's Total," *Wall Street Journal*, April 1, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/measles-cases-top-last-years-total-11554152226>.

29 *Ibid.* The dreadful article that started the scare was Andrew Wakefield et al., "Ileal-lymphoid-nodular hyperplasia, non-specific colitis, and pervasive developmental disorder in children," *The Lancet* 351 (February 19, 1998): 637–41. See also, for a good summary of the flaws, Ben Goldacre, *Bad Science* (London: Fourth Estate, 2008), 277ff.

30 Jerry Kaplan, "The Machines That Will Read Your Mind," *Wall Street Journal*, April 5, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-machines-that-will-read-your-mind-11554476156>.

And I haven't yet even *mentioned* the political lies, half-truths, quarter-truths, evasions, fudges, deliberate vagueness, etc., that we hear and read every day; they are so many, and so hard to disentangle from the small grains of truth they may contain. In short, unconcern for truth seems—not universal, of course—but every day disturbingly more prevalent than the last.

I suspect this may be in significant part because, in our “age of information,” there is more communication, more information—and hence, more *misinformation*, and more avenues by which the unscrupulous and the careless may spread misinformation.<sup>31</sup> As a result, politicians, universities, drug companies, etc., have more ways to lie, fudge, cheat, spin, than they used to; their lies may be more egregious than they once were; and the audience for these lies may be more credulous than it once was. More than likely the overwhelming flood of information and misinformation now available on the internet is also responsible for leading many people to *give up trying* to distinguish useful material from dreck; and maybe the deep and bitter political disagreements we read of every day has led some to care more about whether an idea favors their side than whether it is true, so that “the truth, for them, is that for which they fight.”

We mustn't lose sight of the fact that our capacity for speech, writing, and conceptualization is one of our most remarkable human talents,<sup>32</sup> without which we couldn't communicate, create social institutions, learn from each other, and pass knowledge from one generation to the next as we do. But at the same time, neither should we lose sight of the fact that, when it is misused, this same talent enables us, as Thomas Hobbes once put it, “to multiply one untruth by another.”<sup>33</sup> If it gets bad enough, this misuse, this multiplication of untruths, can lead to deep-seated mistrust of everything others tell us; and, at the extreme, to social breakdown. So the decline of truthfulness and the consequent disillusion with the whole idea of truth isn't just an intellectual, but potentially a social, disaster, not to mention an invitation to tyranny.

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31 Newley Purnell, “WhatsApp Users Spread Antivaccine Rumors in India,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 13, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/whatsapp-users-spread-antivaccine-rumors-in-india-11555153203>, tells us that this one app alone has an estimated 300 million users in India.

32 See Susan Haack, “Brave New World: Nature Culture, and the Limits of Reductionism,” in *Explaining the Mind*, eds. Bartosz Brozek, Jerzy Stelmach, and Łukasz Kwiatek (Kraków: Copernicus Center Press, 2019), 37–68.

33 Thomas Hobbes, *Human Nature* (1650), in *Hobbes Selections*, ed. J. E. Woodbridge (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930), 53.



Novelist Anne Perry expresses better than I could just how disastrous this is:

Words are our means of communication, that which raises us above the beasts. We can think, we have concepts, we can write and pass our beliefs from one land to another, one generation to the next. Pollute our relationships with flattery and manipulation, our language with lies, propaganda, self-serving use of images, prostitution of words and meanings, and we can no longer reach each other. ... Nothing is real. We drown in a morass of the sham, the expedient. Deceit, corruption and betrayal ... they are the sins of the wolf.<sup>34</sup>

Perry's right: the more widespread lies and half-truths, flattery, euphemism, propaganda, etc., the less we really communicate, the more readily we succumb to settling for the expedient and the deceptive, the weaker our grip on the very idea of truth, and the weaker our will to seek or to speak the truth.

### 3. Lies, Half-Truths, Spin, Evasions, and Ambiguities

**To lie** is wittingly to make a false claim or claims, i.e., a claim or claims that you are aware are not true, with the intention that your audience should believe you. Usually, the intention is to benefit yourself in some way: to avoid blame for something you did, to make yourself seem cleverer or braver or etc., than you really are, to get elected, ..., or whatever. Making a claim that is partly true and partly false—as when the suspect says “I was nowhere near the scene of the crime, but at home with my wife,” when indeed he *wasn't* at the crime scene, but he wasn't with his wife, he was with his girlfriend—is also lying. (But making a claim that you believe to be false but which is in fact true isn't exactly lying; if it's told with the intent to deceive, however, I would say it is a **failed attempt to lie**.)

**To lie by omission**—also known as “being economical with the truth” or “shaving the truth”—is to tell only part of what you know to be the (relevant) truth, and deliberately to suppress the rest, again for your own, or your friends', or your party's, etc., benefit: think of the case where a government hoping to get re-elected reports that claims for unemployment benefits are down, but neglects to mention that this is because many people of working age have given up seeking work. This form of unconcern for truth, especially prevalent today, is often achieved by massaging statistics, and exploiting the naïveté of an audience unaware how easily technically-correct figures may be presented so as to be misleading.

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34 These are the words of William Monk in Ann Perry's *The Sins of the Wolf* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 411–12. The allusion is to Dante's eighth circle of hell, the circle of fraud, where seducers, those who sell ecclesiastical preferment, false prophets, corrupt politicians, hypocrites, etc.—all who commit “the sins of the wolf”—find themselves. See Dante Alighieri *The Inferno* (first published, in Italian, in 1472), Canto XVIII, trans. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2016), 133–37.

**To fudge the truth** is to convey a false impression by using words which are euphemistic, ambiguous, or vague enough that—even though you were well aware that your audience would take you to mean something else, something you know is *not* true—you can say, if you should be challenged, that what you said was true, giving yourself “plausible deniability.” A recent commentator observed that Theresa May’s assurances that “Brexit means Brexit”<sup>35</sup> managed to be at once meaningless and at the same time untrue; more exactly, I would say, they were so vague as to be virtually meaningless, but just meaningful enough to be untrue in any sense in which they might be reassuring.

**To spin the truth** is to say something that’s true, but to present it in such a way as to suggest that it is more favorable than it really is. A drug company presents a direct-to-consumer TV advertisement, for example, where the benefits are listed repeatedly and at length over glowing images of happy patients, images that continue to be displayed as a quieter voice reads the scary list of the drug’s possible side effects at break-neck speed.

And **to be just plain sloppy with the truth** is to say, write, or pass on something as if it were true even though, for all you know, it may be untrue or, even if it is true, misleading. You are just talking for the sake of talking, or to convey the impression you’re a good guy, one of the boys, on the right side, in agreement with, or way ahead of, the crowd; you give no thought to whether what you say is true, about which you couldn’t care less. This is what is known colloquially as “bullshitting,” presumably because such talk, and such writing, is very loose and very copiously produced.<sup>36</sup>

Of course, lies, spin, and all the many other kinds of unconcern for truth are complicated phenomena. For one thing, very often many of these forms are combined, as someone lies, fudges, equivocates, and so on, all at once. For another, while all forms of unconcern with truth have in common that, whether deliberately or unwittingly, the speaker or writer may deceive or mislead others, you may also mislead or deceive others by saying something that you genuinely believe to be true, but that isn’t. If you make a false claim unwittingly, it’s wrong to charge you with lying; however, if you haven’t bothered to check, you have certainly behaved irresponsibly.

Moreover, some lies are egregious and consequential: think of the case where a person in authority officially declares that his country has destroyed all its nuclear weapons when it hasn’t. But not all lies are equally morally blameworthy. Some (those we call “white lies”) are relatively minor, and often intended, not to

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35 Andrew Roberts, “The Establishment Coup Against Brexit,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 12, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-establishment-coup-against-brexit-11555107537>.

36 Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

deceive, exactly, but to spare someone's feelings, set up a surprise party, and such. Others are so casual and routinized that they barely count as lies at all: think of the usual response to the greeting, "how are you?"—"Oh, fine, how are *you*?" we automatically reply, even if we have a splitting headache and aren't fine at all.

Still, one thing is clear: *none of these forms of unconcern with truth would even make sense unless there were a legitimate concept of truth, and a real phenomenon, objective truth.* What I say can't be a lie, i.e., an intentional falsehood, unless its negation is true; what I say can't be partially true unless part of it is true and part false, and it can't be misleading because it's ambiguous or vague unless it suggests something false, something the negation of which is true; one can't be sloppy with the truth unless there's a truth to be sloppy *with*. Moreover, even if *per impossibile* we had moved beyond truth altogether, it would be *true* that we had moved beyond truth altogether. So, if the first strand of the post-truth idea—the skepticism about truthfulness—is, as I fear, true, the second strand—the despair of the concept of truth—must be false.

#### 4. The Truth about Truth

And indeed, the second strand *is* false. There *is* such a thing as objective truth—truth is not at death's door; and there *is* a serviceable, functional truth-concept.

Etymologically, the word "truth" derives from the Old English verb "to trow," to promise, or to swear loyalty. Another notable trace of this obsolete use remains in an old-fashioned but still occasionally-used phrase for getting engaged to be married, "plighting one's troth." In keeping with this etymology, the English words "true" and "truth" have many uses: we speak of true friends and true believers, describe a photo or a portrait as true of its subject, talk of someone faithful to his girl as a true lover, say that a picture hanging crookedly is "out of true," and even speak of "truing the wheels" on a bicycle. Ideally, I'd like to have a fuller understanding of how these uses fit together with the propositional use that preoccupies philosophers. Here, however, in line with this philosophical preoccupation, I will start with the thought that to say that a claim, belief, proposition, statement, etc., is true is to say that you can count on it.

As Peirce puts it, to say that something is true is to say that it is SO, whether you, or I, or anybody believes it is so or not. Not surprisingly, Aristotle had said essentially the same thing long before: "to say of what is that it is or of what is not that it is not, is true..."<sup>37</sup>; and Frank Ramsey would say it again later: "a

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37 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Christopher Kirwan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), Book Gamma, 1011b2.

proposition is true just in case it is the proposition that p, and p."<sup>38</sup> To be sure, none of these obviously correct statements amounts to a complete theory of truth; and some may think that, if we are to defend the concept adequately, we will have to appeal to a robust notion of correspondence or to something like the fancy logical footwork of Tarski's "semantic" approach. But I disagree.

So-called correspondence theories fall into two large classes: the substantial, those with real explanatory teeth, and the toothless, the insubstantial, those that really explain nothing. Some of the substantial correspondence theories, such as Wittgenstein's and Russell's Logical Atomist accounts,<sup>39</sup> require large and implausible metaphysical assumptions, not to mention an explication of the difficult notion of correspondence itself; other substantial correspondence theories, such as J. L. Austin's account in terms of the coincidence of demonstrative with descriptive conventions,<sup>40</sup> apply only to indexical statements. And toothless, insubstantial correspondence theories, such as John Searle's,<sup>41</sup> use phrases like "really, in fact," not to do any real work, but as rhetorical flourishes, emphatic adverbs if you like. Nor does Tarski's semantic theory<sup>42</sup> take us much further; his T-Schema is faithful to the core idea, but as he said from the beginning—and as the failure of the "Davidson Program" eventually revealed to those who didn't take Tarski's word for it—his account applies only to regimented, formal languages like those of mathematics and logic.

As I see it, we should start with what we might call the Aristotelian Insight, with Peirce's simple observation, and with Ramsey's laconic formula. Serious work will be needed: e.g., to explain what makes a proposition the proposition that p, and how to understand the propositional quantifiers that Ramsey's account

38 Frank P. Ramsey, *On Truth*, eds. Nicholas Rescher and Ulrich Majer (Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Springer Science + Business Media, 1992), 11.

39 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1922) (first published in German in 1921); Bertrand Russell, "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism," *The Monist* 28, no. 4 (October 1918): 495–527.

40 J. L. Austin, "Truth," Supplementary Volume, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 24 (1950): 111–28.

41 John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995), chap. 9; "Illocutionary Acts and the Concept of Truth," in *Truth and Speech Acts: Studies in the Philosophy of Language*, eds. Dirk Greimann and Geo Siegart (New York: Routledge, 2007), 31–40. See also Susan Haack "La justicia, la verdad y la prueba: No tan simples, después de todo," in *Debatiendo con Taruffo*, eds. Jordi Ferrer Beltrán and Carmen Vázquez (Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2016), 311–36.

42 Alfred Tarski, "The Concept of Truth in Formalised Languages" (1933), in Alfred Tarski, *Logic, Semantics, Metamathematics*, trans. J. H. Woodger (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 152–278; Alfred Tarski, "The Semantic Conception of Truth and the Foundations of Semantics" (1944), reprinted in *Readings in Philosophical Analysis*, eds. Herbert Feigl and Wilfrid Sellars (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1949), 52–84.

requires in a way that doesn't itself call on the concept of truth; but this strikes me as, though far from easy, a lot more straightforward than trying to get a grip on those logical atoms, negative and disjunctive facts, etc. or to apply Tarski's work to everyday, political, academic, metaphorical, etc., discourse, or ..., etc.

For the former, we might look to Peirce: "A proposition has a subject (or set of subjects) and a predicate. The subject is a sign; the predicate is a sign; and the proposition is a sign that the predicate is a sign of that of which the predicate is a sign"<sup>43</sup>—an observation backed up by his whole complex theory of signs. For the latter, we might look to those who have proposed an understanding of propositional quantifiers as, borrowing Arthur Prior's term, "inference tickets," so that a universal propositional quantifier, "for all p," permits you to infer any instance of p.<sup>44</sup> And in any case, I would add, it surely doesn't follow from the fact that we have as yet no fully satisfactory theory of truth that the Aristotelian Insight is no insight at all, or that that Peirce's brisk statement and Ramsey's laconic formula aren't exactly correct.

Notice that none of these formulations of the core insight requires any reference to an individual, a community, a theory, a scientific paradigm, or, ..., etc.; in short, all recognize that truth is objective, i.e., not relative to anything or anybody. Indeed, it's precisely this aspect that Peirce so effectively articulated when he wrote that truth is SO, "*whether you, or I, or anybody believes it is so or not.*" That's what "objective" means.

All of these formulations, moreover, apply to any truth-capable statement or proposition whatever, regardless of its subject matter. Whether the proposition concerned is mathematical, logical, empirical, historical, legal, musical, literary, ethical, ... or just something about what I ate for breakfast, it is true just in case it's the proposition that p, and p: e.g., it's true that Florida is a *Frye* state just in case Florida *is* a *Frye* state;<sup>45</sup> true that  $7 + 5 = 13$  just in case 7 plus 5 *is* 13, true that I had kippers for breakfast just in case I *did* have kippers for breakfast, true that it's morally OK to torture babies for fun just in case it *is* morally OK to torture babies for fun, ... and so on.

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43 Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 5.553 (1906). Early and late, Peirce maintained that, in a way, every proposition is of subject-predicate form: see *Collected Papers* 2.472 (1867), 5.452 (c.1902), & 2.318–20 (1903). See also Robert E. Lane, "Truth as Will or Representation: Realism in the Post-Truth Era," *Cosmology and Taxis* (forthcoming 2020).

44 See e.g., Dorothy Grover, "Propositional Quantifiers," *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, 1, no.2 (1972): 111–136; C. J. F. Williams, *What Is Truth?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 46–48; Maria-José Frápolli, *The Nature of Truth: An Updated Approach to the Meaning of Truth-Ascriptions* (Berlin: Springer, 2013), 131ff.

45 *Frye* and *Daubert* are two different regimes for determining the admissibility of expert testimony, the latter federal law since 1993 and since adopted by a majority of states, the former still used by a minority of states.

Now, however, you may object that some truths, such as “Florida is now a *Daubert* state,” clearly *are* relative: in this instance, relative to a jurisdiction (Florida state law) and a time (2019).<sup>46</sup> This is true; but it is no real objection to my claim that truth is objective. This is obvious once we distinguish *truth*, the phenomenon or the concept of truth, from *truths*, the propositions, beliefs, theories, claims, etc., that are true. There is one truth, but many truths; and while truth is objective, some truths are relative—they make sense only relativized to a society, a community, a theory, . . . , or, etc.

Still, you may point out, many claims are made, many propositions believed, many theories offered, etc., which are *not* true. Yes; and when lying and all the other forms of unconcern for the truth are commonplace, the words “true” and “truth” begin to grow scare quotes as part of their normal spelling; as “this government report tells us the ‘truth,’ about the state of the economy—yeah, right!” And when a word is routinely hedged about by cynical scare quotes, people naturally enough begin to lose confidence in the concept to which it supposedly refers; as Rorty evidently did, since in my opening quotation he can’t even bring himself to say, what he presumably meant, that he has no use for the concept of objective truth, but feels obliged to write “‘objective truth’” in scare quotes, and so to say the exact *opposite* of what he meant! But, as we’ve seen, the fact that false claims are often made or obliquely conveyed, so far from undermining the concept of truth, actually requires it.

## 5. Overcoming Unconcern for Truth?

Now it’s time—no, it’s past time!—to move on, to ask what we can do to reverse the disturbing trend towards unconcern about, and even despair of, truth, and the appalling idea that truth simply doesn’t matter.

How can you and I protect ourselves from falling for the lies, the half-truths, and all the other misleading stuff we read and hear? First, I reply: we should frankly and freely acknowledge our, and others’, fallibility and cognitive limitations; cultivate the epistemological virtues of humility and circumspection;<sup>47</sup> and always be prepared to say, when it’s true, “I just don’t know, or “Oh damn, I was

46 In 2013, the Florida legislature voted to adopt *Daubert*, and the Governor signed off on the change. But the change is procedural, and so the last word rests with the Supreme Court of Florida. In late 2018, a decision of this court rejected *Daubert* and stuck with *Frye*. *DesLisle v. Crane Co.*, 258 So. 3d 1219 (Fla. 2018). But in May 2019, the same court (though with three new members) ruled that Florida now is, after all, a *Daubert* state! In re: Amendments to the Florida Evidence Code, No. SC19-107 (Fla. May 23, 2019).

47 Susan Haack, “Credulity and Circumspection: Epistemological Character and the Ethics of Belief,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 88 (2014): 27–47.

mistaken; I'm so sorry if I misled you." *Don't* feel you must have an opinion on every subject; *don't* feel you must stick to your old opinion when you realize it was ill-founded; *do* remind yourself that it's only human to be often ignorant, often wrong—and disastrous to pretend otherwise.

Next: we all need to take serious thought about the sources of information on which we rely, to check them, when anything significant is at stake, as least as carefully as an attorney must check the references in a legal brief, or a professor writing a law review article. That's why another law librarian, who told me that none of her beginning law students had ever heard the phrase, "publish or perish," and that all of them thought that publication in a peer-review journal was evidence of reliability,<sup>48</sup> was trying precisely to teach these young people how to be more discriminating, more circumspect, less gullible, in their use of sources.

Nor should we forget that the truth, as Oscar Wilde observed, "is rarely pure, and never simple."<sup>49</sup> Philosophers' examples like "the cat is on the mat" and "snow is white" distract us from the real complexity and interconnectedness of all those many and various truths about our complicated world. And more than, that, we need to be acutely aware of the ramifying complexities of evidence, of the need to take account of negative evidence as well as positive, and of the real possibility that we may not have all the relevant information or may not even know that certain information *is* relevant—and so may have neglected to consider some of Donald Rumsfeld's famous "unknown unknowns."<sup>50</sup> Often, we must draw a conclusion on less evidence than we would ideally like; but we should never forget that we have done so, and never allow the conclusion we drew earlier to blind us if new, and contrary, evidence comes in.

But we don't only need to consider how to protect *ourselves* from the avalanche of lies, misinformation, and all that; if we in the academy are serious about our work, we need to think about how to do all we can to help *our students* protect themselves from what will doubtless be an ever bigger avalanche of misinformation in the future—it's part of our job, after all, not just to teach them stuff, but to help them grow up intellectually. One thing we can do is ensure they grasp such crucial concepts as tendentiousness, bias, credulity, partial truth,

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48 It isn't. See Susan Haack, "Peer Review and Publication: Lessons for Lawyers" (2007), in Haack, *Evidence Matters*, 156–79; Susan Haack, "The Academic-Publication Racket: Whatever Happened to Authors' Rights?" *Borderless Philosophy* 2 (2019): 1–21.

49 The word's are Algernon's, in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, act 1.

50 Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, "Department of Defense News Briefing," *U.S. Department of Defense*, February 12, 2002, <https://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=2636>. See also Susan Haack, *Epistemology: Who Needs It?* (first published, in Danish, in 2011), *Kilikya Felsefe Dergisi (Cicilia Journal of Philosophy)* 3 (2015):1–15 and in *Philosophy South: Filosofia UNISINOS* 16, no. 2 (2015): 183–93.

circumspection, fallibility, and the like; another, to help them, as those law librarians help law students, to discriminate better evidential sources from poorer ones.

"Well, of course," you may say, "that's why we teach our students epistemology." "Not so fast!" I reply. If what you teach them is the usual material in this field—perhaps the Gettier paradoxes, contextualism and all that stuff about broad vs. narrow context, or maybe reliabilism, veritism, how to do Bayesian calculations, etc.—they will learn little or nothing about the complexities of real-life evidence, nor of the virtues that serious inquiry requires. Nor will it help to shift to some variant(s) of "social epistemology," which won't help much unless it tackles issues about evidence and what can make it misleading head-on; and neither will teaching students "virtue epistemology," unless you go much further and far deeper than the usual hackneyed list of epistemic virtues, and stress that what *makes* a virtue epistemic is precisely its connection with subjects' attitude, and their response, to evidence.

"Well, OK," you may reply, "but we also teach critical thinking; isn't that just what you're suggesting?" "Yes and no," I answer. Teaching students to recognize a few formal fallacies won't get them very far; though working through news articles, etc., with them, identifying possible problems, etc., might do some good, and discussing with them how to choose sources and how to get in the habit of checking their sources' sources, would be helpful too. However, some courses in critical thinking, doubtless, are better than other such courses; the worst, I fear, implicitly treat agreeing with the instructor as the litmus test for whether the students are thinking straight. In any case, it's over-optimistic, to say the least, to imagine that even the best such one-semester course is sufficient to make students good, discriminating consumers of information; and absolutely fatal to give students the impression that if they've passed the Critical Thinking exam, they're now set for life. Rather, *every* class we teach should convey, directly or by example, the need for acknowledging one's fallibility, for appreciation of the ramifications of evidence, and for the pitfalls of credulity.

"Yes," you may say now, "but what can we possibly do to reverse the rising tide of misinformation, the ever-growing carelessness with truth, the ever-broader sense that truth doesn't matter? What can *anyone* do, you might ask, against so significant a social trend?" Those are good questions, to which I wish I had better answers than I do. But I will start by reminding you, as W. K. Clifford well knew, that bad, sloppy epistemological habits are infectious,<sup>51</sup> so that avoiding them ourselves, and helping our students avoid them is itself a contribution to the larger project.

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51 W. K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief" (1877), in *The Ethics of Belief and Other Essays*, eds. Leslie Stephen and Sir Frederick Pollock (London: Watts & Co., 1947), 70–96, 73–74.



And then, I think of John Stuart Mill's observation "[b]ad men need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing."<sup>52</sup> (Women, too, of course.) So I will add that each of us can contribute *something* beyond this: when I'm told, "only 2% of claims of sexual harassment are false," for example, I can speak up, and ask, "How, exactly, do we know this? How could *anyone* possibly know?" More generally, when I hear large claims made without evidence, I can ask what the evidence is, and whether there is contrary evidence not mentioned. Sometimes—though not, of course, always—I can look into the basis of such claims myself; and I must find the courage to speak up if I conclude that the claim is not well-founded. Why courage? Because, in the monoculture of political correctness that pervades U.S. universities today, even raising such a question may get you in trouble.

That's too bad. But still and all, we must do what we can, reminding ourselves that the way to resist the tide of misinformation, exaggeration, etc., is—emphatically *not* to allow such outfits as Facebook<sup>53</sup> and Pinterest<sup>54</sup> to filter our information for us—but to renew our commitment to free speech and to a free marketplace of ideas; *and* our commitment not just to allowing, but to encouraging, and participating in, this marketplace, always conscious of our own, as well as others' fallibility. The best—the only—antidote to bad information is good information; the best—the only—antidote to flimsy and inadequate evidence is more and better evidence, the best—the only—antidote to misleading claims is to disambiguate the ambiguities and spell out the vague terms that are leading us astray; and the best—the only—antidote to lies is truth.

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So, you may ask, what is my answer to the question in my title? *Are* we post-post-truth yet? Sorry: it was a trick question; and my answer is, as usual, "yes and no." As we saw, the claim that we are now post-truth, that truth no longer matters, parses into two quite different claims: that more and more people care less and less about truth, and that the concept of truth, and even truth itself, are beyond rescue. So on one understanding we *never were* post-truth: there was always objective truth, and there always was a legitimate, if not yet fully-

52 John Stuart Mill, *Inaugural Address* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1867), 36.

53 Robert McMillan and Brianna Abbott, "Facebook Cracks Down on Vaccine Misinformation," *Wall Street Journal*, March 7, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-cracks-down-on-vaccine-misinformation-11551989347>.

54 Robert McMillan and Daniela Hernandez, "Pinterest Blocks Vaccination Searches in Move to Control the Conversation," *Wall Street Journal*, February 20, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/next-front-in-tech-firms-war-on-misinformation-bad-medical-advice-11550658601>.

explained, truth-concept. And on another understanding, we *still are* post-truth: we still live in a pervasive atmosphere of lies, deception, obfuscation, hyperbole, loose talk, and plain old-fashioned bullshit—an ethos we must fight with all the intellectual and personal weapons at our command.<sup>55</sup>

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