The Truth
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The Problem Of Finding Truth

Though apparently simple at first sight, finding truth is one of the most complex philosophical problems in humanity. Historically, fact checking and consensus are two methods that can be used in the search of truth. In our current society, many events are consensually embraced as truth even when later are shown to be inaccurate or incorrect. We live in the times of post-truth as they say. Conspiranoia, misinformation or biased information are frequently embraced by individuals in society as a truth.

From a philosophical viewpoint, we have attempted to find truth by a number of inquiry methods. The correspondence theory of truth attempts to find truth through fact checking. Therefore, according to this theory a belief is true if and only if it corresponds to a fact. Science, academia, and traditional journalism share this method of finding truth. However it has some limitations. For instance, correspondence theory is limited by the fact that something, in order to be true, has to be witnessed by a human being. For example, if a tree falls and there are no humans that can verify it, the tree did not fall. This may appear silly but it has implications in our daily life. Many theories in science for example cannot be verified. An example of this can be found in religion: Life after death, or in cosmology: The dark matter, or the non observable universe. These cannot be fact checked or verified but are accepted as truth in the religious community or in the scientific community.

Another way of finding truth is through the coherence theory. In this theory something is true as soon it is coherent within a system of beliefs. Truth in its essential nature is that systematic coherence which is the character of a significant whole. Truth can be found through consensus. For example, in our current society, we belief that Homo Sapiens have evolved from monkeys. Few people questions this statement. They embrace it as they learned it in school. If
one attempts to fact check this event. This statement can also be verified by the correspondence method. We can look into fossils and see how some monkeys gradually took a human form leading to Neanderthals, Cromagnons, etc. For the most part, very few people have access to these fossils. Therefore, we accept a textbook or the wikipedia as a reliable source to verify that. In a way we accept by consensus these sources without verifying them on our own. Truth does not have to be witnessed but it is proposed by a coherent system of beliefs. If a person does a scientific study and discovers a finding that does not resonate with the coherent system of beliefs in the scientific community, the finding might be rejected. Even, if the scientific method was rigorously used. On a personal note, last year I did a study on inflammation with patients who had suicidal thoughts. Using a scientific method, I found that basophils were elevated in patients with suicidal thoughts. A limitation of the study was a small sample size (n=71). The study, though well done, was rejected by most journals. Other studies had not found basophilia in suicidal patients. I believe, my findings, would have been published if they had been coherent with the system of beliefs in the scientific community. In my case, as the results were atypical, a larger sample size was requested and it could not be published. In this way, one could argue that even science is limited by the coherence method. One cannot do a study on topics that are disapproved by society or the scientific community. It would be very difficult to get a grant for it or to publish results that challenge the coherence of the system.

The coherence method of finding truth, is the most frequently used in modern journalism and politics. For instance, if a politician or a youtuber states that society is racist. The consensus in society will embrace this as a truth or not. It is very difficult to use a correspondence method of truth to embrace that society is racist. There would be several ways but not a single one. For example, we can try to ask the community if they feel the society is racist. If more than fifty percent of individuals in society feel that society is racist, it would be possible to accept it as truth within a coherence system of beliefs in the community. In contrast, we can try to ask people in the community if they are racist or if they embrace racist values. In this case, it is unlikely that to conclude that society is racist since most people in our society don't feel racist themselves. Here we could live in the dissonance: The majority feels society is racist whereas at an individual level very few people feel to be racist themselves. Another example: president Trump, claimed
that the latter elections were stolen. Within his voters, this statement has been widely accepted. Therefore, for most people that voted for him, the elections were stolen. In contrast, people who did not vote for him, don’t believe it to be truth. Society then is broken around this idea as there is no consensus. This form of polarization creates a breach in connivence, and enhances anxiety in society. It may lead to violence lead by the most radicalized sectors around this belief. In addition, it is difficult to prove by correspondence theory if elections were stolen or not since the voting method in the United States is complex and difficult to comprehend for many citizens. Harmony may be only restored by bringing consensus back. If other leaders of the republican party state that the elections were not stolen, a majority of people in society will reject the idea that the elections were stolen as a truth.

There are other methods of finding truth but all of them are related to these two methods of truth finding: the correspondence and the coherence method. In summary, truth, as an absolute is unreachable or at least we lack the methods to reach truth. We live by propositions of truth. If we are able to bring consensus, no matter what we believe to be truth, we may be able to at least, enhance connivance in our society.

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Moses’ Attempt To Bring Truth

Moses breaking the tables of the law is painting made by Rembrandt in 1659. Today, it can be appreciated at the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin, Germany. The painting shows the moment in which Moses, frustrated by retuning from the mountain and finding that the Jewish people were adoring a golden calf, breaks the two tables of the law written by God. According to the legend, a second set of tables were made after this event. The tables have been traditionally depicted in Christian art as rounded on the top with a square bottom. Rembrandt made Moses breaking the tables of the law later in his life. In his later work, Rembrandt’s brushwork is characteristically broader, less dynamic. It has been hypothesized that this could be related to his loss of eyesight. At the same time, it is mysterious that in this later style, the intensity of his work
seem to have grown. In a way, Rembrandt, a wiser and experienced person. He is able to capture the human quality at a higher level. In Rembrandt’s depiction of Moses, the light strikes the forehead and cheeks creating a deep furrow between his eyebrows. Moses in this painting, appears tired and disappointed. He just arrived from the top of the mountain after a mystical encounter with God. He has received a revelation that may save his people. After that, he enthusiastically comes back down to bring the truth, the light, to find out that his people are not ready for it. Being released from Egyptian slavery has not changed their souls. They will need guidance and leadership to achieve rectitude and find truth. Moses is alone in this endeavor.
The Whole Truth

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'Epigram

'When the compulsion of speech is to find and say the truth which is inclusive, all utterance must be tormented by doubt.'

Louise Gluck, Proofs and Theories, 1989, p. 21

Hebrew letters, as in Arabic, and before them Phoenician and Aramaic, have been classified as an 'abjad' alphabet. This term was coined in 1990 by Peter T. Daniels. It is a neologism based on the first four letters of the Arabic alphabet.

The symbols in Abjad alphabets represent consonants only and not vowels. In day to day reading, vowels are deduced from context or remembered. Vowels are indicated by infra- and superscript dots and lines and are used in formal writing or for learning the language.

The Hebrew alphabet has 22 letters. In Hebrew the word for truth is *emet*. It is comprised of the first, the next to 'middle' and the last letter of the alphabet. The word for lie is *sheker* and is constituted of three of the last four letters.
This quirk is used as a way of teaching ethics. Truth encompasses the whole world (just as the word *emet* covers all the letters from A to Z). Conversely a Lie is constituted of three consecutive letters at the end of the alphabet – narrow and limited.

The question is: what makes completeness and inclusiveness Truthful, and constriction and narrowness Falsehood?

Walter Martin suggested that ‘Truth by definition is exclusive. If Truth were all-inclusive, nothing would be false.’ Here one wonders whether he has a rather narrow view of Truth.

If Truth includes everything then it also includes as a subset, Falsehood. This is acceptable and in its way logical and consistent with the above concept of inclusiveness.

However it does not address the question that narrowness is Falsehood and completeness is Truth.

If I understand correctly I think the explanation has something to do with the understanding of a Monotheistic God.

If an entity is unity and it cannot be divided up into constituent parts then it has to include everything in that mathematical set. However there is a Kabbalistic teaching that God somehow withdrew from Himself and was able to create outside of Himself – that is, the Universe. The Universe is not God – that is Pantheism.

In the story of Job, Satan was presented as a power separate from God but still answerable to Him and able to be controlled by Him. One assumes that God created Satan who existed outside of God's Unity. Hence Truth and Falsehood come from the same stable, as it were.

One suspects therefore that a Monotheistic God in some way incorporates Falsehood. Just as the letters and words of the Hebrew alphabet hint at.

What can we learn from this in a practical way?
The moral lesson would seem to be that we all have an evil inclination and it is up to us
to control it. This recalls the ending of John Steinbeck's East of Eden. Adam on his deathbed said
to Caleb the choice is yours: *timshel* (though mayest) do right or do wrong.

* Timshel is a Hebrew word in Genesis and means 'thou mayest'. Steinbeck used the story of
fratricide as a framework for his novel 'East of Eden'.

* 'The Last Question' (9 pages) is freely available as PDF download.
Conspiracy theories are so engaging because our cerebrums are in a real sense hardwired to discover patterns in our general surroundings. As we evolved, this capacity to track down patterns could mean the difference between life and death. On the off chance that you could not connect dark clouds with an approaching storm, you may get drowned in a flood. If you didn’t sense the association between a shadow and a hunter holding on to murder you, it may be your last misstep ever.

As much as the brain flourishes with finding sense in the commotion, this real-world is a terrible random place. Now and then our cerebral cortex attempts to figure out a situation by finding a pattern, regardless of whether one truly exists. This occurrence is called illusionary pattern perception, and research proposes it plays an enormous part in conspiracy theory beliefs.

A person seeing associations where there aren't any doesn't appear to be fixed to a particular topic. In one ongoing investigation, subjects record the after effects of a series of coin flips. The individuals who sensed a pattern in the random outcomes were more likely to believe in one major conspiracy theory. Researchers additionally seemed to be able to convince people to illusory pattern perception. By asking subjects to watch videos about conspiracy theories before documenting coin flips, the test subjects were bound to see patterns in the random coin flips than the control group.

So are conspiracy theorists better at intuiting what's truly going on? Well, according to neuroscientists, almost certainly not. The real answer might be the dopamine in their minds. Individuals with relatively higher levels of normally occurring dopamine have been discovered to be susceptible to conspiracy theories. One analysis even showed that non-devotee subjects were bound to see designs in random shapes after getting a medication designed to artificially increase their brain’s free dopamine levels.

There is additionally an influential social framework that permits conspiracy theorists to thrive in an otherwise informed community: confirmation bias. At the point when the mind reaches a resolution, information that supports that conclusion is easily assimilated and added to the mental library of realities. This has a strengthening impact and permits opposing data to be excused as
bogus. Ironically, the explosion of information on the web has aggravated the issue. More information may mean more correct data, but it also means more reinforcing falsehoods for conspiracy theorists to assimilate. Conspiratorial echo chambers form, making networks of individuals who think everything from reptile overlords subtly running our country to traveler planes spreading mind-controlling synthetic chemicals across the skies.

While it's amusing to consider living on a huge flat plate constrained by NASA in a sans gravity bubble, ignoring realities and researchers is risky and can prompt some repulsive results. But despite what conspiracy theorists say, the world isn’t ending tomorrow. Studies show these beliefs are frequently set off by a clear lack of control, and that empowering individuals to take action in their own lives can help mitigate the impulse to see patterns when there are none.
At times we encounter from our student days the name of an individual who was highly influential in our education. A scientist who enshrined our understanding of human behavior as a unified material reality. Such a happenstance meeting brings to mind that profound influence in our youth but also may reveal.

*Among all human constructions, the only ones that avoid the dissolving hands of time are castles in the air.*

*De Roberto*
A recent obituary for William Dement, called The Father of Sleep Medicine, filled an entire page in the New York Times. An early researcher of sleep, he was among the first to bring subjects into a sleep laboratory to slumber as brain activity (EEG), eye movements, heart rate, respiration, and body temperature were measured. He was also a cool guy who played bass at jazz clubs. As a medical intern in New York, he set-up a sleep laboratory in his apartment, and invited Rockette dancers to serve as research subjects in sleep deprivation studies.

Nathanial Kleitman’s laboratory at the University of Chicago first sparked Dement’s lifelong passion for sleep research and for understanding the relationship between rapid-eye movements and dreams. In his biography Dement proudly asserted, “I believe that the study of sleep became a true scientific field when I finally was able to make all-night continuous recording of the brain and eye activity during sleep.”

Dement documented that the sleep cycle passed from drowsiness through several 90-minute cycles from light to deep sleep, which were interrupted by paradoxical wakeful-like brain activity and bursts of saccadic eye movements. These rapid eye movements, or REM periods, were often accompanied by dream reports once the participant was awakened. All subjects reported dreaming several times in each sleep session. Here, finally, was an exciting scientific method that appeared to provide a physiological record of what was occurring in the brain as a person was asleep and dreaming. The representation of the dream was captured in the subject’s recall of it when awakened.

For some must watch while some must sleep.

So runs the world away.

Hamlet

Dement’s research fostered the idea, now prevalent among neuroscientists, that the brain activity was the material basis of conscious experience and, further, that unconscious processes like dreaming could be fully understood as reflections of brain function. Researchers Alan Hobson and Robert McCarley suggested that dreams are the result brain activity caused by the spontaneous firing of specific neurons in the brain stem during REM, which triggers random
neural activity in the visual system and cerebral cortex. The cortex struggles to synthesize and make sense of the random activity with the creation of a dream. Hobson and McCarley proposed that even though the source of dreams is random, the dreamer’s daytime motivations, experiences, and memories may guide the interpretation of dream content.

With such thrilling advances in neuroscience on the physiology of sleep and dreaming, were not the mysteries of the mind itself soon to be uncovered? Graduate students like myself entered our professional lives in high hopes that we would lead the way to a scientific understanding of consciousness. After all, powerful correlations were established between and among EEG activity, rapid eye movements, and the dream state. Were there not other aspects of human behavior to understand as reflections of underlying physiology?

A few years later, William Masters and Virginia Johnson employed physiological measures to uncover the Human Sexual Response cycle as couples copulated in their laboratory. Participants were hooked up to devices that measured brain wave activity, heart rate, respiration, body temperature, and sexual tumescence. Masters and Johnson used prostitutes to serve as participants in their research because they felt that female subjects would not be available (even though it was the 1960s, sex without love was considered distasteful). Like sleep, the human
sexual response revealed a cycle consisting of several phases: excitement, plateau, orgasm, and resolution. Masters and Johnson published a book of their findings for scholars, which nonetheless, broke sales records for a studious book on sex research.4

Dement and Masters showed that intimate and private aspects of human behavior were subject to physiological recording that yielded fairly precise correlates of sleep and sex. This gave impetus to the idea that human behavior was nothing more than a material enterprise. It was assumed that future research would reduce consciousness itself to the neurochemistry of brain function. Our sexuality, dreams, and awareness were wholly part of the material world.

Kleitman disregarded the dream reports as a significant finding, but for Dement, who intended a career in psychiatry, the study of dreams was, as Freud said, the royal road to the unconscious. A dream is a life-like experience during sleep that is accepted as real by the dreamer. Dreams create a narrative of the dreamer’s world. Do dreams have purpose? Do dreams have meaning?

The distinction between the purpose or function of dreams and the meaning of dreams concerned sleep scientists since the discovery of REM. However, for psychoanalysts the theater of the night created salient symbols that exposed the patient’s unconscious thoughts, conflicts, and anxieties. Indeed, a dream had meaning that was revealed through interpretation when the patient was awake. As Dement and his colleagues framed the question of the meaning of dreams,
The major technique by which psychoanalysts attempt to arrive at the hidden meaning of a dream is called free association. A patient will think about an image from a dream or a whole dream and without inhibition or censorship say whatever comes to mind. This usually occurs without difficulty and the thought usually seems important and clarifying. If the psychoanalyst has worked with the patient for a long time, he or she often knows where the ideas and associations are leading, or that they can relate to certain aspects of the patient’s personality or life. The fact that the psychoanalyst knows the patient extremely well introduces an obvious bias to an interpretation.

In large measure, the meaning a dream has for us is the meaning we confer upon it while we are awake. We may free associate and report our recollection of the dream, not the dream experience. If the meaning of dreams depends on the wakened dreamer, then is the content meaningful while the dreamer is asleep? Sigmund Freud would certainly say yes—that the unconscious mind has intention to reveal a conflict or desire to consciousness. Accordingly, the meaning of a dream is inseparable from the dreamer’s state of awareness. The hidden meaning is transferred unchanged from unconscious to conscious states. Is this so? Most dreams are forgotten upon waking, or not even reflected upon as we go about our daily activities. Many dreams are a jumble of inchoate, fragmentary images and thus not open to interpretation. So, perhaps the significance placed on hidden meaning is overstated. Maybe dreams are fragments of consciousness without consequence. But do dreams have a purpose? Or, like hidden meaning, are they castles in the air?

Alan Hobson denied dreams of any function in sleep. He asserted that dreaming was a byproduct of REM sleep without purpose: “Because dreams are so difficult to remember, it seems unlikely that attention to their content could afford much in the way of high-priority
survival value. Indeed, it might be assumed that dreaming is an epiphenomenon of REM sleep whose cognitive content is so ambiguous as to invite misleading or even erroneous interpretation.” In a later paper, Hobson suggested that prior daytime experiences and motivations may be integrated into the dream.

The early work of Dement and others hypothesized that rapid-eye-movement sleep was the neurophysiological substrate of dreaming. This triggered a cascade of research over the next six decades into the function or purpose of REM sleep. Memory consolidation, emotional regulation, threat simulation, and the individuation of personality were among the models suggested as functions of dreams. However, Dement’s hypothesis was challenged because even after decades of research, it could not explain the characteristics of dream reports, let alone dreams themselves. “Therefore, even the neurophysiological correlates of dreaming are still unclear, and many questions remain unresolved. Do the representations that constitute the dream emerge randomly from the brain, or do they surface according to certain parameters? Is the organization of the dream’s representations chaotic or is it determined by rules?” These are significant questions that have eluded explanation; however, the essence of the hypothesis—the neurophysiological substrate of dreams—was ignored.

How do we reduce the dream experience, not merely the dream report, to brain activity? How do we move from the subjective experience to the material events in the brain? What is the material basis of dreams? The question was ignored for good reason. It is not possible to reduce conscious or unconscious experience to brain activity in any way.

Matter and mind are separate categories of reality. Natural philosopher Rene Descartes (1596–1650) ran into the same problem of mind and body as separate realities—soul and matter—that interacted through the brain’s pineal gland. Material things like the brain were controlled by physical laws; immaterial things like consciousness were controlled by non-physical laws. What was the nature of the energy transfer between immaterial mind (soul) and the material body (brain)? Was the energy transfer material, or was the energy transfer spiritual? If either were
true, then what was the nature of the interaction? In what way did spirit affect matter, and what of the reverse? This was the conundrum for students of mind and brain.

Neuroscientists blithely replied, “There is no problem, the soul does not exist! There is a single unified material reality.” Dreams are emergent events that are integrated within the neurophysiology of the brain. But now we are back to the original question: If the neurophysiological substrate of dreams is objectively physical, how do we explain the subjective experience of the dream itself?

_Ay there’s the rub._

References

Post-modernism can be characterized as a movement that attacks foundations; and that attacks truth or rather, the unity of truth. Just as Nietzsche was a precursor of the postmodernist attack on foundations, he too was also a precursor of the postmodernist attack on truth. Here, I would like to explain this attack by focusing on the writings of Nietzsche.

It’s a well established fact that Nietzsche wrote genealogies - stories about the historical origins of our values, in order to show that those values are not as obvious and self-evident as we tend to believe. Those stories were mostly based on moral values, but the same holds true for other kinds of values, including scientific or cognitive values. Nothing may seem more obvious than that we should value truth - that truth is better than falsehood. But Nietzsche repeatedly asked us why we believe that. Couldn't it be the case that we actually prefer falsehood? - That we
humans even need falsehood in order to survive, that we couldn't handle the truth if we ever were to find it. I'm going to leave those truly radical questions aside for now. Instead, I want to focus on the question of whether we can know the truth, and especially whether we can know the objective truth about what the world is really like. Here, Nietzsche uses biological theories to perform another genealogy. Look at this small aphorism from one of Nietzsche's notebooks; he writes – “it is improbable that our ‘knowledge’ should extend further than is strictly necessary for the preservation of life. Morphology shows us how the senses and the nerves, as well as the brain, develop in proportion to the difficulty of finding nourishment”. What Nietzsche is saying here is that all human capacities are developed just far enough to be useful for our survival. Our eyes are good enough to see Tigers at a reasonable distance, or to notice the distinction between a stick and a snake from up close, but they are not good enough to see the individual cells of a plant or to see distant galaxies. Why is that? Well, because it is, or at least it used to be essential to our survival that we could see tigers and snakes, but not of course that we could see cells or galaxies. Hence, is logical that our eyes have developed as far as they have, but no further. Now what is true of the eyes, Nietzsche suggests, is surely also true of the brain. Our capacity for thought will have developed just enough to aid our survival, but no further. There is certainly no reason to assume that it has developed far enough for us to know the objective truth about what the world is really like. The idea that we could know the objective truth may seem reasonable if you believe that God has given man his intellect in order to grasp and understand the world. But, if you accept Nietzsche's more biological story, then there is no longer any reason to believe that our brains are adequate to this presumably difficult task. So, we shouldn't believe that we can ever know the objective truth. But Nietzsche wants to go further than that - he wants to claim that in fact, there is no objective truth. Truth is always, and necessarily subjective. He writes - “truth is the kind of error without which a certain species of life could not live”. What does that mean? How could truth be a kind of error? Well, Nietzsche says language divides the world that we experience in two groups of things that are supposed to be the same. The word ‘snake’ can be applied to lots of experiences, all of which are experiences of the same thing, namely a ‘snake’. But Nietzsche goes on – “no two things ever are the same, no two objects are identical, no two experiences are identical”. In order for language to function, we first have to abstract away from
an infinite amount of detail in order to focus on just a few aspects of reality. We can only say those two things are the same; they are both snakes because we ignore almost all the detail about them. In this way, truth is a kind of error. Truth exists only in language, and language is an abstraction from the world in which we close our eyes for almost everything, in order to focus on just a few details. As Nietzsche wrote that truth is the error without which a certain species of life could not live, that second part has to do with the fact that of course humanity had to create languages, which made the distinctions that humans needed to make in order to survive. Our languages make a distinction between sticks and snakes because it is essential for us to be able to quickly abstract away from everything else - seeing something that looks like a snake and immediately getting out of the way. That happened in prehistory and it is still happening now. We shape our languages to fit our needs; for instance, when we distinguish between rebels and terrorists, are we describing a real distinction in the world or are we just making a distinction that suits our own political needs? Nietzsche would probably suggest that it is the latter not the former. So, when we say the truth is a kind of error - that does not mean that there is a better truth somewhere else, a real truth, a truth that would not be an error. Sentences or thoughts are the only things that can be true or false, and they only exist in language. Hence, truth only exists in language. But languages always falsify the world; they always make it simpler than it is in ways that benefit our survival as physical individuals, as cultural groups and so on. All truth is a kind of error because all truth is necessarily prejudiced and partial. It is always only ‘my’, or at most, ‘our’ truth. There is a delightful passage in Nietzsche's book ‘The Genealogy of Morals’, where he imagines some lambs saying to each other that birds of prey are evil and lambs are good, at which the birds of prey just laugh and reply that they still like the Lambs since nothing is as tasty as a little lamb. The moral of course is that the truth of the Lambs is not the same as the truth of the birds because they have a very different ‘perspective’ on the world. Let's think for a moment about that word - ‘perspective’. It is one that Nietzsche uses a lot; he calls himself a ‘perspectivealist’. He writes that we have finally come to see that it is absurd to stand in your own little corner of the world, and claim that only perspectives from that little corner are correct - that they are the objective truth and that all the other perspectives are wrong. You can't judge between these perspectives, Nietzsche would say. You might prefer one or the other for certain
reasons maybe as a matter of taste, but you can't seriously claim that one perspective is true and
the other is false. They all have some claim to validity, and thus the idea of a single objective
truth vanishes, and that is precisely what the postmodernist attack on the unity of truth is all
about. Still, there is something a bit unsatisfying about this metaphor of perspectives. It is
obvious that Nietzsche believes that different truths can directly contradict each other; the lambs
and the Eagles for instance, or the early Christians and their Roman opponents have exactly
opposite ideas about morality, but that is not how perspectives work. If I have one perspective on
a mountain, and you have another perspective on that same mountain, then we are both seeing a
different part of the mountain and we can combine our perspectives to get a better grasp of the
mountain as a whole. So Nietzsche believes that truths can contradict each other; that they can be
so opposed with no way to combine them; that history in fact is often like an arena where
different truths fight each other to the death. But, perspectives as we know them from visual
experience can always be combined into a single whole. The metaphor of perspectives then is not
a very good metaphor for explaining how Nietzsche and the post modernists really think about
truth.

One final note - the attack on foundations and the attack on the unity of truth is at the
bottom, the same attack. If there were foundations; like fundamental truths that everybody could
agree on, then everybody should be able to agree about all the other truths as well and, the truth
would be one. On the other end, if there are no foundations, then every claim to truth is always
open to criticism, and the truth will not be one. If you reject one, you have to reject the other as
well.
Witness To Truth


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“Practical politics consists in ignoring the facts . . .” declared Henry Adams in the second volume of *The education of Henry Adams.* Too often, politicians, office holders, and candidates for office ignore, twist, distort, and disregard facts in their political discourse. Politicians sometimes behave as if the facts underlying their assertions are not important to an informed public. According to author Lucas Graves, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Wisconsin, in response to these shortcomings in public discourse and the failure of the news media to fully reveal the veracity of their postings, a new class of political fact-checkers has emerged—journalists who specialize in assessing public claims and communicate their findings to other journalists, politicians, activists, and the general public. *Deciding What’s True* contends that the new fact-checkers constitute a reform movement that reaches to the core of American journalism. “How has the Internet — not as a technological force, but as a complex of affordances rendered meaningful by new practices, norms, and organizations — transformed
journalistic work and the world of news production?” The new actors and behaviors reveal deeper currents in the practice of journalism and its defining professional norm.

While a graduate student, Lucas volunteered to intern and interview journalists at the elite fact-checking organizations (FactCheck.org; Polifact, Washington Post’s Fact Checker) to learn the techniques of how factual veracity is uncovered and the public informed. His fact-checker training involved learning the matrix for choosing which facts to check, researching and deciding what is true, and conducting extended case studies in which the fact-checker as journalist draws on reason, judgment, and, ultimately, values to interpret a contested assertion and make a coherent assessment of where the truth lies. *Deciding What’s True* hinges on Graves’ experiences with the respected fact checking organizations at which he worked and is essentially an account of their motivations, practices, and results within the ecology of journalism.

Succeeding the tradition set by Herb Gans in the classic work on news media, *Deciding What’s News*, Graves dates the origins of professional fact-checking to December 9, 2011, when a blogger issued a call to arms against the mainstream news media: “It’s 2001, and we can Fact Check your ass.” The phrase quickly entered the meme blogosphere and became a rallying cry for the antagonism between bloggers and professional journalists. The internet afforded bloggers a medium for criticism that would take journalists to task for errors in reporting. And, of course, journalists would frequently counter these vacuous, off-the-cuff, superficial attacks on their own well-researched news accounts. Such was the heated climate in the ecosphere of news reporting, which included bloggers, journalists, activists, commentators, and the news organizations. The veracity of news accounts was often called to question in blogs, with rebuttals and counterclaims by journalists. It was within this milieu, that FactCheck.org was established in 2003 and PolitiFact and The Washington Post’s Fact Checker both were founded in 2007 to bring professional fact-checking to journalism. Graves describes the newswork of fact-checkers thus:

Fact-checkers scan the news and pore over transcripts looking for suspicious claims; they trace the media origins of political rumors and bogus political career of these claims; and they promote their conclusions eagerly to other journalists, encouraging news outlets to cite their findings and to invite them on the air. Fact-checkers do, in one sense, assume
the journalist’s traditional role as witness: They witness and report on mediated events. Fact-checkers are both students of and participants in a news ecosystem which assembles news, and constructs authority through citation and annotation of other media.

Document exegesis is the core of a professional fact-checker’s newwork. Graves terms this activity annotative journalism, which he defines as journalism that proceeds mainly through the critical analysis of published texts, be they news accounts, official documents, or other publicly available texts.

Like bloggers, they exploit the affordances of hypertext for citation and annotation, for linking and quoting and excerpting. Their style of newwork is profoundly intertextual and relies on formal and informal ties to other news organizations. Fact-checkers draw on published news accounts as a source both of dubious claims and of the evidence to check those claims, while they encourage other news outlets to cite their research. Fact-checkers pay avid attention to the traces their work leaves through the news ether, and to how it is assessed by journalists, political figures, high-profile bloggers, and the wider online public.

Once a dubious claim is uncovered, it is made available to the news media to be shared with the public. Fact-checkers often question the effects of their newwork. Does fact-checking actually improve the veracity of public discourse? Do politicians actually pay attention to the facts in their debates, advertisements, public statements? With the inception of fact-checking, has truthfulness flourished in of what appears in the press and media?

Graves believes that fact-checking has the potential to effect change in three different ways for three different audiences. First, a fact-check may provide information that corrects an erroneous belief or immunizes the reader against false claims and perhaps changes their thinking. Second, fact-checking may encourage other journalists to challenge falsehoods and adjudicate factual debates rather than just report competing “he said, she said” views. Finally, fact-checking may, as a consequence of its effects on public opinion or press coverage, inhibit political lying by making it more costly for public figures to distort the truth. At professional fact-checking
conferences, examples of such positive results are proffered in small numbers. However, the public’s notice of fact-checking reports seemingly grows logarithmically.

As journalists, fact-checkers claim that it is not their mission to moralize or clean up the lies in the cultural landscape, “Just the facts ma’am,” as uttered by Jack Webb in almost every episode of the TV series “Dragnet.” Fact-checkers are not the police of fraudulent or corrupt public discourse. Rather, their role is to make known false or misleading claims so that what Herb Gans has called “journalism’s theory of democracy” aids citizens to make well-informed choices at the ballot box.

As an engaged participant and concerned academician, Graves has offered an in-depth history of professional fact-checking from its inception. The landscape, work, and effects of this new class of journalists who assess public claims are placed within the wider context of journalism to assure us, the public, that politicians do not ignore the facts.
Peeling Back The Layers

Ali Saleem Manghi, MBBS, Ziauddin Medical University.

Somebody had shared an excerpt from a book that feels almost like a response to the widely available self-help books in the market. The author writes that it is a better approach to appreciate the struggles of life, and try to sustain values that an individual can control.

The snippet in question stated that values are at the core of every action we take. If someone has “poorly” chosen the definition of what success/failure means to them, then everything from emotions, thoughts, and actions will be out of sync. It explains how people are not adept at answering “why” questions, which renders them unable to achieve an extensive awareness of their personal values. It goes on to give practical examples of loneliness and wanting to be rich and argues that decisions are based on chasing emotional highs, not genuine contentment.

“Take a moment to think of something that’s really bugging you. Now ask yourself WHY it bugs you. Chances are the answer will involve a failure of some sort. Then take that failure and ask why it seems TRUE to you. What if that failure wasn’t really a failure? What if you’ve been looking at it the wrong way?”

This piece resonates with me, and I find myself agreeing with the author’s viewpoint. Too often, there is a tendency in individuals to shift the blame onto external factors for their current woes. “I will be happy if I am rich/ have a partner, etc” is something that is heard often. While they may play a certain part, it does little to solve the core problem. Why is there such a strong desire to achieve that particular goal? Why have they chosen that particular metric? Why is it...
that the person will be happy only upon achieving the desired result, and not find satisfaction in the journey towards the goal?

“Honest self-questioning is difficult. It requires asking yourself simple questions that are uncomfortable to answer. In fact, in my experience, the more uncomfortable the answer, the more likely it is to be true”.¹

We are frequently told that communication is key when it comes to having honest and meaningful relationships. I feel that applies internally as well. It is never easy to accept the fact that we may be locked in a prison of our own making. Being mindful of what you are trying to achieve and why you are chasing it is a constant process. We need to have these dialogs frequently with ourselves. Being honest with oneself will help prevent falling into the negative loop they may have been stuck in. It will assist in making sure that the problem will be solved long-term and avoid the need for that short-term high.

There is nothing wrong with having goals, but it is important to be mindful of why we have set them. That will help in achieving a healthy state of mind.

References:
  1. The Subtle Art of Not Giving A F*ck Chapter 4: The value of suffering page 73.
Cinema and Psychiatry

Coherence

Fernando Espí Forcén, M.D., Ph.D., Department of Psychiatry, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston

James Ward Byrkit directs this surreal, scientific, psychological thriller in which a group of individuals struggle to understand which is the true reality they live in. The film plays with quantum theory of different realities co-existing. A group of friends gather for dinner at one of their houses. That night a visible comet is passing close to the Earth. The comet is able to challenge the quantum moment and brings a wide array of existential possibilities for this group. The house they are in is just one of this existential possibilities. If they leave the house they may have to face alternative realities.
Future Issues

Winter 2021 - The Existence
Spring 2021 - Justice

To submit a manuscript you can email the editor at fespiforcen@gmail.com

wikimedia commons: Images
IMD: Movie images