

## Opinion Page: Truth is Real

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It is often said, rather casually, that truth is dissolving, that we live in the ‘post-truth era.’ But truth is one of our central concepts – perhaps our most central concept – and I don’t think we can do without it. To believe that masks prevent the spread of COVID-19 is to take it to be true that they do. To assert it is to claim that it is true. Truth is, plausibly, central to thought and communication in every case. And, of course, it’s often at stake in practical political debates and policy decisions, with regard to climate change or vaccines, for example, or who really won the election, or whom we should listen to about what.

One might have hoped to turn to philosophy for a clarification of the nature of truth, and maybe even a celebration of it. But philosophy of pragmatist, analytic and continental varieties lurched into the post-truth era a century ago. If truth is a problem now for everyone, if the idea seems empty or useless in ‘the era of social media,’ ‘science denialism,’ ‘conspiracy theories’ and suchlike, maybe that just means that ‘everyone’ has caught up to where philosophy was in 1922.

### Truth in Tradition of Philosophy

Before the 20th century, reflection on truth in Western intellectual and spiritual traditions usually exalted it:

Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know

declares John Keats, very Grecianly, or at least Platonically, Plato having anointed truth as the goal of philosophy, the goal of human life. ‘Assuredly we must be bold to speak what is true, above all when our discourse is upon truth [*aletheia*],’ Socrates says in

the *Phaedrus*. ‘It is there that true being dwells, without colour or shape, that cannot be touched; reason alone, the soul’s pilot, can behold it, and all true knowledge is knowledge thereof.’ Plato’s truth is identical not only with the beautiful, but with the good and the just. It is the highest thing. Jesus agrees, proclaiming himself at John 14:6 to be the way, the truth and the life.

Philosophical reflection has not always treated truth as a god, but it was certainly a central concept, commitment and question for some 2,500 years. Characteristically, Aristotle is more grounded than his teacher, Plato, when he gave the classic formulation of the correspondence theory: ‘To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true.’ That’s fairly crisp if somewhat bewildering, but this definition, like many characterisations of truth, appears oddly redundant, notably uninformative. On the other hand, every formulation seems beset by redundancy, and the terrifying question looms: is that definition of ‘truth’ itself true?

### Correspondence Theory

The correspondence theory has been formulated and reformulated over the centuries. ‘Truth is the agreement between intellect and object,’ says Thomas Aquinas, explaining ‘agreement’ by means of near-synonyms such as ‘concord’ or ‘conformity’. Immanuel Kant puts it like this: ‘Truth is the agreement of cognition with its object.’ That seems fairly clear until you start pressing, since Kant thinks that empirical facts are produced within the forms of human consciousness. In some sense, for Kant, truth is the agreement of cognition with itself, or with its own involuntary constructions, rather than with an external reality. Ludwig Wittgenstein, in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), perhaps the last great statement of the correspondence theory, treated sentences or propositions as pictures: if the elements of the world depicted correspond to the elements of the picture, which accurately represents them in their relations to one another – if picture matches fact – then the proposition is true.

However, the ‘agreement’ or ‘matching’ on which correspondence rests is difficult to explain. Philosophers found they couldn’t themselves agree about what (sentences? propositions? beliefs? cognitions? pictures? ideas?) was supposed to agree with what (objects? facts? the world? reality?). And then there was the little matter of the agreement itself, which seems to be conceived as producing a simulation or picture of reality in your head or in your language, and trying to assess whether the representation sufficiently resembles things as they really are, apart from all representations. This, as many 20th-century philosophers, including Wittgenstein himself, came to note, is evidently impossible. It seems to require us to exit our own consciousness and our own cultures.

### Coherence Theory

For such reasons, and under the influence of Kantian and Hegelian idealism, the various classical versions of correspondence were challenged by coherence theories, which incidentally re-exalted truth. Underneath these developments was a struggle about what sort of thing reality is as a whole: a series of discrete facts independent of human consciousness, as the correspondence theory suggests, or a web or network of interdependent facts, leaning on each other and perhaps on human consciousness, only understandable as a whole, as the idealists insisted.

Of course, logical coherence does bear on truth: if you believe both horns of a contradiction, for example, you have at least one false belief. Falsity can sometimes be corrected in one direction or the other by pointing out that what someone is saying now is incompatible with what they said before. The British idealist F H Bradley formulated the view like this in 1914:

The general view, which others and myself may be said to have inherited [from Hegel], is this – that the criterion [of truth] lies in the idea of system. An idea is true theoretically because, and so far as, it takes its place in, and contributes to, the organism of knowledge. And, on the other hand, an idea is false of which the opposite holds good.

To get the ultimate truth, we would need to see how the particular claim fits into something like a complete theory or system of the Universe as a whole: each fact is a fact and is the fact it is, only in relation to such a system, or only because it finds a place in such a system. ‘We cannot assume,’ wrote Harold Joachim in 1906, ‘that the idea in question possesses its “significance” (its fullness of meaning or its power to constitute truth) alone and in its own right. It in turn derives its significance from a larger significant system to which it contributes.’

Replying to Joachim, Bertrand Russell considered the conspicuously false claim ‘Bishop Stubbs was hanged for murder.’ Now, let’s suppose, Bishop Stubbs was a saint, and his alleged hanging completely incompatible with most of what is known of him. However, the belief that he was hanged for murder might happily keep company in a distorted anti-clerical belief system with such propositions as ‘Most Bishops are violent criminals,’ or ‘Bishops are generally hanged.’ And, for that matter, consider the case in which Bishop Stubbs actually turned out to be guilty of murder, which does not at all cohere with what we thought we knew about him. It might be true for all that, disturbingly enough.

The overwhelming objection to the coherence theory, in short, is that there might be two or more equally coherent theories or belief systems that contradict one another, in which case coherence seems to drive us to describe two, or many, flatly incompatible beliefs, such as ‘the vaccines work’ and ‘the vaccines don’t work’, as true, if each appears as an element in a sufficiently coherent system. And perhaps they do, as each functions in its own information bubble. Indeed, it might have been a certain commitment to a coherence view that drove Hegel to abandon or at least qualify the principle of non-contradiction, the claim that if a sentence is true, it’s not also false. At that point, however, coherence is getting pretty incoherent. And to have any truth at all, we might have to wait, with Hegel, for the synthesis of all knowledge and history into a single final account.

By the early 20th century, these views seemed to many philosophers to introduce more obscurities than were

there to begin with. In an academy in which the sciences and mathematics were in a period of relatively clear and useful results (and in which most scientists and mathematicians were operating quite well without a grand metaphysical theory of truth), the millennia-long history of reflections on this topic came to seem something of an embarrassment.

### Pragmatism and Truth

The first real pinprick to the truth blimp was inflicted by American pragmatism, devised by [C S Peirce](#) around 1880 to bring philosophy up to speed with empirical science. Pragmatism demanded truths that could conceivably make a difference to someone, and a theory of truth that shows ‘what we practically mean’ when we say something is true. The philosopher [William James](#), in his lecture ‘What Pragmatism Means’ (1906), called for a theory that gives us a sense of truth’s ‘cash-value’. Or as [John Dewey](#) put it in *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920):

If ideas, meanings, conceptions, notions, theories, systems are instrumental to an active reorganisation of the given environment, to a removal of some specific trouble and perplexity, then the test of their validity and value lies in accomplishing this work. If they succeed in their office, they are reliable, sound, valid, good, true ... if they increase confusion, uncertainty and evil when they are acted upon, then are they false. Confirmation, corroboration, verification lie in works, consequences. Handsome is that handsome does. By their fruits shall ye know them. That which guides us truly is true – demonstrated capacity for such guidance is precisely what is meant by truth.

A belief or theory is true, for the pragmatists, to the extent that it practically helps us solve problems or allows us to usefully continue our research. That’s what we mean when we say it’s true that the vaccines are effective. There’s no practical purpose to be served by a metaphysical theory or a gnomic formula beset by obscurity and circularity. Pragmatism, wrote [Richard Rorty](#) in 1982, ‘says that truth is not the sort of thing one should expect to have a philosophically interesting theory about.’

### Post-Truthism in the 1920s

The post-truth era in philosophy was properly inaugurated in short order after Dewey’s (and Russell’s) pronouncements when, in 1927, [Frank P Ramsey](#) flatly declared the whole notion of truth to be redundant, to convey no content or information. ‘There is really no separate problem of truth but merely a linguistic muddle,’ he wrote. “‘It is true that Caesar was murdered’ means no more than that Caesar was murdered, and ‘it is false that Caesar was murdered’ means that Caesar was not murdered.’ Ramsey conceded that to say ‘That’s true!’ might express emphasis or agreement, but it has no content apart from the sentence it emphasises. Truth, he added, is a ‘superfluous addition’. Much of the analytic reflection on the truth that followed let the air out one way or another. Philosophers formulated ‘deflationary’ theories, or simply declared the whole question useless nonsense.

The project shifted from grandly characterising truth in a crisp aphorism to making observations about the concept that could conceivably have a bearing in logic or science. Alfred Tarski’s T-schema first put forward in 1933, gives a procedure for saying what makes each true sentence true, rather than providing a crisp definition. The resulting formula appears circular or redundant, just what we’d expect from Ramsey’s claim that ‘truth’ is superfluous. The sentence ‘Snow is white’ is true if and only if snow is white, Tarski points out, and you could then begin to enumerate the truth conditions of every declarative sentence, or any sentence that makes a positive claim, by as it were ‘disquoting’ it, just removing it from the quotation marks so that it seemed to be about the world rather than about words. For that matter, the sentence ‘Snow is chartreuse’ is true if and only if snow is chartreuse.

Though Tarski’s T-schema was presented as an interpretation of the role of truth in logic and mathematics, it’s all we can really say about the meaning of truth even in ordinary language, if Ramsey is right. That is more or less the position that came to be called ‘deflationism’. Tarski’s approach gives a recursive definition, a procedure for generating the correct application of the concept rather than straightforwardly telling us

‘what it means.’ But it is also, in its own way, an attempt to say what ‘true’ means: whatever the sentence it’s embedded in means, without it.

### Contemporary Deflation of Truth

By 1996, Donald Davidson in ‘The Folly of Trying to Define Truth’ was describing the by-then vast Ramsey/Tarski/deflationist history, to which he had centrally contributed, as the attempt to ‘eliminate’ truth. He also issued a somewhat vague plea to revive the concept of truth, to try to show what role it plays in everyday human communication. Maybe he was hinting that, though ‘The election was stolen’ is indeed true if and only if the election was stolen, that’s not going to help us conduct a democracy.

On the continental side of the great disciplinary divide, philosophers were somewhat longer in getting suspicious of truth as a general notion. Martin Heidegger’s wild and difficult treatment in ‘On the Essence of Truth’ (1930), despite his own distrust of metaphysics, was perhaps the last great outbreak of Hegelian-style speculation on the topic. Heidegger starts by demanding to know what must be the case about the world and human beings if correspondence is to be possible. Consider an ordinary statement about a coin, for example and what it would mean for it to match up with the coin itself. ‘The coin is made of metal,’ he points out, sensibly enough. ‘The statement is not material at all. The coin is round. The statement has nothing at all spatial about it. With the coin something can be purchased. The statement about it is never a means of payment ... How can what is completely dissimilar, the statement, correspond to the coin? It would have to become the coin and in this way relinquish itself entirely.’

Heidegger’s approach was not to abandon the question of truth, but to retreat to the ‘essence’ of truth – the conditions that make it possible for statements to correspond to reality. He heads back to Truth, we might say, with a capital ‘T’, and does this in terms of such notions as ‘the unconcealment of beings’ and the idea of the essence of truth as a certain kind of ‘comportment’: a psychological or cultural condition

of openness in which things ‘come to appear’ and thus to underpin ordinary true claims. His attack on correspondence is quick, compelling and familiar (James’s was similar, and Joachim’s too). But the subsequent move to truth’s ‘essence’, despite what I think of as its real air of profundity, confirmed the worst suspicions of the pragmatists. Certainly, in terms of truth’s role in mathematics, for example, such concepts as ‘comportment’ and ‘unconcealment’ are at best irrelevant.

Anglo-American philosophers kept trying to deflate truth even well after there was no air in it. If the analytic philosophers were sceptical on conceptual grounds, the critiques that came in the continental waves that followed Heidegger were political, concerning above all the intertwining of truth and power, a theme directly from [Friedrich Nietzsche](#). What their critique had in common with the analytic material, aside from the suspicion that truth can’t or shouldn’t be theorised, was a relentless centralisation of language. Both turned from the meaning of truth, as it were, to the meaning of ‘truth’. And then they deflated that meaning.

[Michel Foucault](#) began one of his reflections like this:

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint ... Each society has its own regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.

‘Truth is a thing of this world,’ and the connection of truth and power: these were points made by Dewey. But the pragmatists affirmed them as appropriate, connecting truth directly with the prestige of science, the development of technology, and structures of expertise operating for the common good. Foucault was far less sanguine. He foresaw, we might say, the uses to which the Chinese state puts truths about its citizens, or what Facebook knows about its users and what it

does with that information.

If Anglo-American philosophers kept trying to deflate truth even well after there was no air in it, the continentals undermined it, then undermined their undermining of it, then undermined even that. One place this fetches up is in the 'hyper-real' of Jean Baudrillard. So much of our lives has come to be lived through simulations, representations, media, he said in the 1980s, that the distinction between representation and reality, or statements and facts, can no longer be maintained. And if he and Rorty thought so in 1982, they'd be sure of it now as they quested forth on to Instagram. 'No more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its concept,' wrote Baudrillard in 'The Precession of Simulacra' (1981). 'By crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor that of truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by the liquidation of all referentials.' The 1991 Gulf War, Baudrillard asserted, was a made-for-television representation of war, and, as he claimed in the title of one of his books, 'The Gulf War did not take place.' With that, continental philosophy, too, entered the post-truth era.

Taken together, the continental and analytic meltdowns indicate that truth is either an evil authoritarian force or that it is nothing at all. That just about does it, doesn't it? In one way or the other, then, and through the whole century, truth seemed to be in collapse, a scene of puzzlement and despair, a land from which philosophers had emigrated.

### Regaining Truth

But we haven't stopped needing to figure out what's true or stopped arguing about it as though we know what we mean. Questions about what is true are, putting it mildly, no less urgent now than they were in 1900. Truth, that is, has proven as hard to eradicate as it is to elucidate. We keep finding we need the notion, and certainly it does have practical value, even among all the contestation. Do mRNA vaccines work? What should we do about the climate crisis? Did Joe Biden win the 2020 election fairly? That truth is fabricated, or is a simulation in which the real disappears, or that

it is not a property of statements or theories at all and is a dispensable redundancy, that talk of truth is always corrupt: these views have difficulties here and contribute in their small way to continuing the real disaster.

I don't think, despite all the attacks on the notion by all sorts of philosophers for a good century, that we're going to be able to do without truth. In a way, I don't think all those attacks touched truth at all, which (we're finding) is necessary, still the only possible cure.

It's puzzling that Ramsey and the deflationists think that the fact that the idea of truth is presupposed in every act of belief or assertion shows that it is trivial or dispensable. On the contrary, it's everywhere all the time. Ramsey showed, if anything, that truth is central: there's no believing anything without presupposing it. If it is meaningless, so are all beliefs and claims. It goes without saying because it's everywhere. And if claims to have or embody or represent the truth are often impositions of power, as Foucault rightly points out, they are also often manifestations of resistance. Oppressed groups, for example, are liable to have to fight for central truths of their identities and experiences. None of this is confined to the sheer realm of simulacra: as Foucault might have ended up saying, it's about bodies negotiating a social and physical world together.

As a first step to recovering the question, we might broaden the focus from the philosophical question of what makes a sentence or proposition true or false to focus on some of the rich ways the concept of truth functions in our discourse. That love is true does not mean that it is a representation that matches up to reality. It does not mean that the love hangs together with all the rest of the lover or lovee's belief system. It doesn't mean that the hypothesis that my love is true helps us resolve our problems (it might introduce more problems). It means that the love is intense and authentic, or, as I'd like to put it, that it is actual, real. That my aim is true does not indicate that my aim accurately pictures the external world, but that it thumps the actual world right in the centre, as it were.

Perhaps what is true or false isn't only, or even primarily, propositions, but loves and aims, and the world itself. That is, I would like to start out by thinking of 'true' as a semi-synonym of 'real'. If I were formulating in parallel to Aristotle, I might say that 'What is, is true.' And perhaps there's something to be said for Heidegger's 'comportment' after all: to know and speak the real requires a certain sort of commitment: a commitment to face reality. Failures of truth are, often, failures to face up. Now, I'm not sure how much that will help with mathematics, but maths needs to understand that it is only one among the many forms of human knowledge. We, or at any rate I, might hope that an account that addresses the traditional questions about propositional truth might emerge from this broader structure of understanding. That is speculative, I admit.

Truth may not be the eternal unchanging Form that Plato thought it was, but that doesn't mean it can be destroyed by a few malevolent politicians, tech moguls or linguistic philosophers, though the tech moguls and some of the philosophers ([David Chalmers](#), for instance) might be trying to undermine or invent reality, as well. Until they manage it, the question of truth is as urgent, or more urgent, than ever, and I would say that despite the difficulties, philosophers need to take another crack. Perhaps not at *aletheia* as a joy forever, but at truth as we find it, and need it, now.

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