

The Alternative

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Dear Reader,

The topic of this issue of the Newsletter is the truth. Not any old truth but *the* truth. What emerged in the 2016 presidential campaign, among many other strange things, was a crisis of truth. Donald Trump seemed to tell one lie after another; yet millions of followers praised him precisely because he stated the obvious truth. How could this possibly be? What is at issue is not one truth or another but the nature of truth itself. Throughout most of history discussion of truth has been left to a small group (usually men) who withdrew from ordinary life to think about thinking, especially the relation between thinking and what is “real.” Truth was the proper relation between the mind and reality.

Philosophy has always been about “the truth” but there have been special moments of crisis when the basis of all truth seemed to have disappeared. In Western philosophy the figure of Socrates is heralded as a champion not of truths but of a way to find the truth. And in the 17th century when religious and philosophical beliefs were under threat, Descartes claimed to have found the basis of all truth by a method of doubt. Since early in the 20th century philosophers have been wrestling with how we are certain of anything. Their discussion seemed removed from the general population. But suddenly in the 21st century doubt about the basis of all truth affects almost everyone.

Science or knowledge of the experimental and mathematical kind had seemed to be the indubitable basis of truth and it still is for many people. But starting in the 1960s-1970s, that kind of knowledge has become suspect. Another basis of truth, religion, still supplies the bed rock of knowledge for some people but the number of believers has fallen. Muslims and Evangelicals still speak with confidence about *the* truth. But Roman Catholics, since witnessing the debates of the Second Vatican Council, are aware that the church’s teaching does not come directly from heaven but from political compromises.

The irony is that never has more information been available to more people than it is today. But increasing numbers of people disregard all but a tiny amount of what is available. When Donald Trump was asked who he consulted, he said he talks to himself because he has a good brain. He knows what is true from his experience, a term cherished in the United States. After winning the election, Trump disdained the idea of listening to the assessments of the truth as discovered by 20,000 people at the NSA and 30,000 at the CIA. Instead, he said: “I, like, am a smart person.” To some people his answer is insane but to many other people he is simply disregarding unnecessary complexity and holding on to the simple truth that he knows because he is a smart person who has proved it by making billions of dollars.

DO FACTS EXIST?

By Gabriel Moran

On Nov. 30, one of Donald Trump's spokespersons, Scottie Nell Hughes, made the startling comment on CNN: "There's no such thing, unfortunately, anymore of facts." Could she be right? The editors of the Oxford English Dictionary at the end of 2016 said that their choice for word of the year was: "post-truth." I think the OED is one of the great institutions of the modern world. Nevertheless, I was shocked at their choice and consider it to be ignorant and harmful.

The word "post-truth" (if it is even a word) implies that the current world has gone beyond the question of truth to something that has replaced truth or is more important than truth. The editors' definition of post-truth is "a state in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal beliefs." There probably is such a state but why call it post-truth? Public opinion is a claim to truth and it has probably always been more shaped by appeals to emotion and personal beliefs than by "objective facts."

Stephen Colbert made a somewhat mocking complaint that the editors of the OED were hijacking his word, "truthiness." Colbert in coining that word captured something for which a new word was helpful. By truthiness Colbert meant someone saying the truth is what he felt even though he knew the facts were otherwise. "Truthiness" is not an alternate truth or an alternative to truth. Truthiness is falsehood. The editors of the OED are unfortunately giving credence to the lazy and dangerous opinion that truth is not as important as it used to be. If truth is equated with "objective facts," as the OED editors' statement seems to affirm, then perhaps they ought to examine whether *their* meaning of truth is adequate.

Their phrase "objective facts" is a redundancy. A fact is something which is supposedly objective; that is, what exists apart from the humanly subjective. The ideal of modern science was to discover truths that depend only on facts and cannot be disputed. The laws of physics could be imagined as existing apart from human beings, or more precisely as including human beings as objects but not as perceiving subjects. To remove all trace of human ambiguity it is necessary to state physical laws in mathematical form. It is said that numbers do not lie which is true enough but only because numbers do not say anything at all. It is only people who make statements, and statements in words can never be as unambiguous as numbers are. People who are careful thinkers are aware that their speech is always a mixture of opinion and fact. When someone begins a sentence "the fact of the matter is..." you can be fairly sure that what follows is not a fact.

Humans are unavoidably involved in saying what scientific numbers mean. Science supposedly demonstrates that A causes B, but the idea that one thing causes another is a human idea. Someone can show a hundred times that B follows A, but can anyone be sure that the next time it may not. The answer in the physical sciences is that if the same result occurs millions of times then the statistical odds that it will hold next time

are astronomical. No one has to worry that the law of gravity is only statistically a law; to think that in the next moment the law of gravity might not operate, someone has to be insane.

What is of no practical significance in the physical sciences is a major problem when science is applied to human beings. Social science relies on statistical probability but it can never duplicate the certainty of laws in the physical sciences. Scientists can amass enough evidence to draw a “factual” conclusion that everyone, or at least nearly everyone, accepts as true. But if someone denies the claim to be a fact, there is no proof in citing more facts of a similar kind. Paradoxically, the acceptance of facts is based on faith: belief in the order of the universe and belief in human testimony.

Every human being has a “worldview,” within which they interpret information. Something that conflicts with his or her worldview will be rejected because admitting that the worldview is wrong may be unbearable. R. D. Laing in *The Divided Self* recounts listening to two patients in a mental hospital having an argument. One of them suddenly says: “Stop. If I win, you lose the argument, if you win, I cease to exist.” When people deny what to most people are obvious facts, they may be defending their very existence. Almost half of Trump voters deny that Barack Obama was born in the United States; even more have insisted that he is Muslim. There is ample evidence to the contrary but those “facts” do not fit some worldviews. It is literally unthinkable for some people that a black man with the first name of Barack and a middle name of Hussein could be president of the United States. Case closed.

For decades, cigarette makers argued that cigarettes do not cause cancer. If “cause” means that every time you have A then B will follow, then cigarette smoking does not cause cancer. The cigarette makers were correct; other factors than smoking are in play for how anyone gets cancer. People who condemned cigarettes were frustrated by what they took to be lies but the cigarette makers were not lying. They were pointing out the limits of scientific conclusions. The statistical *correlation* between cigarette smoking and cancer is overwhelming but opponents of cigarette smoking are wiser to admit the limits of science. It probably does not help their case to argue that smoking cigarettes *causes* cancer.

The parallel case today is global warming. Is human activity the cause of climate change? The statistical correlation is overwhelming but a causal relation still has to be inferred. The numbers can only show a correlation and there are always other factors. Scientists get impatient that people will not accept scientific facts. But citing more of the same kind of facts will never prove the case to some people. To accept as true what is claimed to be fact would require a change of worldview. For whatever reasons, some people are not ready to do that. Insisting to them that humans *cause* global warming is not helpful.

Someone who starts a sentence with “to tell you the truth...” is probably going to say something that is not true or at least very doubtful. Why does anyone announce that they are going to be truthful? Are they implying that they usually don’t tell the truth?

When friends are having a conversation, it is assumed that what is said is true unless there is strong evidence to the contrary. The point of conversations is not to state truths but to have an interesting discussion. The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead said that “the first thing to notice about a statement is whether it is interesting. If it is interesting, then truth will add to the interest.” Interest, specifically self-interest, would seem to be a threat to truthfulness for public officials. If their interest is to make money for themselves or enhance their reputation, they are likely to use false or misleading statements to protect their interest.

But before there is any blanket condemnation of “self-interest,” the idea deserves examination. “Self-interest” was coined in the 18th century. The idea was an attempt by early social science to be based on facts. The aim was to make social science similar to physics. The philosopher Helvétius said that “as the physical universe is ruled by the laws of motion so is the moral universe ruled by laws of interest.” Helvétius claimed that everyone is moved by self-interest, and that self-interest is easily quantifiable. That belief became a truism in social science.

It was assumed, and still often is, that a person’s actions are predictable because of their self-interest, which is most often equated with economic self-interest. Thomas Frank wrote a famous book entitled *What’s Wrong with Kansas?* in which he tried to figure out why Kansans voted against their (economic) self-interest. The fairly obvious answer is that people have more than one interest because they have more than one possibility for the kind of self they wish to become. For some people the main interest of their self is not making as much money as possible.

A person would not act if he or she was not interested. There has to be self-interest, but a person’s self-interest always involves other selves. The term “interest” (*inter esse*) refers to what is between people. A “selfish” person is someone who does not understand that his or her interests are always achieved with other selves. In the nineteenth century when scientists assumed that humans are by nature selfish, the contrasting moral act was described as “altruistic” (to act for others). But no one acts selflessly. The ethical corrective to selfishness is to examine what self I want to be in relation to the other selves who are always part of my world. A morally good action is one that is based on discovering common interests with other selves.

What does self-interest have to do with truth? We begin life from our interests which set the direction for what we find to be true. The French Declaration of Rights says that “man is born free.” Hardly. Humans are born totally dependent on others. Without a mother or a surrogate caregiver, a human baby could not survive for more than a few hours or days. But babies do start responding immediately with their whole bodies to the world around them. They quickly learn what is needed for their survival and comfort. Their *interests* are to be fed, kept warm and dry, kept from falling, provided with human interaction. They begin trying to converse with other humans (and animals) even before they possess any recognizable words. It is sometimes said that babies are naturally selfish; that is slander. Babies are keenly aware of other people; selfishness is an adult vice.

People who pay no attention to infants (that would include the majority of philosophers) are likely to think that knowledge arises from taking a look at the world and then attaching words to what is seen. If one pays attention to infants and very young children, it is apparent that knowledge arises from entering into a conversation with other humans. At first, the conversation is confusing and the child struggles to get in a single word. The words that the infant uses are from whatever language is at hand, especially words that adults use as they perform some action. Conversation enables people to decide which direction to look and what they see when they look. What children find to be true is based on their interests. The same holds for adults.

It is an interest of everyone to make sense of the world that they have been thrown into. In adolescence, an ideology – a closed set of ideas through which to view the world – is almost a necessity for survival. A boy or girl needs some confidence that they can function in a terribly complicated world. The avalanche of information now at their fingertips makes things more difficult. Years ago people grew up not knowing much but also not knowing how much they did not know. It was safe to try out ideas and change one's mind. But today it would not be surprising if adolescents live by a fixed set of ideas. A problem arises if their experience does not shake up that ideology as they get older. They could reach a place in middle age when it is almost impossible for them to see the world except through the ideology which they adopted as an adolescent.

Our interests are always aligned with some group of people who are our tribe. The tribe can be geographical, generational, ethnic, racial, sexual, or religious. Whatever the tribe we are in, we tend to think as true whatever the tribe agrees is in our interest. The sociologist Rodney Stark described religious conversion as “coming to see the world the way your friends do.” That could be applied to every tribe. Understanding, as Wittgenstein said, is a matter of conversion. Seeing things differently requires a crisis of faith in the beliefs of one's tribe. Most of those beliefs are unspoken; one discovers them when one doubts them. Many people today, especially in cities, belong to overlapping tribes which can be either enriching or confusing, but belonging to several tribes does not eliminate interests and tribal limits.

The main hope for lessening the vicious differences in the country is the meeting of people from different tribes who are willing to suspend final judgments on the differences between their tribe and others. If not friendships at least there could be a willingness to interact socially and talk about anything that might be of common interest: work, football, movies, music, food, weather, bargains. The severe division in the United States is not of a year's making; the problem has been growing for at least 40 years. It will not be overcome with a few clever arguments. But it is in the self-interest of every citizen that the nation survive and that inevitable differences do not tear apart the fabric of peaceful tribes and common interests.

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THE POINT OF DONALD TRUMP'S LIES

By Jamelle Bouie

“The essential characteristic of fascist propaganda was never its lies, for this is something more or less common to propaganda everywhere and of every time,” wrote the late political theorist Hannah Arendt in a 1945 essay. “The essential thing was that they exploited the age-old Occidental prejudice which confuses reality with truth, and made that ‘true’ which until then could only be stated as a lie.”

Put in plain language, fascists didn't lie to obscure the truth; they lied to signal what would eventually become truth. Or to use Arendt's analogy, “It is as though one were to debate with a potential murderer as to whether his future victim were dead or alive, completely forgetting that man can kill and that the murderer, by killing the person in question, could promptly provide proof of the correctness of this statement.”

Americans aren't living under a fascist government, but they *have* elected a president with an unusual relationship to the truth. Even when they lie, most politicians care about the truth. It's why they lie, why they try not to get caught. But Donald Trump doesn't appear to see a difference between truth and lies. He lies as a matter of habit about matters large and small. His lies are often obvious, easily disproved by available information. For example he tweeted: “In addition to winning the Electoral College in a landslide, I won the popular vote if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally.” This charge is groundless. False. There is no evidence of “illegal voting.”

But, following Arendt, debunking Trump's lie as a lie misses the point of his lying. Since 2013, when the Supreme Court struck key provisions from the Voting Rights Act, GOP lawmakers in states across the country have pushed and pursued strict laws for voter identification and voter suppression. Republicans in Kansas, North Carolina, Ohio, Texas, and Wisconsin (among others) have tried to burden voters with cumbersome requirements, convoluted procedures, closed precincts, and reduced time for voting. “We call this restoring confidence in government,” said Thom Tillis, then-speaker of the North Carolina House of Representatives, in support of a voter ID law. “There is some evidence of voter fraud, but that's not the primary reason for doing this. There are a lot of people who are just concerned with the potential risk of fraud.”

As president, Trump will have the power to take harsh action on voting rights and access. His Department of Justice, for example, could decline enforcement of much of the Voting Rights Act, freeing Republican-led states to enact strict and restrictive voting laws. Under Jeff Sessions, Trump's pick for attorney general and a longtime opponent of broad and inclusive voting rights, that outcome looks likely. Trump could follow inaction with efforts to combat alleged voter fraud through investigation into voting rights and voter registration groups, and coordination of voter purges (trimming the rolls of registered voters). Trump's top candidate for the Department of Homeland Security, Kris Kobach, has proposed as much by adapting his draconian policies as Kansas secretary of state for the nation at large. Other voting skeptics in

the Trump administration include chief adviser Stephen Bannon, who according to the *New York Times*, once questioned the value of universal suffrage, suggesting that only “property owners should be allowed to vote.” When told that this would exclude many black Americans, Bannon allegedly said, “Maybe that’s not such a bad thing.”

When Trump decries imaginary fraud in the presidential election, is he lying for its own sake? Is he lying to assuage his ego after losing the popular vote (in an election that he nonetheless won)? Or is he lying to clear the path for a federal assault on voting rights? Is he sowing the ground for a time when that lie—our elections are “rigged”—is the reality? It is important to combat Trump’s lies with the truth: to dispute, debunk, and show the public the facts of the matter. At the same time, citizens should also stay attuned to the aims of Trump’s dishonesty, whether he’s obscuring a larger scandal (the president-elect’s “illegal voting” tweet came as the *New York Times* published a massive story on his influence-peddling and his disturbing quantity of conflicts of interest around the globe) or signaling priorities for his followers and surrogates.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO TELL THE TRUTH

By Dietrich Bonhoeffer

From the moment in our lives at which we learn to speak we are taught that what we say must be true. What does this mean? What is meant by “telling the truth”? It is clear in the first place it is our parents who regulate our relation to themselves by this demand for truthfulness; consequently, in the sense in which our parents intend it, this demand applies strictly only within the family circle. It is also to be noted that the relation which is expressed in this demand cannot simply be reversed. The truthfulness of a child toward his or her parents is essentially different from that of the parents toward their child. The life of a small child lies open before the parents, and what the child says to them should reveal to them everything that is hidden, but in the converse relationship this cannot possibly be the case. In the matter of truth, the parents’ claims on the child are different from the child’s claim on the parents.

From this already emerges that “telling the truth” means something different according to the particular situation in which one stands. Account must be taken of one’s relationships at each particular time. The question must be asked whether and in what way a person is entitled to demand truthful speech of others. Speech between parents and children is, in the nature of the case, different from speech between wife and husband, between friends, between teacher and pupil, government and subject, friend and foe, and in each case the truth which this speech conveys is also different.

“Telling the truth,” therefore, is not solely a matter of moral character; it is also a matter of correct appreciation of real situations and of serious reflection upon them. The more complex the situations of a person’s life, the more difficult and more responsible will be the task of his or her telling the truth. The child stands in only one vital relationship, the relationship to his or her parents and will have nothing to

consider and weigh up. The next environment in which he or she is placed, the school, already brings with it the first difficulty.

Telling the truth is something that must be learnt. This will sound shocking to anyone who thinks that it must all depend on moral character and that if this is blameless the rest is child's play. But the simple fact is that the ethical cannot be detached from reality and therefore continual progress in learning to appreciate reality is a necessary ingredient in ethical action. In the question we are now concerned, action consists of speaking. The real is to be expressed in words. That is what constitutes truthful speech. This inevitably raises the question of the "how" of these words. It is a question of knowing the right word on each occasion. Finding this word is a matter of long, earnest and ever more advanced effort on the basis of experience and knowledge of the real. If one is to say how a thing really is, that is, if one is to speak truthfully, one's thoughts must be directed toward the way in which the real exists.

If my utterance is to be truthful it must in each case be different according to whom I am addressing, who is questioning me, and what I am speaking about. The truthful word is not in itself constant; it is as much alive as life itself. If it is detached from life and from its reference to the concrete other person, then this truth has only the appearance of truth but it lacks its essential character. It is only the cynic who claims to speak the truth at all times and in all places to all people in the same way but who displays nothing but a lifeless image of the truth. He dons the halo of the fanatical devotee of truth who can make no allowance for human weaknesses; but in fact he is destroying the living truth between people. He wounds, shames, desecrates mystery, breaks confidences, betrays the community in which he lives, and laughs at the devastation he has wrought and at the human weakness that "cannot bear the truth."

For example, a teacher asks a child in front of the class whether it is true that his father often comes home drunk. It is true but the child denies it. The teacher's question has placed him in a situation for which he is not yet prepared. He feels only that what is taking place is an unjustified interference in the family and that he must oppose it. What goes on in the family is not for the ears of the class in school. The teacher has failed to respect the reality of this institution. The child ought now to find a way of answering which would comply with both the rule of the family and the rule of the school. But he is not yet able to do this. He lacks experience, knowledge, and the ability to express himself in the right way.

As a simple no to the teacher's question, the child's answer is untrue; yet at the same time it nevertheless gives expression to the truth that the family is an institution that the teacher had no right to interfere in. According to the measure of his knowledge, the child acted correctly. The blame for the lie falls back entirely on the teacher. An experienced man in the same position as the child would have been able to correct his questioner's error while at the same time avoiding a formal untruth in this answer and he would have thus found the "right word." The "lies" of children and inexperienced people in general, are often to be ascribed to the fact that these people are faced with situations which they do not fully understand.