

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.