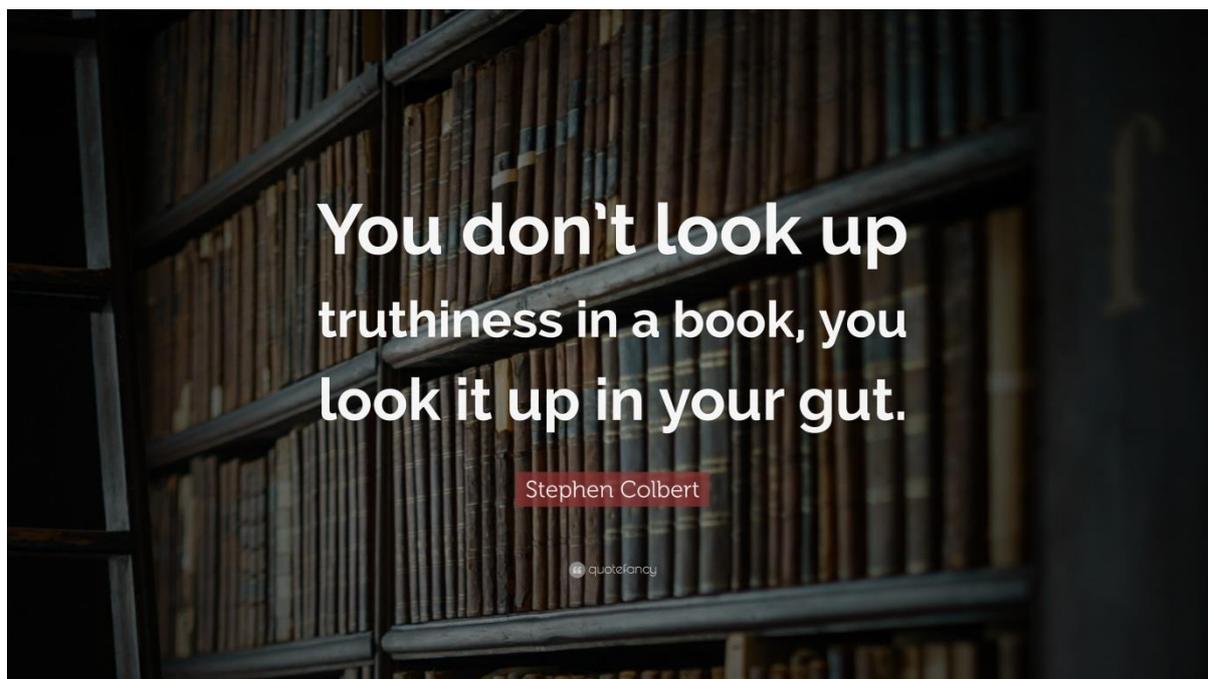


Critical Reasoning 20 - Truthiness



The word “**truthiness**” in its contemporary usage was introduced by the American television comedian Stephen Colbert during a pilot episode of his political satire program *The Colbert Report* on October 17, 2005. In the following year the word was chosen as the 16th annual “Word of the Year” by the American Dialect Society, defined as “the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true.” The Merriam-Webster’s dictionary now includes two definitions: “truth that comes from the gut, not books” and “the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true.” (Wikipedia: Truthiness)

Interestingly, “truthiness” was being used informally at the University of Cape Town, Department of Philosophy, as far back as the 1990’s to describe that which has the ring of truth about it, but for which there was absolutely no evidence. Western Philosophy has a long tradition of distinguishing truth (ἀλήθεια) from opinion (δόξα) which dates back to the Pre-Socratic era. Today every course in Philosophy, including this one, other than those run for profit or religious persuasion, includes, very early on, a section or series of lectures discussing subjectivity, relativism and emotivism. These are usually followed up by one on more tutorials in which students are asked to analyse sample texts and identify such fallacies.

As first year students are bombarded with an overabundance fresh views, opinions and theories both from their peers and their professors, it is not uncommon to here expressions such as “Well that may be true for you, but not for me,” especially where content is subservient to political correctness and cultural sensitivities. Usually however, as students mature both as academics and as persons they begin to adopt more confident, reasoned positions of their own, or at least, that is the hope. Postmodern society in general has not been so fortunate, especially without the privilege of a tertiary education.

As early as 1981, the Scottish born moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre in his book *After Virtue* defines **emotivism** as "... the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and, more specifically, all moral judgments are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling. ..." On this view there is no moral difference between asserting "I believe x is wrong" and "I don't like x." And there is no point arguing about it either. According to MacIntyre, without any agreed-upon criteria for evaluating truth or judgement, all moral arguments become "interminable". As a way out of this social and moral morass MacIntyre, instead of insisting that there are absolute, immutable discoverable, moral truths, argues that "within a community, within a cultural and ethical heritage, there are clear and absolute *virtues*." (Meyer, 2006, our emphasis)

However the real world we inhabit is culturally pluralistic and global. Even the seemingly unquestionable universal values of life, liberty and equality are not accepted by all world cultures. Several nominally democratic Western cultures for example have inconsistent "terms and conditions" that apply to such values: In some territories the state may carry out executions but may not perform abortions; coerced labour is not illegal so long as you have no legal status meanwhile the rich (and famous) are held to a different moral and tax account than the working classes, respectively. Moreover, as Meyer points out,

[Most] people don't - and probably can't - acknowledge their own emotivism; they think their judgments are fact-based and reasoned, not emotional. Or they don't care. [That] you have been the victim of emotivism is [that] you have been shut up with the omnipresent locution, "You just don't get it!" (*l.c.*)

In *After Virtue* MacIntyre harps back to Aristotle's teleological thinking as an exemplar of rational moral philosophy, however everyday life in Hellenistic Greece was every bit driven by disinformation and propaganda as ours. Indeed the privileged classes, retained at considerable expense, the services of a rhetorician to train their male offspring in the art of persuasive public speaking. Legal and political matters were frequently decided on their rhetorical rather than factual merit. Only the very elite could afford a philosophical education. Indeed Aristotle himself was the tutor of Alexander the Great.

At the time of Meyer's commentary the social media were in their infancy and far from the ubiquitous phenomenon that it is today. Available on every computer, smart phone, tablet and even smart watches, social media are now the primary sources news, information and social interaction particularly for "Generation Z," born between the mid 1990's to early 2000's and characterised by their familiarity with the internet from a young age. The difference between the social media and earlier forms information dissemination is that news, advertising and social posts are personalised based on algorithms that appraise the similarity of each user profile, including status, contacts, demographics, GPS location and previously tagged "likes" *inter alia*. The result is the aptly named "**echo chamber effect**" analogous to the way sounds reverberate in a hollow enclosure. Ideas, opinions, beliefs and persuasions already held by the user are repeated, reinforced and sometimes distorted while dissenting or inconsistent views are censored, blocked or simply underrepresented. (Wikipedia: Echo chamber (media))

Reverberated rumours, tenuous beliefs, urban legends and conspiracy theories rapidly acquire the status "fact" or "truth" among users with similar profiles crated by personalisation algorithms. This leads to what has been metaphorically described as **tunnel vision** or a reluctance to consider

alternative ideas or opinions to one's own or, in this case, to those of one's "liked" contacts. This is very much like the concept of "Groupthink" discussed in Critical Reasoning 08, where the desire for harmony or conformity within a group leads to faulty reasoning or poor decision-making outcomes.

Since 2016 the phenomenon of "**Fake news**" has gained notoriety. Defined as "a type of hoax or deliberate spread of misinformation in social media or traditional news media with the intent to mislead in order to gain financially or politically," fake news has dominated discussion around the 2016 American presidential election and in the run-up to the 2017 German federal election. Fake news items generally have attention grabbing headlines and are fabricated in a way so as to encourage online-sharing and to maximise advertisement revenue. The "better" (read: worse) fake news items are almost indistinguishable, to the untrained eye, from their mainstream counterparts and frequently lure users to follow links to that are used in phishing and the distribution of malware. The Facebook newsfeed has itself been implicated in the spread of fake news; however since December 2016 the company has promised to employ fact-checkers and to label stories in an attempt to suppress hoaxes. (Wikipedia: Fake news; Heath, 2016)

'**Post-truth**' was named word of the year for 2016 by Oxford dictionaries, defined as, "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." According to the editors, the word's usage jumped some 2000% up on the previous year. In the context of politics, rather than serious epistemology, there is a disconnect between repeated assertions and details of policy, on the one hand, and factual rebuttals, on the other, which are simply ignored. Although the practice post-truth politics is as old as propaganda itself, the advent of the internet has allowed George Orwell's dystopian vision in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to be realised. In the novel, the state's "Ministry of Truth" constantly changes and revises historical records according to the propaganda goals of the day. (Wikipedia: Post-truth politics)

Finally we have "**Alternative facts**", a phrase first used by Kellyanne Conway, advisor to President Trump. During a "Meet the Press" interview on January 22, 2017 she defended White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer's demonstrably false statements about the presidential inauguration with the words, "Don't be so overly dramatic about it, Chuck. You're saying it's a falsehood, and ... our press secretary, Sean Spicer, gave alternative facts to that." Chuck Todd responded by saying, "Alternative facts are not facts. They are falsehoods." (Wikipedia: Alternative facts)

Remarkably, on the Wednesday following Conway's speech, Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was the best-selling book on Amazon.com. (Andrews, 2017) Meanwhile, one Twitter user posted: "Someone should let Kellyanne Conway and Sean Spicer know that Orwell's *1984* is a warning; not a guide."

Endnote and Task

This is by far the least philosophical of the topics so far posted; however there *is* an alarming trend in public life in the way that "truth" is being subverted, alternatively disseminated and ignored in a way and rate that was impossible in any of the previous totalitarian regimes. Perhaps what we are experiencing will ultimately prove to be only a blip on world history. Perhaps we will get used to a world of information overload, rather than succumbing to it. Maybe we will learn when it's time just to switch off!

Find your own example of truthiness, post-truth or alternative facts. Why do you regard it as such? What is problematic regarding truth or falsehood in your example? How are truthiness, post-truth and alternative facts different from ordinary fallacies?

Feedback

We chose a now infamous tweet from Donald Trump regarding climate change as an example of post-truth:



During the first presidential debate with Hillary Clinton on 26 September 2016, she brought up the issue. Here is how the exchange went:

CLINTON: Some country is going to be the clean-energy superpower of the 21st century. Donald thinks that climate change is a hoax perpetrated by the Chinese. I think it's real.

TRUMP: I did not. I did not. I do not say that.

CLINTON: I think science is real.

TRUMP: I do not say that.

Today we know that anthropogenic climate change is a reality. Human activity is warming the planet at an unprecedented rate. That is why some 200 nations have ratified Paris Agreement to mitigate the effects of greenhouse gas emissions. That much is true. Compare this to Trump's tweet which is a near perfect example of the Oxford dictionary's definition of post-truth as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." In our opinion it is somewhat less than post-true. It is also paranoid.

Fallacies, such as those discussed in Critical Reasoning 04, are attempts at argument gone wrong. In the case of Trump's tweet however there is not even an attempt at argumentation - not even a scrap of evidence adduced to support a cherished conclusion. We are simply presented with a "truthy" expression, which if it resonates with what our gut tells us, we may be persuaded to retweet.

The next Critical Reasoning topic will deal with Copi's "A Propositional Calculus".

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