The Trouble with Truth

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If a statement is true, only a fool would refuse to believe it, and only a madman would reject its guidance. Those words sound self-evident. Yet what we call truth is not all it is cracked up to be.

Some of our truths are shining beacons on hills, illuminating reality and revealing processes that give rise to our experiences. But others intoxicate us with illusions of knowledge, competence, and virtue, blinding us to dangers and encouraging us to act in ways that are reckless, fruitless, destructive or cruel. An apparent truth may be unworthy of trust. Even the most convincing statements may mislead us.

I respect the law. Yet I recognize that many laws are unjust. I love sausage. And although I believe that some sausage makers "answer to a higher authority" (Con Agra Foods), I know that all too many sausages are medleys of the unspeakable, best left to wither unconsumed.

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Just as veneration of law and sausage requires us to ignore the ways they are made, uncritical veneration of what we view as truth requires a kind of blindness. For the processes by which truth is manufactured are often corrupt. And the products of those processes rarely embody the virtues we assume truths to possess.

The subject of this paper is apparent truth—not truth itself; that which humans accept as true—not the Platonic Ideal (Kraut). When I use the word truth, I am not referring to that which the wise yearn to embrace, but to that which the arrogant embrace, thinking themselves wise. I am not referring to those daunting revelations that the strong can endure only with support, but to those reassuring misconceptions that lead the weak to see themselves as strong. I am not referring to that which science incrementally approaches, but to the blind alleys of scientific fashion that masquerade as progress. I am not referring to that which the principled strive to speak, but to the twaddle that, in the mouths of the frivolous, tastes like virtue. I am not referring to the lightly-held conceptions of those who struggle to understand complex and changing phenomena, but to the disfigured horrors that ideologues create when they torture bothersome facts into compliance with their doctrines.

Although philosophers have proposed diverse theories of truth (Simmons), my dictionary (McKechnie) suggests that English speakers call a statement true if they view it as accurately describing the way things are. This simple, straightforward view of truth is common even in the most sophisticated circles. According to a large-scale, on-line survey, more doctoral level philosophers adhere to this view of truth than to any other (The PhilPapers Surveys Preliminary Survey results).

To clarify further: inspired by Charles Sanders Peirce, when I say that we view an assertion as true, I mean that we would confidently act under its guidance (Peirce). In other words, to say we view an assertion as true is to say that we are convinced that it provides us with actionable intelligence.

Imagine that Linda hates getting wet. Imagine that she is preparing to take a walk in the park. As she is about to leave her home, she discovers that weather.com predicts thunderstorms

within the hour. If she views that forecast as true, she will delay her walk. If she heads for the park anyway, odds are that she questions the truth of the forecast.

To view that forecast as true, Linda must be in a particular state of mind. First, she must experience it as making intuitive sense. The appearance of the sky and the texture of the air must make her feel that a storm is inevitable. If, upon walking outdoors, her intuition tells her that pleasant weather is approaching, she is likely to doubt the accuracy of weather.com's report. Second, she must be able to generate a narrative that justifies her intuition. Such a narrative might be as concrete as "Look at the sky! That storm is moving towards us!" or as cerebral as "Weather.com says that there's a 100% chance of rain in the next hour. Their short-term predictions are never wrong!" Finally, she must believe that she can defend that narrative. If she cannot explain why she believes it is going to rain, or if sees her explanation as unable to withstand questioning, she is unlikely to see that prediction as true (Margolis).

What creates this state of mind? The answer is simple. If our experience is consistent with an assertion, we see the assertion as true. If it has stormed every time the sky and the air have felt a particular way, and if the narrative Linda uses to justify her intuition has consistently fit the data and withstood criticism, Linda is likely to become confident that she knows when a storm is coming.

This approach to truth may seem unproblematic—but the processes that create belief-consistent experiences all too often do so by taking advantage of flaws in the ways we perceive and reason. There are many such flaws. Some have negligible effects, but all too many engender powerful biases that compromise reason and objectivity. Our insensitivity to ambiguity is one such flaw.

The ambiguity of a statement is determined, in part, by the range of observations that are consistent with it. The more ambiguous a statement is, the broader the range of observations that support it and the narrower the range of observations that challenge it. In this sense, the prediction that a roulette ball will land in one of the wheel's eighteen red pockets is more ambiguous than the prediction that it will land in one particular pocket.

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When we are gambling, we are aware of this sort of ambiguity. Imagine you are about to play high-stakes roulette and are allowed to choose one of three consultants to help you place your bets. Imagine that each potential consultant is a certified fortune teller who has demonstrated clairvoyance under the scrutiny of scientists, auditors, Las Vegas security experts, and magicians by correctly predicting the results of five consecutive spins of a roulette wheel (Carroll).

Fortune Teller "A" correctly predicted the individual pocket into which each ball fell. Fortune Teller "B" correctly predicted the color of the pocket (red or black) into which the ball fell. And Fortune Teller "C" correctly predicted that the pocket in which the ball landed would be a manifestation of divine will. Most of you would choose as your consultant Fortune Teller "A"—the fortune teller who successfully made the most precise predictions—because you both sensed and judged that his or her predictions reflected the greatest prescience.

This exercise is what Howard Margolis, the late social theorist and occasional critic of experimental psychology, might have called a "toy problem." Its stakes are trivial (indeed, imaginary). The issue of interest is contrived, the problem devoid of the uncertainties, complexities, passions and yearnings that affect most decision-making. It portrays an approach to ambiguity under ideal circumstances, but it does not depict the way we handle ambiguity when grappling with real dilemmas.

In a 1953 Cambridge University address, the Austro-British philosopher Karl Popper revealed that he was inspired to reflect on the distinction between science and pseudo-science by the insensitivity to ambiguity that characterized the principal intellectual movements of his time (Popper). Popper was living in Vienna in the years following the collapse of the Austrian Empire, when that city, he later wrote, was animated by "revolutionary slogans and ideas, and new and often wild theories." Among the new and wild theories that fascinated Popper were Einstein's theory of relativity, Marx's theory of history, Freud's psychoanalytic theory and Adler's "individual psychology."

While all of these theories were intriguing, Popper felt that only relativity theory was truly scientific. Marx's, Freud's and Adler's theories, he suspected, resembled myths more closely than science; nonetheless, some attributed to them immense explanatory power.

Popper found such attributions troubling. Followers of Marx, Popper said, found confirmation on every page of the newspaper, "not only in the

news, but also in its presentation—which revealed the class bias of the newspaper—and especially of course in what the paper did not say" (Popper 34).

Popper was particularly disturbed by the ease with which Freudians and Adlerians formulated conflicting explanations of the same phenomena. He noted that if a man pushed a child into the water, intending to drown it, Freudians could attribute that act to repression, while Adlerians could attribute it to the man's desire to mitigate feelings of inferiority by proving that he dared to commit a crime. If, on the other hand, that same man risked his life to save the child from drowning, Freudians could attribute his act to sublimation (the transformation of the energy of a biological impulse to serve a more acceptable use), while Adlerians could attribute the same act to the man's desire to mitigate feelings of inferiority by demonstrating courage (Popper 35).

In other words, the theories of Marx, Freud and Adler were profoundly ambiguous, enabling adherents to view a very broad range of observations as supportive of their theories and scarcely any observations as contradictory. Their inability to predict future events, when combined with which they explained past events, made them the epistemological brethren of the fortune teller who predicted that the outcome of each spin of the roulette wheel would be consistent with God's plan.

The nature of the evidence that supported Einstein's theory, Popper noted, was quite different. One of the predictions of relativity theory was "gravitational lensing"—the bending of light by gravity. Einstein's theory, unlike the theories of Marx, Freud and Adler, made precise predictions—in this case, a prediction about the degree to which our sun would bend light passing close its surface. That prediction was all the more daring because it conflicted with Newton's conceptions of space, time and gravity, which were supported by two centuries of astronomical observation. Unlike the predictions of Marx, Freud and Adler, those of Einstein ran the same kind of risk of being disproven as those of the soothsayer who repeatedly predicted the particular slot into which the roulette ball would fall.

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That is why Popper was intrigued by the reactions of Einstein's followers when, in 1919, a solar eclipse off the coast of Africa made it possible to measure shifts in the apparent positions of stars whose light passed close to the sun. Those measurements, it turned out, clearly supported Einstein's model and would have justified righteous euphoria among Einstein's supporters (Kennefick). Yet, according to Popper, even in the wake of those measurements, devotees of relativity were less passionate about the truth of their theory than followers of Marx, Freud and Adler were about the truths of theirs. Of course, Einstein's followers were thrilled by confirmation of his predictions. But the passions of the followers of Marx, Freud and Adler were of a different order, forged by visions of their theories as embodiments of truths so manifest and sublime that only those who perversely closed their hearts and minds could doubt them.

Popper's observations point to a profound irony: that ambiguity makes beliefs less illuminating and believers more passionate.

Recent research into the adaptive unconscious (a modern conception unrelated to Freud's model) has uncovered a mechanism that accounts for that ironic reality. According to University of Virginia psychology professor Timothy Wilson, we are more likely to pay attention to things that resemble what we've encountered before. The more often and more recently we've encountered an idea or phenomenon, the better the chance that our adaptive unconscious will admit it to conscious awareness (Wilson). Since ambiguous ideas subsume more phenomena than precise ideas, they are likely to be called on more frequently—and, on average, to have been accessed more recently—than more precise notions. In addition, their ambiguity is likely to facilitate satisfying but spurious explanations of our concerns, enhancing their subjective worth. As such, it is not hard to imagine how our adaptive unconscious can render ambiguity-related biases self-reinforcing.

Of course, many characteristics other than ambiguity interact with vulnerabilities in human reasoning to create "truths" that are unworthy of that appellation (Mahoney). But such specious truths all have one thing in common: they appear to provide profound understandings of broad swaths of reality, but they do so only because they are consistent with all outcomes and immune to all challenges. They appear

rich in wisdom only because they are devoid of content. They are subjectively reassuring only because they are objectively vacuous. They appear to inform us about the world, but closer examination reveals that by inducing us to accept their opportunistic rules of evidence, they transform our vision and our judgment, rendering us incapable of doubting them and addicting us to the reassurance they provide.

Truths like these are nothing but illusions. Submission to habits of thought that lead us to believe such illusions and accept their guidance is, I propose, an abdication of our responsibility to strive for what Bernard Lonergan and his admirers have called authenticity (Helminiak 2008; Helminiak and Feingold; Lonergan).

Yet such specious truths have too much influence over human affairs to be casually dismissed. They may be the kinds of statements that members of the Vienna Circle would have categorized as "nonsense" (Uebel), but they are nonetheless compelling and consequential. Thus, in the spirit of Alfred Ayer's approach to the problem of induction (Ayer) and John Dewey's approach to ethics (Dewey), I modestly propose that we appraise such "truths" by examining their effects.

If such truths transform us into persons who accept them without question, I suggest that we evaluate them by asking ourselves whether we wish to be thus transformed. It is, after all, as Bernard Lonergan observed in *Method in Theology*, "up to each of us to decide for himself what he is to make of himself" (Lonergan 1972).

Of course, questions like, "What *do I* wish to be?" or, less narrowly, "What *should I*, as a human, wish to be?" are profound, and all answers to such questions controvertible. But it is possible to reduce the intoxicating influence of specious truths by incorporating a few simple steps into our evaluations, and, by so doing, to answer these questions less parochially, with clearer eyes and purer hearts.

The first step when answering such questions is to place ourselves behind a conceptual veil of ignorance similar to that which John Rawls suggested we use when making decisions about justice (Rawls). That veil must render us agnostic regarding the truth we're evaluating, the assumptions that spawned that truth, the web of observations and beliefs shaped by those assumptions, and the web of observations and beliefs the truth in question may have inspired (Quine and Ullian). The opacity of that veil and the expanse it should cover may be debatable, but there is little question that such a veil, however imperfect, improves the odds that exploration of a truth will be informative.

The struggle to function authentically requires unrelenting confrontation of our limitations, our failings, and our mortality, and is rife with intellectual challenge and emotional pain.

Second, I suggest that we attend to how our truths and the rules we use to judge them affect authenticity. That is, I suggest that we attend to the effects of such truths and their second-order traditions (Popper) on how we seek and understand information, communicate our insights, determine whether our insights are accurate, and use what we know to guide our actions. To the extent that our truths impair those functions, they render our commerce with the world less effective and impair our ability to formulate and achieve satisfying, worthwhile.

Finally, I suggest that we attend to how our truths affect our ability to create and sustain relationships, standards of discourse, and other norms and institutions that support authenticity (Feingold; Habermas; Helminiak 2008). The struggle to function authentically requires unrelenting confrontation of our limitations, our failings, and our mortality, and is rife with intellectual challenge and emotional pain. And authenticity, if achieved, is a momentary state, as unstable as an inexperienced mountain climber on an icy, windswept peak. We need all the help we can get.

These components are, I propose, essential to any valid approach to assessing our truths. But I doubt that they are sufficient. I suspect that many of you would want to include the effect of your truths on your chances of achieving and sharing genuine happiness (Haidt; Seligman). Others would likely wish to consider the impact of their truths on their chances of creating a world that supports other heartfelt values (Haidt). Still others, I am sure, would find it important to attend to other effects.

While it is unlikely that persons of candor, intelligence, and good will ever achieve complete and permanent agreement about how truths should be assessed, the effort to do so is worthwhile, for the stakes are high. Whatever might allow us to see through one another's eyes, however fleetingly, increases the odds of human survival and meaningful progress. In the

absence of an approach to mitigating the intoxicating effects of counterfeit truth, all too many of us will continue to see those whose vision differs from our own as depraved, wicked, or less than fully human. History reveals the results of confident commitment to such insular truths to have been disastrous, leaving us, in our millions, bound, blinded, and, if we are fortunate, merely bloodied.

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Believers and skeptics alike must examine how we are shaped by the true beliefs that may, unless constrained, transform us into "true believers" (Hoffer), and to do so fearlessly, objectively, and painstakingly. In this endeavor, may we be guided by the spirit of Saint Jerome, who said, "The scars of others should teach us caution," and, equally, by the spirit of Ernest Hemingway, who said, "Call 'em like you see 'em, and to hell with it."

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Robert Seibel, and to his wife Barbara.

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