

Written Representation 43

Name: Singapore Philosophy Group

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Dear Sir or Madam,

I would like to submit opinions on Fake News from the Singapore Philosophy Group, and I also attach a summary of the very recent book on this issue, "A Short History of Truth" by the philosopher Julian Baggini. The book is of course worth reading in its entirety but the group felt your committee might appreciate a reasonably concise summary as an aid to your deliberations. Although we have not all had time to read it, the group felt it would be helpful for you to include it in your background papers.

The group has been meeting for about 7 years, and its membership is large and diverse, a mix of non-Singaporeans and Singaporeans. We held a lively and interesting discussion at our February meeting. About 12 of us were involved.

We felt "something should be done", by a majority of about 9:3, but were very worried about further legislation; in general, we felt this kind of "free speech" issue should not be dealt with in the courts, or their use should be restricted to the more severe cases (10:1 against fresh legislation). But of course, as was pointed out, much depends on the way legislation is drafted.

A majority wanted to see more use of "fact checkers" (7:4) and nearly everyone wanted to see more emphasis on education to cultivate more "critical thinking" in young people. Nearly everyone also felt that Freedom Of Information was an important related issue and that lack of availability of information from powerful bodies such as Corporations and Governments was as important as actual falsehoods in blogposts or the press.

Finally, we wanted to emphasize the need for proportionality (as Baggini himself argues) in dealing with this issue. If Singapore were subjected to the kind of organized subversion of its political processes as is alleged to have happened in the US in 2016 by a Russian group, then very severe penalties and counter measures would be appropriate. But silly young people trying to impress their friends by making bad jokes should not receive the same kind of censure. One test of any new measures will be the amount of satire aired in Singapore: if satire disappears, Singapore will be the poorer.

I hope our comments and the paper attached will be of help to the Committee.

Yours sincerely,

Tim Bunn, Coordinator of Singapore Philosophy Group.

Julian Baggini's "Short History of Truth"

Introduction:

Baggini takes history and philosophy as guides to see “how the idea of truth has actually been used and abused.” He discusses truths in categories, starting with truth from revelation, rather than in a strict historical sequence. “Each category illustrates how the means of legitimately establishing truth are imperfect and contain with them the potential for distortion,” with the ultimate aim of showing that “the claim we live in a post-truth world is the most pernicious untruth of them all.”

He says that the meaning of “truth” is not really in question. Aristotle’s definition is still appropriate (if cumbersome): “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.” (Metaphysics, 1011B) However, “our problem is not primarily with what truth means but how and by whom truth is established.”

Eternal Truths

Some examples of revealed truth are disbelieved by the great majority of the rest of humanity (eg The Book of Mormon). But none of the more widely believed revelations are believed by a majority of humanity, while the majority do believe that one such text is revealed. In other words, the majority believe in one revelation that the majority believe to be false! However, if none has majority support, then it is rational to believe in a minority view.

This reminds us the problem is not an absence of truth but an overabundance of competing claims, some of which conflict sharply with science (eg Creationism vs Evolution). Fortunately, most religious believers accept scientific truths alongside their faith, and are tolerant of other religious beliefs. Not many believers hold that “every word” of revelation is literally true, nor do many say that all revelation is allegory and metaphor; most are somewhere between literal belief and metaphor. “There is a strong tradition in Islam, for example, of insisting that nothing in the Qur’an contradicts science and there are many ways of interpreting the text to maintain such compatibility.” (p16) Similarly, in Christianity how Jesus came to be (was Mary literally impregnated by God?) has been the subject of much very difficult argument and discussion, suggesting that in the end the most rational course for religious believers is to accept that faith in the divine is necessarily somewhat mysterious.

“Religion does not just promote different truths, it advocates different grounds of truth.” (p17) We should not mistake theology for science, or mythology for history. What makes religious revelations special is not that they embody ordinary, empirical truths. Rather they intend to tell us how to live, and how to feel about ourselves, other people and the universe. “Religion and secular knowledge clash when they both see themselves as offering competing realities. When they accept that their truths are of different species, coexistence is possible.” This understanding offers our best hope of reducing religion as a source of conflict.

Authoritative Truths

Most people know little about some things, and so must defer to the authority of experts. But we need to know when it is right to accept an authority's version of the truth. First, is this an area of knowledge in which anyone can speak truth, whatever our views on particular authorities may be? Secondly, what kind of expert is trustworthy in this area? Thirdly, is this particular expert to be trusted? For example, homeopathy might seem very poorly supported by science, but many who are well-informed about health do support its claims.

However, we are immediately faced by a serious dilemma: "We need to defer to experts but not everyone who claims to be an expert is one. If we decide which experts to defer to on the basis of expert opinion, we paradoxically have to choose which experts to trust." We have to rely on our own judgement in this process: "Reason's dirty secret is that we have to rely on our own judgement without being able rationally to justify it completely." (p29) "We should not kid ourselves we can rely solely on logically following the facts."

Currently expert authorities in many areas are routinely dismissed in favour of gut reactions or loudly touted "popular" views. Popular media have become unbalanced. "We have to take more care as to whom we grant authority, and on what basis." "Don't think by yourself but do think for yourself, not because you are wiser or smarter than other people but ultimately because that's what you have to do." (31)

Esoteric Truths

The truth about the 9/11 World Trade Centre terrorist attacks is considered by some to be quite different to the majority view: the whole thing was staged by the CIA as an excuse for launching wars in the Middle East. This kind of conspiracy theory persists not because some people are crazy but because some truths have always been hidden. Plato, for example, has Socrates advocating a fictitious creation story because he argued it was beneficial for people to believe the story and so support the state. And indeed, some conspiracy theories are true: through Operation Mockingbird, the CIA did pay journalists to publish propaganda in the 1960's and 70's. "In the early 21st century we find ourselves in the position where we know some truths are hidden by powerful groups to protect their own interests, we are not usually competent enough judges to know which claims about such esoteric truths are correct, and we don't have much confidence in experts to make those judgements for us." (p39) "The distinction between paranoia and justified suspicion has become dangerously blurred."

However, we need to remember that having good reason to believe there are concealed truths is not a reason to believe most claims of their discovery. In the absence of good evidence that we are being deceived, it is foolish to believe something is being hidden; it is like digging for buried treasure randomly, or on the basis of rumour. As the philosopher David Hume said, "A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence." (Enquiry, Section 10, 1748) "We need to row back on our cynicism without in any way decreasing our scepticism." (p42)

Reasoned Truths

The philosophers Descartes and Spinoza were the most prominent modern advocates of the power of reason to give us truth. Reason, they suggested, can get behind appearances, and show us reality as it truly is. Since then most philosophers have come to understand reason's power as more limited, and most would agree with the physicist Werner Heisenberg, "It will never be possible by pure reason to arrive at some absolute truth." (Physics and Philosophy, 1958) David Hume argued that reason can only tell us about the relationship between concepts, like "1+1=2", which does not tell us what happens when you actually put two things together: they can merge, or multiply or annihilate each other.

The problem is that in order to make arguments "logical" we have to simplify them, which does more to exaggerate the relationships between our assumptions than reveal new truths. "This isn't reason at its best, but reason at its purest. Like alcohol, when it is too pure, reason becomes unpalatable and potentially toxic. Reason works best in a blend which includes not just logic but experiences, evidence, judgement, subtlety of thought and sensitivity to ambiguity." (p47)

We should not, however, debunk rational thinking. Psychology has recently shone a very powerful light on our capacity to misjudge evidence, especially in Daniel Kahneman's "Thinking Fast and Slow", (2011) Reason can best be seen as a way of helping us evaluate what is true, rather than as an infallible guide, using both our "hot", fast automatic thinking and our slow, cool scientific tools. After all, the weaknesses in thinking Kahneman has exposed were discovered through careful scientific investigation. "It's a smart creature that understands very well the nature of its own stupidity. And understanding the traps of irrationality we fall into means we can become better at avoiding them." (p50)

Empirical truths

David Hume argued that there are two kinds of human enquiry, logical and empirical. Empirical truths (facts) are never certain: it is possible that the sun will not rise tomorrow, albeit very unlikely - we hope!. "A lack of certainty is therefore part of the deal with empirical truth. We need to give up on it in order to take up the possibility of knowledge of the world." (p55)

This does not mean that discovering all the relevant facts is always easy. Indeed, we usually get closer to the truth through a kind of "drunkard's walk", finding the errors of successive misconceptions, rather than arrowing neatly towards it. This is well illustrated by the long story of the significance of exposure to cold on catching a cold: it now seems likely that although we carry cold viruses most of the time, we are more likely to become sick from them when cold weather reduces our immune system responses (Ellen Foxman, reported in news.yale.edu/2015).

"The successes of modern science, including the tremendous advances in medicine, are owed to the judicious use of empirical methods. To deny this has expanded our store of truths because empirical knowledge is never 100 percent certain would be to make a demand of truth that it could never conceivably meet." (p59)

Creative Truths

Can truths be created? “Being ‘creative with the truth’ is no more than a euphemism for not telling truth at all. (p65) But some truths are created by their utterance: when a Muslim man says talāq three times in some jurisdictions, he divorces his wife. When a legally sanctioned official says to a couple, “I declare you man and wife” they become married. This can be seen to be true even in some more general cases: when President Bush told Congress after 9/11, “Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists,” he was issuing an ultimatum. In other words, he was not stating a political fact but creating one – you must take sides. Sadly, this has been the case in many if not most conflicts; it is usually impossible to remain in place and not be on one side or the other.

However, this can also go too far. When Donald Trump talked about “truthful hyperbole” he suggested it was “an innocent form of exaggeration.” His ghost writer in “The Art of the Deal”, Tony Schwartz now says that deceit is never innocent: “‘Truthful hyperbole’ is a contradiction in terms. It’s a way of saying, ‘It’s a big lie but who cares?’” (Jane Mayer, New Yorker, 27.7.2016)

It is very important to be accurate about existing reality before you attempt to change it, by creating new truths. “Not just any truth can be created.” (p65)

Relative Truths

Relativism can be used to curtail dialogue: your truth is yours and mine is mine, and so it is pointless to try to say which is true. There is no absolute truth, only relative truths.

It has been argued that because Inuit has about 50 words for “snow”, we cannot say in Inuit “snow is white” is true, even though it appears true in English. So the truth here seems relative to the culture and language in which it is expressed.

If we consider the Inuit words for snow, we need to remember that Inuit is actually a family of languages, and because they are polysynthetic, words can be formed and reformed in different ways, so what counts as a new word is not clear. But once we have established a clear rule for counting, we can say how many words for snow there are, and the answer depends on the facts, not just on the rule.

Although there is more than one truth to be told, the truths are not necessarily contradictory. To say it is good snow for skiing and bad snow for building an igloo is not to offer competing truths about snow, but to draw attention to different qualities or aspects of snow which those who know snow very well might notice much more readily than those who do not.

There may therefore be not be only one objective truth but more than one objective truths, and that is because ‘true’ and ‘false’ are not the only categories into which we can classify statements. It may in the Inuit snow case be indeterminate whether a word is a new word or just a variant of another word.

More generally, “the defender of objective truth need not claim that all truths are clear and unequivocal.” “Objective truth does not always have sharp edges. Indeed, sometimes the truth precisely is that something is ambiguous or indeterminate, and the falsehood that something is clear-cut and determinate.” (p75)

It follows that a statement can capture some of the truth without capturing it all. The phrase “alternative facts” is misleading: there are additional facts which can replace missing or bogus facts, but facts are facts, there are no alternatives.

If there were no truths, only “perceptions”, then there would be no truth at all. “If what is true for me is not true for you then either one of us is wrong, or both of us have only one hand on the truth and need each other’s help to see the whole it.” (p76)

Powerful Truths

The French philosopher Michel Foucault has advocated the view that truth itself is linked to systems of power which produce and sustain it. This view is perhaps readily accepted when examining how truth is manipulated in totalitarian states, but is harder to sustain and more difficult in societies which claim to be democratic and to espouse free speech.

Does this mean that truth is nothing more than the exercise of power? Perhaps clandestine elites within every society can actually control what is understood to be true. But, if this is true, then “we have to accept that there are at least some truths that are not merely expressions of power.” Otherwise, truth just means power and there is no possibility of changing our understanding of it except through power. But we have good examples of truths which have been manipulated by power for a long while, only to be eventually exposed. The tobacco industry famously concealed evidence that smoking caused cancer for a long time before it was finally exposed for its deception. The current view of health scientists is that sugar is more harmful than trans fats; for many years, fat has been promoted by governments as the greatest danger to health, and this was partly because the sugar industry in the US was able to sponsor research which suggested that sugar was less damaging. But nutritionists themselves played a part in this. A leading US nutritionist called Ancel Keys secured a powerful position on health boards and was able to reduce the effectiveness of those who disagreed about sugar. This example shows that truth can be manipulated by power and we need to ask of any strong claim, “Cui bono?” (who benefits?). But “every time we debunk an alleged truth propounded by the self-interested powerful, we prove that truth can overcome power and must not always be its servant.” (p84)

Moral Truths

Relativism has more to say about moral truths. From a western perspective, this may be partly because of how intolerant and sometimes how destructive our ancestors were towards native peoples in countries such as Australia and America; we now want to avoid condemning diversity. But this is more troubling when faced with practices like female genital mutilation, persecution of homosexuals, or killing rape victims. Few are willing to say that the Holocaust was only wrong for some.

But what evidence, what facts might be relevant in moral judgements? Does a dislike of judicial execution remain just a preference, a matter of ethical taste? Relativism seems to be an inevitable consequence of viewing moral judgements as a matter of taste.

However, David Hume suggested that morality is based on feeling, and especially on “fellow feeling”. What tells you life is of value? There is no logical proof of its value – it’s a matter of feeling that this value is very important.

Hume was arguably correct in saying that morality is rooted in our value preferences, but he did not stress enough that values can be shaped by what we take to be true. Facts have changed our values: for example, the belief that homosexuality is wrong has been eroded by evidence that it is not a choice and never an illness; greater concern for animal welfare has been a result partly of more evidence that animals can suffer pain. Although there remains room for argument, the belief that wealth inequality should be reduced is affected by evidence on the kinds of problems and benefits more equal and unequal societies demonstrate.

“Prejudice arises because we reach a conclusion in advance of seeing the relevant facts. When we judge after having seen the truth, prejudice is replaced by fair judgement.” (p91) Aristotle understood this 2300 years ago, when he said, “True theories are extremely valuable for the conduct of our lives as for the acquisition of knowledge, since because of their agreement with the facts they carry conviction, and so encourage those who understand them to live under their direction.” (Aristotle, Ethics 1172b)

Holistic Truths

Argument between those who hold completely incompatible systems of beliefs (such as between whole earth creationists and evolutionists and cosmologists) are not easily settled. Both take a holistic approach to justification. “If your sense of the divine is at least as strong to you as the feeling of gravity, isn’t it in one sense reasonable – at the very least understandable – to believe in one as the other?” “Because truths stand or fall together, it is not possible to put ourselves outside two webs of belief and assess their credibility from a third, neutral perspective. This is why it is so difficult to get to the ‘bottom line’ of truth. There is no such bottom line, only key threads that hold our beliefs together.” (p99)

Does this mean we are simply trapped in a spider’s web of our own beliefs? Perhaps it does. But this does not prevent us re-examining our beliefs and even occasionally experiencing revolutionary change in them. Thomas Kuhn’s theory of change in scientific ideas (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn, 1962) graphically explained how paradigm changes occur at periods of “revolutionary science”. It showed how much science was a collective endeavour in the past and even more so today, when huge, expensive particle colliders or massive collaborative projects such as the Human Genome project are essential to make the next breakthroughs. The web metaphor suggests solitary spiders weaving alone; really, the networks of belief are much more social and collaborative.

“The post-truth society is in part a result of a malfunctioning of this social system of knowledge. By retreating into bubbles of the like-minded, people can strip out a lot of inconvenient complexities a wider perspective would give, leading to a simpler but therefore also distorted network of belief.”

“No facts are inconvenient for the truth. The way to truth is not for an impossible neutral view that takes us outside any given network of beliefs. It is to expand the web as much as we can, weaving in as many true threads as possible.” (p103)

Conclusion: Future Truths

This essay has surveyed methods of enquiry or sets of rules for establishing facts. But we have found that attitudes are at least as important as methods of enquiry: epistemic virtues like modesty, scepticism, openness to other perspectives, a spirit of collective enquiry, readiness to confront power and distortion, a desire to create better truths, and a willingness to let morals be guided by facts.

In the post-truth world, these epistemic virtues have not been explicitly rejected nor have their opposites, cynicism, overconfidence, deference to power, loss of the hope for new truths, been seen to triumph. Indeed most people continue to value sincerity and accuracy highly. We continue to want our facts to be right; we need to remain vigilant about our attitudes.

Truth is less like shiny pebbles we look for on a beach and more like a garden, an organic whole where everything is inter-related. Some things remain constant in the garden but others change. Our garden needs cultivation and nurture, to prevent it becoming overgrown with weeds.

“The defence of truth often takes the form of battles to defend particular truths that divide us. This is sometimes necessary but as the military metaphor suggests, it feeds antagonism. The greater unifying enterprise is to defend the shared value we place on truth, the virtues that lead us towards it, and the principles that help us to identify it. Those who stand up for this are pushing at an open door because ultimately we all recognize that truth is not a philosophical abstraction. Rather it is central to how we live and make sense of ourselves, the world and each other, day by day.” (p108)