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The Growth of a Post-Truth World in Modern Society

The concept of truth – the acceptance that certain events, objects or beliefs actually exist and can be proven through facts or occurrences – has been, and in many instances remains, a fundamental component of life, of how mankind manages what we know to be existence. However, a somewhat seismic change is taking place in America and other parts of the world today, as messages deemed and proven by many sources to be inherently false are propagated as being true.

This so-called "post-truth" movement is driven by a myriad of changes to accepted societal mores as well as technological advancements that allow unsubstantiated and unfettered dissemination of inherently "true" information and messages with those that decidedly are "false." Another factor framing this development: The ubiquitous 24-hours news cycle, a delivery mechanism of information originating from both long-standing and reputable sources of journalism along with fringe entities spanning both ends of the political and social spectrum. The result is a mounting challenge to Western beliefs on truth.

What follows is an attempt to better comprehend post-truth developments of today through an analysis of the building blocks of truth set into place in the fourth century BC, then expanded and extrapolated by a modern thinker. A close reading of the conclusion to Plato's *Sophist* and sections of Michel Foucault's *Discourse on Language* will be explored to provide a "time line"

of sorts on the evolution of the concept of truth. The goal will be to analyze the origins of truth and its reinterpretations to better comprehend why and how we now live in an increasingly post-truth society – and what might be the immediate and long-term prognosis for society.

The Post-Truth Phenomenon as Embodied in American Twenty-First Century Politics

The activities affiliated with managing a government and the conflicts that rise among the people and parties involved – the political structure – provide framework for exploration into a well-established post-truth problem that often dominates the communications landscape in the second decade of the twenty-first century; but studies show this development, also called "post-factual" or "post-reality politics," actually surfaced more than a century ago. One of the most acknowledged and encompassing modern examples of documented mistruths made in the national political arena have taken place here in the United States. According to various sources, the level of post-truth messages is alarming, and the ramifications may be long-term.

An obvious and always evolving example of widely recognized and reported post-truth communications was established in the months leading up to and following the 2016 national elections. Less than two years into his administration, a documented analysis revealed President Donald Trump presented incorrect or inaccurate information with astounding regularity on topics ranging from tax legislation, the probe into meddling by Russia before the 2016 elections, erection of the proposed border wall between the U.S. and Mexico and legislation and rulings originated by the Obama Administration. In an article published in the *Washington Post*, the President reportedly communicated "3,001 false or misleading claims" in the first 466 days in office, an average of 6.5 messages each day that should be classified as falsehood or leading to

false beliefs. And, the article also states, Trump purportedly presents identical mistruths on multiple occasions: "Trump has a proclivity to repeat, over and over, many of his false or misleading statements. We counted at least 113 claims that the President repeated at least three times, some with breathtaking frequency."[1]

The inflammatory nature of the political culture, which for many appeals primarily to emotion and is distanced from facts and policy, is a factor in this post-truth movement, and has been an accelerating product of political discourse in recent years. This contemporary challenge to truthful communications actually has been woven into the political fabric before more recent societal changes and the explosion of digital communications.

To expand on this thought, the documented mistruths and hyperbole regularly associated with Trump perhaps is representative of an encompassing national zeitgeist encapsulated by a jaundiced perspective of fairness and neutrality. This introduction to a commentary from editor Jon Gingerich supports this premise: "Donald Trump is less responsible for America's existential crisis than he is a symptom of it, the result of what happens when people identify themselves by an increasingly narrow set of beliefs, and the only remaining tie that binds us is the notion that objective truth no longer has any value in informing those beliefs." Gingerich maintains that the unwavering dedication to core beliefs by many today, coupled with unmonitored and expanding digital and broadcast communication channels, contribute to the broadening set of beliefs, "where hyper-partisan news outlets and social networks are curated to suit our ideology, offering echo chambers that cater to personalized, subjective accounts of reality."[2]

Back to the Foundation: An Analysis of Truth Presented in *Sophist*

Questionable portrayals of truth and its counterpart have, of course, long have been debated, contributed to written and oral discussions and deliberated extensively. For centuries, scholars have methodically examined Plato's *Sophist* to establish canons that form the principles establishing what frequently is defined as truth in the Western world. Through a close reading of a few selected sections of the closing passages of the dialogue, the conversation between Theaetetus and the Visitor will reveal a rational sort of structure for the conceptional units needed to create the scope of truth – as well as reference the idea of falsehood.

Following discussion that addresses difference and change, the Visitor tells Theaetetus there is a paramount need to agree about the concept of speech. In the latter sections of *Sophist*, speech is translated to mean *logos*,[3] which in Greek can be interpreted (among other definitions) as "reason":

> Vis: "For speech's being one kind among *those that are*. If we were deprived of that, we'd be deprived of philosophy – to mention the most important thing. Besides, now we have to agree about what speech is, but we'd be able to say nothing if speech were taken away from us and weren't anything at all. And, it would be taken away if we admitted that there's no blending of anything with anything else."[4]

With this passage, Plato establishes that the absence of speech would prevent mankind from pursuing knowledge, exploring reality and challenging existence – the cornerstones of philosophical thought. From another perspective, without the ability to communicate through speech, existence as we know it would be stagnant through the inability to intersperse thoughts, ideas and opinions. In essence, through speech society advances.

After Theaetetus questions the validity of this perspective about speech, the Visitor continues with a compelling statement about belief and truth: "If it doesn't blend with them then everything has to be true. But if it does then there will be false belief and false speech, since falsity in thinking and speaking amount to believing and saying *those that are not."* In essence, the poignant concept here is that truth is based on objectivity, while false beliefs don't allow for impartiality or neutrality. Later, the Visitor points out that "all speech is about something," and he employs the analysis of putting a subject (a thing) together with a verb to demonstrate the difference between true speech and false speech: The former, "Theaetetus sits." And, the latter, "Theaetetus (to whom I am now talking) flies."[5] This clearly and purposefully absurd comparison initially can be read with circumspection; however Plato directs the "true" statement to the world, while the "false" statement is delivered directly to Theaetetus – perhaps as a way to scold those who fail to recognize the difference.

After the value of speech and the nature of truth and falsehood is made, Plato concludes with this analysis: "So since there is truth and false speech, and that includes thinking, which appeared to be the soul's conversation with itself, and belief, which is the conclusion of thinking, and since we call *appearing* the blending of perception and belief, it follows that since there are all the same kind of thing."[6]

The noteworthy aspects here: Plato structured a comprehensive perspective on truth by aligning it with speech (as noted, defined as *logos*.) But when defining speech from a literary or primary perspective, it's a fundamental form of communication. One can persuasively maintain *Sophist* concludes that all speech has some meaning, whether it's true speech or false speech. (An aside:

Those who purposefully perpetrate post-truth messages probably are cognizant of the fact the falsehoods presented will resonate as being truthful to the intended audience.) Yet some scholars have contrary interpretations regarding a definitive concept of truth presented in the dialogue. Here are two examples.

In the paper, A "Conception" of Truth in Plato's Sophist," Blake E. Hestir, argues that the account of true and false statements that emerges within the discussion of not being and falsehood generally "neither entails nor outwardly suggests any of the traditional characterizations of a correspondence 'theory' of truth." Hestir continues with an argument interpreting Plato's dialogue as having presented a more diluted perspective of truth: "…what emerges from *Sophist* is a very minimalistic 'conception' of truth which requires neither positing the existence of facts or states of affairs nor formulating a precise, explanatory definition of truth."[7] A somewhat related perspective could be found in a paper from American philosopher Kenneth M. Sayer, who interpreted the schism between truth and falsehood as presented in *Sophist* as having a foundation that requires an immediate or momentary correlation and absence of conflict. This sentence from Sayer's nearly 50-year-old paper, "Falsehood, Forms and Participation in the *Sophist*," encapsulates that theory: "A statement attributing a property to an individual is true if and only if all forms in which the individual participates at the relevant moment are compatible with the form to which that property corresponds, and the statement is false if and only if all such forms are compatible with the complement of that predicate form."[8]

Analysis of Foucault's *Discourse* Leads Discussion in New Direction

As presented in the short interpretation of *Sophist* and the two papers referenced, truth and falsehood, as defined by Plato, are broad-based and encompassing concepts, making their definitions ripe for unending debate and interpretation. Within the 1970 lecture, *The Discourse on Language,* Michel Foucault does not address truth and falsehood specifically; yet the theories he presents regarding the process related discourse -- the collective impact of the capacity to hold influence and knowledge on guiding social decisions -- is relevant to this discussion.

In *Discourse*, Foucault presents this perspective early in the lecture: "I am supposing that in every society the discussion of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality. In a society such as our own we all know the rules of *exclusion*."[9] An interpretation of Foucault's introductory thought: Written or spoken communication is monitored and can be altered to meet a specific need or lead to a prescribed conclusion.

Foucault goes on to point out through the restriction of discourse, the boundaries placed upon communication hold the potential for the greatest harm: "The most obvious and familiar of these concerns what is *prohibited.* We know perfectly well that we are not free to say just anything, that we cannot simply speak of anything, when we like or where we like; not just anyone, finally, may speak of just anything."[10] Of course, these prohibitions and restrictions are not being adhered to in the post-truth world of today. The three types of prohibition identified by Foucault in *Discourse* -- objects, ritual and subject -- interrelate, reinforce and complement each other,

forming a complex web with the so-called "danger spots most numerous," identified as sexuality and politics; the latter, of course, is the cornerstone of the post-truth examples presented earlier. So rhetorically, how does analyzing *The Discourse on Language* contribute to this exploration of post-truth and the foundations of truth? Foucault says discourse is driven by "procedures," which also can be interpreted as having guidelines or structure; he noted in 1970 that there were restrictions on speech, and the top-ranking subjects have the potential to do the most harm. Foucault could not have predicted the emergence of social media and widespread and seemingly unregulated digital messaging taking place today; yet, he comprehended the impact controls to open communication – in this case sharing false-truths – could have on the greater population.

Concluding Thoughts on Post-Truth in Society Today

As noted here, post-truth today is becoming somewhat universal and is propagated consistently by arguably the most powerful human being on the planet. Post-truth is real, false communications are measurable, and the behavioral phenomenon of accepting falsehood is seemingly unstoppable given accessible technology and a segment of society that accepts mistruths in order to support populist beliefs and ideologies. This is especially true in the political arena, but the concept of post-truth extends far beyond politics: Think challenges to climate change or reports that the Holocaust never happened.

Centuries ago, Plato defined truth and falsehood in *Sophist*, and his beliefs continued to inspire new interpretations. In the late twentieth century, thinkers like Foucault brought new perspectives, maintaining that discourse – which can communicate truth or falsehood – was guided by procedures, with discourse related to politics having the prospect of grave consequences to society.

Those consequences recently have been the center of scholarly research. A 2018 study by a team from Massachusetts Institute of Technology revealed that post-truth or false news sent through the internet has a wider, more accelerated and more encompassing effect than truthful or accurate news[11]. In the report, "The Spread of True and False News Online," the research team found that the behaviors identified were applicable across a spectrum of topics – from the expected like politics and urban legends – to business, science and technology. Two key findings to point out: 1) Patently false messages posted on Twitter were 70 percent more likely to be retweeted than truthful messages. 2) Humans – not robots, as many might ascertain – are the force behind the dissemination of false news over the past few years.

Given the examples and analysis presented here, we can safely conclude that post-truth communications will remain part of the national lexicon for the foreseeable future. The long-term ramifications of a world driven in part by false-truth communications will certainly garner significant study and deliberation for many years to come.

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