

Trumpism and the Value of Truth. Donald Trump's "Addiction to Lying". The Onslaught of "Post Truth"

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From the day he announced his candidacy for president of the United States - with his talk of Mexican rapists illegally crossing the border - it has been clear that Mr. Trump has no regard for truth, evidence, or any of the norms that make for honest, intelligent inquiry and debate.

Since Trump took office we have witnessed a president who is by any measure addicted to lying. According to the Washington Post, Donald Trump makes statements which are either untrue or misleading, on average, over six times each and every day. No president in modern history has displayed such contempt for the epistemic norms that are the foundation of civil discourse and a vibrant democracy - and all the while congress looks on inept and indeed complicit with this travesty.



Mr. Trump is the quintessential embodiment of the 'post-truth' era, and his actions as president reveal the high cost of such brazen dishonesty and willful disregard of reality; illustrated by his denial of anthropogenic climate change (a fact affirmed by virtually all climate scientists) and withdrawal from the Paris climate accord; his refusal to acknowledge the pressing need for, at a minimum, common sense gun laws in stemming the growing tide of gun-related violence; his persistent attacks on the FBI and Department of Justice, as well as outright disdain for the rule of law, which is unable to function properly without a healthy respect for things like objective reality, truth and justification; his penchant for conspiracy theories and utterly bogus claims, like the one that the Obama administration had his phones tapped.

But we cannot lay all the blame at the door of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. We may indeed be living in the era of 'post-truth' - but for that, Trump himself is not solely responsible. Robust notions of truth, reality and objective inquiry have long been under assault, both in the culture at large, as well as in the hallowed halls of academia. Trump cleverly exploited this skepticism, a crisis of confidence, to which liberalism undoubtedly contributed.

The philosopher Hegel once wrote,

“Truth is a noble word and the thing is nobler still.”

It is fair to say that philosophers have long since abandoned the high estimation he expressed. The American neo-pragmatist Richard Rorty may serve as a case in point. He claimed that there are only two senses of true: a) what you can defend against all conversational objections, and b) correspondence with things-in-themselves (some mind-independent reality). Since, according to Rorty, there is no such a thing as ‘the way the world is’ we are left with the first option: truth is reduced to a conversational remnant. Of course, Rorty’s dichotomy was far from exhaustive – but putting that aside, the problem with his account of truth is that while there may sometimes be objections which really cannot be overcome, there are also objections which can be, but are not due to the limitations on the part of the participants.

If you go as far as Rorty in giving up on the notion of truth, a reasonable appreciation of science is also undermined. What we are in fact seeing today is the depreciation of reason and the devaluation of truth – a dwindling confidence in the mind as an instrument or faculty for arriving at knowledge, or true justified belief.

Trumpism is a travesty of reason – and its tragic consequence is the sad tale that continues unfolding to the ongoing horror of thinking peoples the world over. It is the tragedy of watching the Presidency of the United States devolve into a hollow megalomania, a form of mindless entertainment to be consumed by the most jingoistic and least informed among us. The tragedy of Trumpism is nothing less than a moral calamity, a breakdown of social values, a rejection of truth and justice for the sake of tribalism (where a belief is “true” if it satisfies the standards of the community to which we happen to belong).

Meanwhile, we have entirely lost sight of the value of truth as such; of why truth matters, and what makes truth something to be sought after, prized and protected. The most common defense of truth is the pragmatic one – namely, that truth works; that true beliefs are more likely to get the job done than those that are not true.

The pragmatic account of the value of truth is not wrong, but at the same time it is not enough. Truth is not valuable for solely instrumental or extrinsic reasons. Truth has intrinsic value as well. When we reduce the value of truth to instrumentality, it is a very short step to saying that we just want beliefs that work for us, regardless of whether they are true or not.

My claim is that truth is to be valued for its own sake as well. Truth is intrinsically valuable and having lost sight of that is one of the great follies that Trumpism helps to perpetuate.

To bring the inherent value of truth into focus we need to get beyond the view that truth is simply the correspondence between a belief and the way the world is – that is, truth is more than agreement between thought and thing. Truth is, first and foremost, the correspondence of a thing with itself – as when, for example, we speak of a true friend or a true work of art. Incidentally, this is what truth meant for Hegel, who made an important distinction between truth and correctness, which are often taken to be synonymous.

Truth, he said, “lies in the coincidence of the object with itself.”

It is precisely in this sense that we can begin to appreciate the inherent value of truth. Truth is valuable in itself because it is nothing less than a thing's measuring up to itself, living up to what it is meant to be, and what it claims to be.

It is also in this sense that we can see how false this president is - how miserably he fails to live up to what his office demands, and what we as a country should demand of him. The tragedy of Trumpism is the unbearably sad prospect that this country may cease, not simply to be true to itself, to its most cherished ideals - for perhaps it never really was - but that it may cease striving to be so; that it may cynically give up on the struggle for truth; that we may indeed die through a kind of collective suicide, a suicide on the part of us which has maintained that, with all of our terrible sins, there is still a truth embodied in the United States.

If this country stands for anything it is collective self-government: "government of the people, by the people, for the people," as Lincoln put it in what is now part of our secular scripture. But such government requires a citizenry that is able to distinguish fact from illusion, and demagoguery from democracy. It demands a citizenry that prizes truth and despises lies - especially when they come from high places.

"Truth is relative," Rudolph Giuliani, now a member of Trump's legal team, explained recently. "They [the Special Counsel] may have a different version of the truth than we do."

Giuliani's self-defeating position would be laughable were it not so dangerous: it is the position that allows the Alex Joneses of the world to operate with impunity; it is the position that allows the president to make a mockery of genuine inquiry.

The onslaught of post-truth is something we must resist with everything in our power, and every means at our disposal - in courts, and classrooms and public discourse. The era of Trumpism must come to an end lest, shamefully, we sink in shallow water.

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