

Truth, untruth and post-truth

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The search for truth is not just the exclusive endeavour of philosophers, scientists, religious exponents etc. Everybody is in search of truth. By the very fact that we live, we also prove that we think, and by the fact of our thinking we again prove our existence – *Cogito ergo sum*. In the pursuit of philosophy or science, the bar for ‘Truth’ may be elevated to a bit higher order but it’s nonetheless in the other areas. The question, however, that bothers many is – “what is truth?” and “How do we assert that what we are thinking or presuming to be correct is true?” Dale Carnegie¹ once wrote that we believe, “... because it is almost impossible not to believe what you want to believe.” The question that permeates all the inquiries is – “Is our belief a sufficient guide to the truth?” Maybe! That’s what the recent history of epistemology trying to demonstrate before us.

Possessing a truth with us at one point of time in our life may not ensure us that we continue to be holding the truth forever unless we subject the known truth to the scrutiny time and again. Alvin Toffler said: “The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.” Truth demands an alertness and continuous striving. Gotthold Lessing, the German writer and philosopher, once said: “The true value of a man is not determined by his possession, supposed or real, of Truth, but rather by his sincere exertion to get the Truth. It is not possession of the Truth, but rather the pursuit of Truth by which he extends his powers and in which his ever-growing perfectibility is to be found. Possession makes one passive, indolent, and proud. If God were to hold all truth concealed in his right hand, and in his left hand only the steady and diligent drive for Truth, albeit with the proviso that I would always and forever err in the process, and offer me the choice, I would with all humility take the left hand, and say: Father, I will take this one – the pure Truth is for You alone.”

Search for 'Truth' or '*Satya*' is not alien to us – Indians, as we proclaimed with all seriousness quite long back in the timeline that '*satvameva jayate*' [Truth alone wins!]. Taken from Mundaka Upanishad, it has now become our national motto on 26 January 1950! But an incredulous mind suffers with a seamless web of doubts: "Will '*satya*' really win? Wins ultimately or in the '*now*,' and in the immediacy? How do I relate to a '*satya*' which may win at an unknown distant future?" It is said that the Taittiriya-samhita considers '*satyam param*', i.e., 'the Truth is the Supreme of all.' There is no doubt that we have huge treasure of literature on the idea of '*satya*' in the ancient Indian scriptures. Is '*satya*' Universal and One, or has several manifestations? Upanishads also say: "*Ekam Sat Vipra Bahudha Vadanti!*" Certain philosophies like Janism, through their '*syad vada*' or '*anekant vada*' allow even the plurality of truth.

Is the word 'truth' amenable for any definition? Does it have any specific patterns in its evolution [or even in devolution] over a period of about known history of written word? A kind of Truth historicism? Felipe Fernandez-Armesto², a British historian, tried to record the history of Truth in "**Truth - a History.**" One of the purposes of writing the book, as the author himself indicated, was: "Historians have continued to turn truth down as a subject. ... Yet we need a history of truth. We need it to test the claim that truth is just a name for opinions which suit the demands of the society or the conservative elites. ..." Outside the mythical versions of the past, the earliest reference to the doctrine of pure rationalism for an inquiry into truth was found in pre-Socrates Greek school of thought. Indian Upanishadic tradition, the contemplations of Buddha etc., also seek parity with the pure rationalism. Kautilya or Chanakya, the astute Brahmin credited with his role in the establishment of Maurya Dynasty or Magadha Kingdom was also said to have strengthened a philosophical system called '*Anvikshiki*', a modern equivalent of critical inquiry.

With the powerful intervention of positivist, scientific, dialectic and materialistic methods from the 16th century onwards, the search for truth assumed new heights in natural as well as social sciences. The confidence of progressive Europe of the Victorian era made the positivist claims an absolute. But this confidence didn't remain as solid as it was at the initial stages of positivism and over a time even the definitive sciences like mathematics, physics etc., entertained

certain doubts in theories viz., 'entropy', 'uncertainty', 'relativity', etc., to cite a few. In the meanwhile, studies into human mind and astronomy delved into unknown realms of the noumenon and phenomenon. Armesto³ thus considers: "In the twentieth-century West, truth was buried in what I call 'the graveyard of certainty' – a civilization of crumbling confidence, in which it was hard to be sure of anything. Uncertainty was part of a scientific counter-revolution, which overthrew the ordered image of the universe inherited from the past and substituted the image we live with today: chaotic, contradictory, full of unobservable events, untraceable particles, untraceable causes and unpredictable effects."

The social sciences, in this milieu, have posed more problems in the project of truth. In their efforts to elevate their theories beyond questioning, some have gone to the extent of embellishing them with the trappings of 'science' or 'scientific' features even beyond science *per se*. Human behavior is not so easily amenable for regimentation into theories. Even then, some social sciences claimed the discovery of absolute truth, inexorable laws, and even claimed certain avoidable predictions. "Even those who believe in truth, and distinguish it correctly, tend to warp, conceal or deny it for their own ends. The new danger is more subtle and more corrosive: liars will have nothing to prove – and defenders of truth will have no case to demand of them – if the very distinction between truth and falsehood is abandoned as a meaningless curio of a pedantic past. In a world where all utterances are of equally little value – the very world into which we are slipping – only merit is silence: joining the voiceless, reveling in illiteracy, abandoning language. No development of our times is more terrifying to those who hope to sustain truth or revive it than the breakdown of confidence in the power of language to express it. ..." ⁴ Thus, the subtle distinction between certainties and possibilities are got blurred in humanities.

Thus, the human being is now forced to doubt the very project of truth. Armesto⁵ thus declares: "Doubt is the truth of our times ..." When Armesto published the history of truth in 1997 he had also, all through, observed the waiting 'Untruth' on the horizons of time for its turn. As long as the dialectics operate within the opposites of 'truth' and 'untruth' the universal project of the epistemology retained the hope of reaching out to truth. But by the beginnings of the new

millennium it appears that we have reached a different stage – ‘Post-truth,’ even before the claims of truth and untruth remain unresolved. The Oxford Dictionary has announced “Post-Truth” as the word of the year 2016! What do we mean or understand by the expression “Post-Truth”? Are we the witnesses for the death of truth? Have we definitely entered the post-Truth era?

Truth and falsehood stand against each other, a known idea common to all. But post-truth transcends truth, and probably even beyond ‘true-false’ dichotomy. Oxford Dictionary defines post-truth as a condition “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” The Cambridge Dictionary defines it as one – “relating to a situation in which people are more likely to accept an argument based on their emotions and beliefs, rather than one based on facts.” Wikipedia [<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki>] further explained the phenomenon: “Post-truth is a philosophical and political concept for “the disappearance of shared objective standards for truth” and the “circuitous slippage between facts or alt-facts, knowledge, opinion, belief, and truth.” It further adds – “Post-truth discourse is often contrasted with the forms taken by scientific methods and inquiry.”

Every young person of today’s digital world is burdened with heavy life activity. The present age of technology doesn’t even allow him to settle down at one particular level of acquisition of knowledge; they are driven continuously by the market forces, sometimes not even to advance, but to stay fit where they were. The times of pastoral leisure are not available to many. We have already seen how the human project of seamless reason has entered the stage of inescapable doubt by the mid of 20th century. Added now to the hedge of doubt the swaths of impossibility of leisurely inquiry! Thus, we see the ground well prepared for the post-truth! Daniel Levitin⁶, a psychologist and Dean of Social Sciences at the Minerva Schools at KGI in San Francisco tried to examine this phenomenon of post-truth in his “**Weaponized Lies: how to think critically in the post-truth era.**”

Levitin⁷ states: “A post-truth era is an era of willful irrationality, reversing all the great advances humankind has made.” He quotes a Stanford University study⁸ which says “... young people’s ability to reason about the information on the Internet can be summed up in one word: bleak. ‘Critical thinking doesn’t mean we disparage everything; it means that we try to distinguish between claims with evidence and those without.’ ‘It is easy for partisans to lie with statistics and graphs because they know that most people think it will take too much time to look under the hood and see how they work.’⁹ Modern readers are not in a position to examine the ‘plausibility.’

Levitin¹⁰ cites a classic example for this new phenomenon in the misuse of social media in the recent past. It appears there is one website by the name MartinLutherKing.org. ‘What MartinLutherKing.org contains is a shameful assortment of distortions, anti-Semitic rants, and out-of-context quotes. Who runs the site? Stormfront, a white-supremacy, neo-Nazi hate group. What better way to hide a racist agenda than by promising “the truth” about a great civil right leader?’ Similar such misuse and abuse of social media is found freely employed in political arena. This phenomenon is growing in India and elsewhere.

We humans, he says, are ‘the storytelling species.’ We are looking only for supporting evidence for our exciting notion. Scientists call this ‘cherry picking’ i.e., the method of collecting the data that suits your hypothesis. ‘Counter knowledge,’ a term coined by the U.K. Journalist Damian Thompson, is misinformation packaged to look like fact that some uncritical mass of people believes to be true. It’s not just in politics that counter knowledge propagates and examples come from science, current affairs, celebrity gossip, and pseudo-history. The difference between a false theory and a true theory is one of probability.¹¹ Counter-knowledge, when it runs contrary to real knowledge, has some social currency. ‘Incredulity’, ‘dismay’, ‘shock’ and ‘thriller’ are not only some human frailties but are also the prime-movers of a story-telling activity. ‘An odd feature of human cognition is that once we form a belief or accept a claim, it’s very hard for us to let go, even in the face of over whelming evidence and scientific proof to the contrary.’¹²

Epistemology, according to the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, is the study of knowledge. Epistemologists concern themselves to the *nature* of knowledge; that is, what does it mean to say that someone knows, or fails to know, something? Second, we must determine the *extent* of human knowledge; that is, how much do we, or can we, know? How can we use our reason, our senses, the testimony of others, and other resources to acquire knowledge? Should we have a legitimate worry about skepticism, the view that we do not or cannot know anything at all? The word “knowledge” and its cognates are an expression of psychological conviction. Epistemologists typically do not focus on procedural or acquaintance knowledge, however, instead preferring to focus on *propositional* knowledge.

The correspondence theory in epistemology considers that what we believe or say is true if it corresponds to the way things actually are – to the facts. This idea can be seen in various forms throughout the history of philosophy. Its modern history starts with the beginnings of analytic philosophy at the turn of the 20th century, particularly in the works of G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell by their rejection of idealism. Moore and Russell hold a version of the *identity theory of truth*. According to the identity theory, a true proposition is *identical* to a fact. But the primary bearers of truth are no longer propositions, but beliefs themselves. A belief is true if and only if it *corresponds to a fact*. The neo-classical correspondence theory seeks to capture the intuition that truth is a content-to-world relation.

Many ideas about realism and anti-realism are closely related to ideas about truth. The relation between truth and metaphysics seen by modern realists can also be exploited by anti-realists. Many modern anti-realists see the theory of truth as the key to formulating and defending their views. But ‘the probabilities of verification’ or ‘verificationism’ is also an element in theory of truth. Truth is not, to this view, a fully objective matter, independent of our thoughts. We have entered into a digital world or virtual world where truth and myth merge into an undistinguishable chemical compound. Now the engines of truth are no more in the hands of the individual seekers.

Foer's¹³ **World without Mind** is essentially a book about the forces in the world that have spurred confusion, conformism, and, sad to say, stupidity. Though the defeat of the higher ideal is hardly final, Foer examines how the truth is manufactured by the big-techs in a make believe world. The author hopes to persuade us that another course is still possible. The Europeans have charmingly, and correctly, lumped them together as GAFAs (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon) – says Foer. For example, Facebook can predict user's race, sexual orientation, relationship status, and drug use on the basis of their "likes" alone. 'The crowd' gets what it wants and deserves. We're in the earliest days of this revolution, of course, says Foer. The whole effort of all the neo-tech is to make human beings more predictable, to anticipate their behavior, which makes them easier to manipulate. Even the father of Capitalism, Adam Smith, didn't anticipate this manipulative market of this extent through information. Knowledge never entered deeply into Smith's thinking about trade. But now "Knowledge factories" have become a reality.

With the big tech entry, we also entered a kind of 'noisy world.' It is a condition called 'Total Noise.' It's no more a stable and predictable knowledge; it is peripatetic, where a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention.¹⁴ The new way of offering us information is always in the order of shock and disbelief. Everyone acquainted with 'social media' is aware of this new environment. See for example a well-known method of social media news: "**9 out of 10 Americans Are Completely Wrong About This Mind-Blowing Fact.**" The moment you come across such news, you will invariably be drawn to read it or hear it instantly. Millions of readers couldn't contain themselves and followed that link. "**You Won't Believe What Happened Next.**"¹⁵ On most occasions the content would be absolutely either irrelevant or full of vanity. The news is not just news, it's always '**breaking**' or '**trending**.' Indians have, of late, become 'news maniacs,' and the social media is more virulent and corrupting in India than anywhere else in the world. Almost every linguistic region has more than two dozen of vernacular audio-visual media and hundreds of social media sites. News 'production' has already reached the level of 'industrial production'!

The question is - can people get the information as a fact-reporting or as a package they want, in the way they want it? Over the centuries, writing became a profession, because it demands the rigor and discipline of a serious writer – a professional? ‘Writing requires revision, fruitless hours of staring at screens, painstaking research.’ ‘Our era is defined by polarization, and by warring ideological gangs that yield no ground.’ A primary problem is conformism. Is there a way out from this cul-de-sac? ‘If readers helped create the conditions for monopolistic dominance, they also have the ability to reverse it.’¹⁶ But Foer’s confidence may not be true at all times. Sometimes the structures we build around for our own security may suffocate us. However, he entertains the challenge¹⁷: “How can we dominate our domination?”

Doubt is the breeding ground for the authority to set in. For some time every branch of knowledge and every known historical truth is upended. It is in this uncertainty fundamentalism sets in because it has no doubts. “Life after doubt may come to be dominated by religious fundamentalism. Societies in recoil from pluralism will demand uniformity, and sceptics and dissenters will probably be the victims of new witch-hunts and burnings.” “Fundamentalism means shutting the doors on variety.”¹⁸ We entered the new millennium with incredulities! The original dichotomy of the ‘Truth’ and ‘Untruth’ is no more holding the ground for the theory of knowledge. It has transcended this dichotomy and entered the phase of ‘post-truth’. The urgent need is – how to withstand the challenge of our times – ‘after-the-truth’ situation? Did we really reach a point of no return, having crossed the Rubicon of epistemology back into the dark swaths of herd psychology?

We are entering into a new world order of uncertainty – a Heraclitus’s world where we ‘cannot step twice into the same river, for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you...’ Russell¹⁹ also cites its alternative expression – ‘We step and do not step into the same rivers: we are, and are not.’ ‘Flux’ is good. But we are in such a flux that its speed and intensity is increased multifold, and probably to such an extent where even Heraclitus would find it difficult to theorize. In a state where even the science has become a tradition and where the distinction between the tradition and the science is less visible, probably, we need to stay a while in a contemplative reflection and question ourselves – “Truth! What next?”

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- ¹ Dale Carnegie, *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*”, Pocket Books, p. 216
- ² Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, © 1997, *Truth - a History*, Bantam Press, London
- ³ *ibid*, p.181
- ⁴ *ibid*, p.194
- ⁵ *ibid*, p.206
- ⁶ Daniel J. Levitin © “**Weaponized Lies: how to think critically in the post-truth era**”, 2016, 2017, PenguinBooks
- ⁷ *ibid*, p.x
- ⁸ *ibid*, p.xiv
- ⁹ *ibid*, p. xvii
- ¹⁰ *ibid*, p.141
- ¹¹ *ibid*, p.170
- ¹² *ibid*, p.186
- ¹³ Franklin Foer © 2017, **World without Mind** – The Existential Threat of Big Tech, Jonathan Cape, London, 2017
- ¹⁴ *ibid*, p.88
- ¹⁵ *ibid*, p.139
- ¹⁶ *ibid*, p.210
- ¹⁷ *ibid*, p.231
- ¹⁸ Armesto, *op. cit.*, p.208
- ¹⁹ Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*, Unwin Paperbacks, London, © Unwin Hyman Ltd 1946, 1961, 1979, p.63