

## ESSAY SEVEN

### Post-Truth Worlds<sup>1</sup>

*“Post-truth extends [the informal notion ‘of an isolated quality of particular assertions’] to a general characteristic of our age.”<sup>2</sup>*

*“Philosophers in particular need to remember that, after all is said and done, truth is a person.”<sup>3</sup>*

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Talk of post-truth today generally turns out to be confusing, complicated, and seriously misleading. My suggestion in this essay for further critical discussion will be that continuing talk about post-truth obscures the authentic and abiding nature of truth as profoundly personal.

#### 1. Talk of Post-Truth is Confusing

In mid-December 2016, the editors of the standard Oxford University Press dictionaries announced their choice of the “word of the year.” They voted for the expression, “post-truth.”<sup>4</sup>

Both the UK’s Brexit campaign and US presidential campaign controversies had made the expression familiar.<sup>5</sup> The lexicographers

observed that “the compound word *post-truth* exemplifies,” they wrote rather dauntingly, “an expansion in the meaning of the prefix ‘post-’ that has become increasingly prominent in recent years. . . . *Post-truth* extends [the informal notion ‘of an isolated quality of particular assertions’] to a general characteristic of our age.”<sup>6</sup>

Among other examples, the lexicographers highlighted two ordinary uses of the expression “post-truth.” The first was the sentence: “in this era of post-truth politics, it’s easy to cherry-pick data and come to whatever conclusion you desire.” The second example was the sentence: “some commentators have observed that we are living in a post-truth age.”

On this and related evidence, the lexicographers then offered a working definition. Their definition read: “‘post-truth,’ adjective, relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeal to emotion and personal belief.”

We may note that this definition uses the expression “post-truth” primarily with respect to what mostly shapes public opinion. This focus may in fact not always be primary, however.<sup>7</sup> Note further the claim that what is most influential in the important social and political process of public opinion is emotion and personal belief, not objective facts. And this indeed may be so. Note finally that this now-standard definition of “post-truth” appears to oppose “objective facts” to what are presumably merely subjective emotions and personal beliefs. Such a bare opposition, however, remains strongly controversial.

This overly frequent kind of opposition between the objective and the subjective, between facts on the one hand and emotions and beliefs on the other, is confusing. Many facts include both emotions and beliefs, yet they are no less objective. The beliefs, emotions, and facts of, for example, Josef Slipyj’s 18 years in

a Soviet Gulag and his subsequent extraordinary services to his faith community and his country often did not oppose objective and subjective matters; they wove such matters together.<sup>8</sup>

We can better grasp this confusing opposition between the objective and the subjective in the definition of “post-truth” when we attend to some of the connotations that “post-truth” related expressions bring to mind.

Thus, English language dictionaries alone offer us such related expressions as “big lie,” “black propaganda,” “circular sourcing,” “deception,” “dog-whistling,” “double-speak,” “echo-chamber,” “euphemistic misspeaking,” “false flag,” “filter bubble,” “factoid,” “fallacy,” “fake news,” “half-truth,” “hoax,” “ideological framing,” “internet manipulation,” “media manipulation,” “propaganda,” “quote mining,” “scientific fabrication,” “social bot,” “spin,” and so on.<sup>9</sup>

The initial point then is that talk of “post-truth” is confusing. Now here is a second point: talk of “post-truth” is also complicated.

## 2. Talk of Post-Truth is Complicated

Recall the lexicographers’ attention to the nuance in their observations of how speakers ordinarily use the prefix ‘post-’ in the expression “post-truth.” When using this prefix, speakers are ordinarily denoting “the time after a specified situation or event – as in *post-war* or *post-match*. . . .” *Here the time denoted is the time after the war or after the match.*

Sometimes, however, in using the prefix “post-“ as in “post-truth,” speakers are not denoting the time after truth. Rather, they are denoting, the Oxford lexicographers say, “a time in which the specified concept [truth] has become unimportant or irrelevant. . . .” Truth is, as it were, still present at such a time. But its importance and relevance have changed.

In particular, the importance and relevance of truth have changed with respect to the circumstances of the time at issue. The definition of “post-truth” proceeds to specify these circumstances as those “in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than [is] appeal to emotion and personal belief.”

“Fine,” some of us might say. We see how the expression “post-truth” does not so much denote a specific time after truth, whatever on earth that might be. Rather “post-truth” denotes a specific time in which truth has become less important and relevant than it was previously.

But then isn't this a distinction without a difference? After all, are not the “before” and “after” in the time before and after the war which the expression “post-war” implies just the same thing as the “before” and “after” in the greater or lesser importance and relevance which the expression “post-truth” implies?<sup>10</sup>

That is, just as there was a time before and after the war, so too there was a time before when truth was more important and relevant and a time after when truth was less important and relevant. Thus, just as some shades of blue may rightly be said to be more in the eye of the beholder than in the ways things are, so too the lexicographers' nuance in the hearing of the allegedly two different uses of the prefix “post” in the expressions “post-war” and “post-truth” may rightly be said to be more in the ear of the listener than in the ways things are.

Once again, though, a pause is helpful, because two separate matters seem to be complicating continuing talk of “post-truth”. The first is our complicated talk of time,<sup>11</sup> and the second is our complicated talk of truth.<sup>12</sup>

As the physicists and philosophers seem never tired of reminding us, our inescapable talk of time is complicated in various ways.<sup>13</sup> We cannot talk properly at all without essentially involving ourselves with time. At least in English, properly talking takes verbs, and most

verbs are temporal realities. Still more, properly talking takes time, and time passes. Thus, continuing to talk of “post-truth” means coming to terms with temporalities, which is no simple matter.

Moreover, as the theologians and again the philosophers also never seem to tire of reminding us, truth too is no simple matter. Just consult the biblical and theological dictionaries and you come upon all kinds of strange matters – everything from various Semitic uses of Hebrew terms for truth as *emet* meaning firmness, solidity, faithfulness, steadfastness, judicial verifiability, and righteousness, to Greek and Hellenistic different uses of truth as *alétheia*, and even to different uses in Paul as sober truth and in John the Evangelist as saving truth.<sup>14</sup> Then pick up the philosophical dictionaries and discover still other strange matters such truth aptness, truth conditions, truth functors, truth functions, truthmakers, truth predicates, truth tables, truth-values, even T-sentences.<sup>15</sup>

In referring to truth in the expression “post-truth,” do we mean our listeners just to take their pick between either “truth” as denoting Tarski’s “convention T” (a material adequacy principle “governing the enterprise of giving a definition of the truth predicate for a language”<sup>16</sup>), or “truth” as denoting John’s “spirit of truth” (a “part of revelation, a witnessing spirit in the community”<sup>17</sup>)?

Or, if we rashly decide to argue that the truth at issue in “post-truth” is neither Tarskian nor Johannine, how are we to overcome the considerable consequent problems of both self-reflexivity and proper warrant for some particular meta-language?

Besides being confusing, talk of post-truth is thus also complicated; still more, talk of post-truth is seriously misleading as well.

### 3. Talk of Post-Truth is Seriously Misleading

At the beginning of the 1960s, a small number of young philosophers in their early twenties gathered glibly at a philosophy workshop

in New York. The workshop was about the supposedly essential relations between social justice and the civil rights movement, and between social justice and the military drafts for the Vietnam War.

The general question was whether the human rights of very poor black children struggling in the American South's segregated schools of the time<sup>18</sup> and the human rights of impoverished black youths being systematically drafted into the American army's utterly soul-destroying war<sup>19</sup> were merely being said to be at issue, or whether they were truly at issue. The intense discussions finally ground to a halt. The stumbling block was reaching agreement over just what truth we could talk about in such trying times.

After some protracted confusion and then a long silence, one of the senior philosophy professors in the gathering rose to his feet. Before speaking and resuming his seat, he paused. He then said slowly – and I should add rather too solemnly, it seemed to some of us then – “Philosophers in particular need to remember that, after all is said and done, truth is a person.”<sup>20</sup> Another long silence ensued. The meeting then adjourned – for cookies and Coca Cola!

Now, my reason for recalling this memory here is the intuition that the very idea of truth is neither just a philosophical nor just a theological matter; the idea of truth is also a profoundly personal matter. That is, truth for some is fundamentally a matter of continually being encountered by a person and of trying continually to respond to that personal encounter.

In Europe and elsewhere, talk of post-truth is not just confusing and complicated; talk of post-truth is also seriously misleading.<sup>21</sup> For such talk leads us all too often to overlook the fundamental matter of truth itself: truth is mysteriously neither before nor after anything whatsoever. Truth as a person simply is.

Yet, as many philosophers and theologians continue to say, language is faithless, the mind is dark, the will is weak, and the world is

fugitive. Still, we do remember the very serious elders, the Mother Teresas, and the astonishing youngsters, the Theresas of Lisieux. And we cannot forget their unending testimonies to the suddenness of joy, to the eternities of persons being always called through this vanishing world to abide forever in the unfathomable truth of human and divine loving.

After all is said and done, there is no post-truth. To see this essential point, consider briefly a more practical and recurring situation that confronts many people today.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4. Practical Dilemmas

Most people living in large cities today regularly encounter persons begging on the streets. In Paris, for example, most of these persons are so-called “*personnes sans domicile fixe*,” *SDF*. In fact, many of these persons are not just without a fixed address; they are without any shelter at all.<sup>23</sup> Still more, many are not just without shelter; they are without anything. They are utterly destitute.<sup>24</sup>

These experiences unsettle people, giving rise to feelings of discomfort. This almost daily experience of a quite particular discomfort invites further reflection. When we ask ourselves just how a sense of discomfort arises from these particular encounters with destitute persons in particular, a first point appears.

Unlike other discomforts, this uneasiness arises largely from our inner hesitations before an implicit dilemma. For we almost immediately recognize that, whether we act by trying to be of some assistance or not, we will in either case not be at ease with ourselves. If we try to help, we will often feel vaguely foolish, because we will feel like we are doing something superfluous. Helping the impoverished, after all, is arguably not our proper business but that of the social services. And yet if we do not try to help, we will often

feel vaguely guilty, for not helping destitute persons is leaving unaccomplished an imperative ethical good.

So whether we help or not, we vaguely sense that either our acting is superfluous, causing us to feel uncomfortable, or we feel that our refusal is culpable, leaving us with an uncomfortable sense of guilt. Either way, we are going to be uncomfortable; either way, we are going to lose our usual sense of well-being. The dilemma that arises from this particular experience is then a first point that invites further reflection.

Coming to proper terms with this peculiar experience involves specifying more clearly just what we are talking about and recalling a few distinctions. We recognize of course that destitute street persons have many needs. Some are physical, such as nourishing food, appropriate clothing, and proper housing. Others are immaterial, such as social recognition, psychological reassurance, and ethical respect. In this particular experience of discomfort, however, the most basic needs are, I suggest, not merely material; they are ethical.

Homeless persons' ethical needs are also multiple. For such persons require that their uniqueness be recognized, their rights respected, their dignity affirmed, and so on. Most agree that their uniqueness, their rights, and their dignity must be reaffirmed; but we argue that it is specifically the ethical dimension of their destitution that must be emphasized.

Why? Because their poverty is what individualizes the specific ethical claims that these persons present to us. Our capacity to respond in a fully satisfactory way to such claims is deeply problematic, however. We have here then a second point, namely the fact that the specific situation of destitute street persons results in their making distinctive ethical claims on the persons they encounter.

This insight brings us now to another point. Destitute street persons most basically engage those they encounter with an experience



of a sovereign ethical good that we are not able fully to accomplish. This sovereign ethical good, in other words, is one we cannot do otherwise but leave undone.<sup>25</sup>

That is, in the face of a homeless individual's condition, none of us is capable of satisfying fully the specific ethical needs of such human suffering. No one is by nature resourceful enough to be anything more than as the poets say "a momentary stay against confusion,"<sup>26</sup> a sometime thing, a contingency, the philosophers say. What the destitution of street persons calls out for finally is the granting of an ever-sustaining inner ethical plenitude, a sovereign good, that not one of us contingent beings possesses the power to grant. A third point, then, is our essential incapacities to respond fully enough to the deep ethical needs of impoverished street people, to their specific ethical situations as such.

A fourth and final point is surprising. In offering a recurring occasion to recognize our own essential limitations as contingent beings in our puzzling experiences of discomfort, dilemma, and incapacity, destitute street persons offer each of us a great benefit in return for an attention, however small. This great benefit is the possibility for becoming aware of our co-dependency on one another as radically incomplete beings.

There is a sovereign good that we ourselves cannot do otherwise but to leave unaccomplished – truly assisting one another in truly essential ways. But there is also another sovereign good that we can receive from just those destitute street persons whom we can never assist enough – the renewed consciousness of our essential co-dependency on one another.

Our fourth point, then, identifies not the benefits that we might bestow on those we may try to assist. Rather, the surprisingly great benefit is the enhanced self-knowledge that destitute street people may bestow on the more materially fortunate. They do so first

by occasioning the discomfort we experience just in encountering them face-to-face, and then in the reflection such unsettling experiences provoke.

### **Envoi: Meeting the Eyes of the Destitute**

Meeting still again the eyes of destitute street persons need not cause us discomfort. For their demands continue to offer us inestimable reminders of our co-dependency on one another. Essential to our natures as persons is no absolute autonomy; rather, what is truly basic to our natures is a radical contingency that constitutes an essential part of our own personhood and humanity, and of theirs, too. Finally, it is this essential yet contingent co-dependency that points the way to a transformative realization of even quite deeper dependencies that reach far beyond the borders of philosophical inquiry.

## Endnotes for Essay Seven

- <sup>1</sup> This text is a revised version of an invited paper presented in shorter form at the “International Workshop of 20th Century Dramas and 21st Century Dilemmas ... Ideological, Geopolitical, and Social Challenges in a Post-Truth World,” Louvain University, Belgium, 19 May 2017.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* The citation omits the further point that “Rather than simply referring to the time after a specified situation or event – as in *post-war* or *post-match* – the prefix [‘post-’] in *post-truth* has a meaning more like ‘belonging to a time in which the specified concept has become unimportant or irrelevant’ . . . [thus, “post-truth” is different from] *truthiness*, defined by Oxford Dictionaries as ‘the quality of seeming or [of] being felt to be true, even if not necessarily true’”.
- <sup>3</sup> William Richardson, S.J., one of the most distinguished graduates of the philosophy faculty at Louvain who died in December 2016 outside Boston. Concerning his remark, cf. Jn 14.4-8: “ . . . you know the way to the place where I am going.’ Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life: No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.’”
- <sup>4</sup> See <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>.
- <sup>5</sup> On the incidence of “fake news” and “alternate facts” as symptoms of “post-truth” see for example with respect to the US elections D. Cole, “Why Free Speech Is Not Enough,” *The New York Review of Books*, 23 March 2017, pp. 34-36, and with respect to the UK’s Brexit see for example J. Jamieson, “Fake News’ Inquiry Launched by MPs,” *The Telegraph*, 30 January 2017. Since the US and UK events, the presidential campaign in France has also suffered from “fake news” events. See E. Henry, “*Face au FN, la vérité reste impuissante*,” *Le Monde*, 5 May 2017 and the massive cyber-attacks on Emmanuel Macron involving “fake news” just one day before the final voting scheduled for 7 May 2017 as reported in *Le Monde*, 6 May 2017. On the nature of “Fake News,” see: <http://guides.library.harvard.edu/fake>.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* The citation omits the further point that “Rather than simply referring to the time after a specified situation or event – as in *post-war* or *post-match* – the prefix [‘post-’] in *post-truth* has a meaning more like ‘belonging to a time in which the specified concept has become unimportant or irrelevant’ . . . [thus, “post-truth” is different from] *truthiness*, defined by Oxford Dictionaries as ‘the quality of seeming or [of] being felt to be true, even if not necessarily true.’”
- <sup>7</sup> Cf. the remark in a recent drama review: “Camus’s classic [*The Plague*] speaks of Nazism and resistance; today it can be read as a tale of the post-truth world, with its xenophobia, indifference, narrow-mindedness, bureaucracy – and, despite it all,

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- hope” (A. Aslanyan, “Turned Tables: The Continuing Relevance of Camus’s *La Peste*, in a New Production,” *TLS* [28 April 2017], p. 22).
- <sup>8</sup> On Josef Slipyi, see: <https://www.amazon.com/Confessor-Between-East-West-Ukrainian/dp/0802836720>. I thank V. Turchynovskyy for this reference.
- <sup>9</sup> Cf. the examples in R. Keyes, *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life* (London: St. Martin’s Press, 2004), and the title page citation from the former Librarian of Congress, the distinguished historian D. Boorstin: “‘Truth’ has been replaced by ‘believability.’” Keyes himself writes: “At one time we had truth and lies. Now we have truth, lies, and statements that may not be true but [which] we consider too benign to call false. Euphemisms abound. We’re ‘economical with the truth,’ we ‘sweeten it,’ or tell ‘the truth improved.’ The term *deceive* gives way to *spin*. At worst we admit to ‘misspeaking,’ or ‘exercising poor judgment.’ Nor do we want to accuse others of lying. We say they’re in denial. A liar is ‘ethically challenged,’ someone for whom ‘the truth is temporarily unavailable.’ This is post-truth. In the post-truth era, borders blur between truth and lies, honesty and dishonesty, fiction and nonfiction. Deceiving others becomes a challenge, a game, and ultimately a habit. Research suggests that the average American tells lies on a daily basis. . . . Post-truthfulness builds a fragile social edifice based on wariness. It erodes the foundation of trust that underlies any healthy civilization. When enough of us peddle fantasy as fact, society loses its grounding in reality.”
- <sup>10</sup> Thanks to E. Alam for some needed corrections in the formulation.
- <sup>11</sup> Cf. for example the essays in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Time*, ed. C. Callender (Oxford: OUP, 2011, esp. the essays in Parts IV and V on “Time in Classical and Relativistic Physics” and “Time in a Quantum World,” as well as those in Part I on “Time and Metaphysics.”
- <sup>12</sup> Cf. for example the essays in *Truth and Truth-Making*, ed. E. J. Lowe and A. R. Rami (Stocksfield [UK]: Acumen, 2009), esp. the essays in Part II on “The Current Debate.”
- <sup>13</sup> Cf. D. Buonomano, *Your Brain is a Time Machine: The Neuroscience and Physics of Time* (NY: Norton, 2017), esp. Chapter 12, “Consciousness: Binding the Present and the Future.”
- <sup>14</sup> See for example the entry “truth” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. D. N. Freedman (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 1338-1339.
- <sup>15</sup> See for example the articles on each of these topics in S. Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Oxford: OUP, 2016), pp. 482-484.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.
- <sup>17</sup> *Eerdmans Dictionary*, p. 1339.
- <sup>18</sup> Cf. Martin Luther King, *I Have A Dream* (NY: Harper Collins, 1992 [1963]).
- <sup>19</sup> For evidence of what I am calling “the utterly soul-destroying” effects of the Vietnam War, see: Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (NY: Knopf, 1977 [1968]).

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- <sup>20</sup> The philosopher was William Richardson, S. J., one of the most distinguished graduates of the philosophy faculty at Louvain who died in December 2016 outside Boston. Concerning his remark, cf. Jn 14.4-8: “... you know the way to the place where I am going.’ Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life: No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.’”
- <sup>21</sup> Thanks to Czeslaw Porebski for his helpful comment on this point.
- <sup>22</sup> This section is a revised version of a brief talk for the *Académie catholique de France* on KTO TV in Paris on 28 March 2014.
- <sup>23</sup> In the municipal election in France in France (23 March and 30 March 2014), the numbers of “*Sans domicile fixe*” (SDF) in Paris were cited as ca. 40,000 persons and the numbers of “*Sans-abris*” as ca. 8,000 persons (N. Kosciusko-Morizet, “*Une nouvelle énergie pour les parisiens*” [NKM Paris.fr, p. 18]).
- <sup>24</sup> One serious problem with trying to assist such persons is often their unknown number at different times of the year. In the late winter of 2018 for example Paris for the first time set out over two days and nights to make a city-wide census with the help of several thousand volunteers of all SDF in the Paris streets at that time. See *Le Monde*, 15 February 2018.
- <sup>25</sup> Note that the impossibility here does not derive from our incapacity to satisfy all the many material needs any individual homeless person has. Of course no one of us could do so, for no one of us has sufficient material resources to make a durable difference.
- <sup>26</sup> The notable expression is that of the American poet, Robert Frost.