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One Big Thing: Responding Ethically in a Post-Truth World¹

Talk of post-truth today, I think, generally turns out to be confusing, too complicated, and seriously misleading. My suggestion here will be that continuing talk about post-truth obscures the authentic and abiding nature of truth as profoundly personal.

1. Much 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”.²

¹ This text is the revised version of an invited paper for the International colloquium on “Responding to the Challenges of the Post-Truth World” held at the *Collège des Bernardins* in Paris on 27 November 2017. My thanks to Volodymyr Turchynovskyy and to Antoine Arjakovsky for their cordial invitation, to my fellow panel participants for their papers and comments, to members of the audience for their questions and remarks, and to Viktor Poletko for his help with editing *In His Own Arms: Events, Actions and Persons*.

² See <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>.

Both the UK's Brexit campaign and US presidential campaign controversies had made the expression familiar.³ 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”.⁴

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”. And 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”.

³ 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, 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 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 on 7 May 2017 as reported in *Le Monde*, 6 May 2017. On the nature of “Fake News” see <http://guides.library.harvard.edu/fake>.

⁴ *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’.

We may note that this definition uses the expression “post-truth” primarily with respect to what mostly shapes public opinion. In fact, however, this focus is not always primary.⁵ 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 may, indeed, 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. For many facts comprise both emotions and beliefs, and yet they are no less objective for that matter. Beliefs, emotions, and facts are, in other words, often woven together.

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

⁵ 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, hope” (A. Aslanyan, “Turned Tables: The Continuing Relevance of Camus’s *La Peste*, in a New Production”, *TLS*, 28 April 2017, 22).

mining”, “scientific fabrication”, “social bot”, “spin”, and so on. Many of these senses are captured in the single English verb “palter” when used as in a *SOED* citation from *Nature* (“It would... be paltering with the truth to pretend that our activities do so much”). The core idea is not to tell the truth but to equivocate, to prevaricate, or to deal evasively.⁶

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

2. Much talk of “post-truth” is too 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.

⁶ *SOED* is the abbreviation for the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 2 vols., 6th ed. (Oxford: OUP, 2007). 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. Boorstein: “‘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”.

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 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 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?⁷

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.

⁷ Thanks to Edward Alam for some needed corrections in the formulation here.

But again a pause is helpful. Two separate matters seem to be complicating continuing talk of “post-truth”. The first is our complicated talk of time,⁸ and the second is our complicated talk of truth.⁹

As the physicists and philosophers seem never tired of reminding us, our inescapable talk of time is complicated in various ways.¹⁰ We cannot talk properly at all without essentially involving ourselves with time. For at least in English, properly talking takes verbs, and most verbs are temporal realities. Still more, properly talking takes time, and time goes by. Thus, continuing to talk of “post-truth” means coming to terms with temporalities. And this is no simple matter.

Moreover, as the theologians and again the philosophers also seem never tired 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 main uses in Paul as sober truth and in John the Evangelist as saving truth.¹¹ And then pick up the philosophical dictionaries and discover still other strange matters such truth

⁸ Cf. for example the essays in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Time*, C. Callender, ed., (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”.

⁹ Cf. for example the essays in *Truth and Truth-Making*, E. J. Lowe and A. R. Rami, eds., (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2009), esp. the essays in Part II on “The Current Debate”.

¹⁰ 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”.

¹¹ See for example the entry “truth” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, D. N. Freedman, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 1338-1339;

aptness, truth conditions, truth functors, truth functions, truthmakers, truth predicates, truth tables, truth-values, even T-sentences.¹²

But 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”¹³), or “truth” as denoting John’s “spirit of truth” (a “part of revelation, a witnessing spirit in the community”¹⁴)? Or, if we rashly decide to argue that the truth at issue in “post-truth” is neither Tarskian nor Johannine, how are we to get round the considerable consequent problems of both self-reflexivity and proper warrant for some particular meta-language?

Besides then being confusing, talk of post-truth is also complicated. Still more, talk of post-truth is seriously misleading as well.

3. Much talk of “post-truth” is seriously misleading

For trying to elucidate this last point perhaps you will allow me now to evoke one of my former teachers many years ago. At the beginning of the nineteen sixties 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 then 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

¹² See for example the articles on each of these topics in S. Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: OUP, 2016), 482-484.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹⁴ *Eerdmans Dictionary*, 1339.

schools of the time¹⁵ and the human rights of impoverished black youths being systematically drafted into the American army's utterly soul-destroying war¹⁶ were just 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 ever be talking 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 although perhaps not for him, a Jesuit priest – “Philosophers in particular need to remember that, after all is said and done, truth is a person”.¹⁷ 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 many persons today is, most fundamentally a personal matter. In fact, truth is for many a matter of con-

tinually being encountered by a person and of trying continually to respond to that personal encounter.¹⁸

In Europe today talk of post-truth is not just confusing and complicated; talk of post-truth is also seriously misleading.¹⁹ 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 Mother Teresas, and the astonishing youngsters, the Therasas of Lisieux and the Elizabeths of the Trinity. And we cannot forget their unending testimonies to the suddenness of joy, to the eternities of persons 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. How then to respond ethically in what is still being called a “post-truth” world?

4. Consider a particular ethical situation

Most of us living in large cities today regularly encounter persons begging on the streets. Most are so-called “*personnes sans domicile fixe*”, or “*SDF*”. In fact, many these persons are not just without a fixed address; they are without any shelter at all. Still more, many are not just without shelter; they are without anything. They are utterly destitute.

These experiences unsettle us. For they nearly always give rise to uncomfortable feelings of disquiet. This almost daily experience

¹⁵ Cf. Martin Luther King, *I Have A Dream* (NY: Harper Collins, 1992 [1963]).

¹⁶ For evidence of what I am calling “the utterly soul-destroying” effects of the Vietnam War, see Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (NY: Knopf, 1977 [1968]). See also the extraordinary documentary film of Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, *The Vietnam War* (USA, 2017) in ten parts and eighteen hours, shown in shorter form in France and Germany on *Arte TV* on three successive long evenings, 19–21 September 2017, and reviewed by F. Fitzgerald in *The New York Review of Books*, 23 November 2017, 30–32, and by D. D. Guttenplan in the *TLS [Times Literary Supplement]*, 10 November 2017, 30–31. In the UK a version was also aired on the BBC.

¹⁷ 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.’”

¹⁸ For the philosophical pertinence, especially for the philosophy of religion and for philosophical ethics, cf. for example V. Vohanka, “Swinburne’s A Priori Case for Perfect Love for the Trinity”, *Pantheon*, 8 (2013), 58–78.

¹⁹ Thanks to Czesław Porębski for his helpful comment on this point.

of a quite particular disquiet invites further reflection. How to respond to this challenge, how to respond ethically, and how to respond ethically in our so-called “post-truth world”? Consider briefly then four related points.

5. Responding ethically to others often generates personal dilemmas

When we ask ourselves just how a sense of disquiet arises from these particular encounters with destitute persons in particular, an important initial point appears. Unlike other disquiets, this disquiet 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: we will feel disquiet.

If we try to help, we will often feel vaguely foolish. For we will feel we are doing something superfluous; we will feel disquieted. Helping the destitute after all is not our proper business but that of the social services. And yet if we don't try to help, we will often feel vaguely guilty; we will feel disquieted. 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 and hence we feel disquieted, or that our refusal is culpable and hence we also feel disquieted. Either way, we are going to feel disquieted; 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. And it invites further reflection.

6. Further clarity here requires several reminders

Coming to proper terms with this peculiar experience of ethical disquiet 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 just material; they are ethical.

Yet destitute street persons' ethical needs are also multiple. For such persons require that their uniqueness be recognized, their rights respected, their dignity affirmed, and so on. Of course their uniqueness, their rights, and their dignity must be reaffirmed. Most specifically, it is the ethical dimension of their destitution that must be emphasized, because their destitution is what individualizes the specific ethical claims that these persons confront us with. And yet our capacity to respond in a fully satisfactory way to such claims is deeply problematic.

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.

7. Trying to accomplish the ethical good reveals deep incapacities

This insight brings us now to another point. We may put this point as follows. Destitute street persons most basically engage those they encounter with an experience of a sovereign ethical good that we are not able to accomplish fully. This sovereign ethical good, in other words, is one we cannot but leave undone.²⁰

²⁰ Note that the impossibility here does not derive from our incapacity to satisfy all the very many material needs any individual destitute street 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.

That is, no one of us in the face of a destitute street person's condition is of such a nature as to be capable of fully satisfying the specific ethical needs of such human suffering. For no one is by nature resourceful enough to be anything more than as the poets say "a momentary stay against confusion",²¹ 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, which is not ever in our power as contingent beings to grant.

A third point then is our essential incapacities to respond fully enough to the deep ethical needs of destitute street persons, to their specific ethical situation as such.

8. Responding ethically often brings an unexpected ethical benefit

A final point is surprising. In offering a recurring occasion to recognize our own essential limitations as contingent beings in our puzzling experiences of disquiet, 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.

²¹ The notable expression phrase is that of the American poet, Robert Frost. S. Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 2016), 285.

A fourth point then is 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 us. They do so first by occasioning the discomfort we experience just in encountering them face to face, and then in the reflection such discomfoting experiences provoke.

9. Recapitulations

Here, I have tried to elucidate briefly why some persons continue to think that talk of "post-truth" today is mostly confused, too complicated, and seriously misleading. On both philosophical and religious grounds I have argued that there is truth and that, consequently, there is no "post-truth". Accordingly, I do not think there is, properly speaking, any such thing as "a post-truth world".

Still, what some repeated talk of "a post-truth world" appears to indicate, at least in part, is a centrally important attitude within many so-called "developed" societies today in the US, in Japan, and in Europe.²² Some persons may not improperly identify this feature as the actualization within such societies of governments and individuals of the practice of regularly lying.

Lying, of course, may be described in different ways.²³ But these descriptions mostly have in common an understanding of lying as "the deliberate utterance of a falsehood; with the intent to deceive or mislead an audience". Recall for example the repeated pronouncements of the Russian government concerning the invasion of Crimea, Mr. Trump's repeated denials regarding global warming, and the Brexit campaign in the UK.

²² Thanks to Volodymyr Turchynovskyy and Alois Joh. Buch for their insistence on the importance of post-truth as an attitude.

²³ See for example the excellent short paper of M. Hogenboom on BBC World 15 November 2017.

Among the gravest instances of lying, whether collective or individual, is lying to oneself. This is especially the case with respect to the extreme poverty of street persons today such as migrants worldwide especially unaccompanied children. Here lying to oneself, either as a society or as a member of that society and a citizen, often consists in continuing to believe something deeply unreasonable and continuing to act accordingly.

What is profoundly unreasonable is continuing to act on a finally groundless assumption. The groundless assumption is that regularly coming to the assistance of such destitute street persons like migrant street children is basically a matter of charity, or of solidarity, or of something that is properly the province of societies' social services only.

But many good reasons are on hand for holding, to the contrary, that recognizing the truth of why the destitute must be forever assisted, witnessing to that truth, and communicating that truth follows irrefutably from the true nature of persons as contingent, essentially interrelated beings.²⁴

Persons in fact are not fundamentally fully sovereign independent individuals. Persons are essentially interrelated entities. Forever assisting the destitute then is forever acting on the truth inextricably bound up with endlessly recognizing and acknowledging in action one's own inalienable poverty.

In a world today that is increasingly self-centred on the primacy of the supposedly fully sovereign individual, responding ethically to the ceaseless ethical demands of the world requires one thing, one big thing. The one big thing in responding ethically in a so-called "post-truth world" is testifying through one's daily actions to the most fundamental connectedness between the basic poverty

²⁴ Thanks to François Euvé for the similar accents in his paper on the necessity for defining the person in terms of relationality.

of ourselves as basically dependent entities and the inescapable participation of ourselves in the profound poverty of all by reason of our essential interrelatedness as persons.

Envoi

To conclude: continuing to meet the eyes of the destitute street persons again in a world misleadingly called "post-truth", need not cause us disquiet. For their demands continue to offer us inestimable reminders of our essential interrelatedness with one another. Absolute autonomy is not essential to our natures as persons. Rather, what is truly basic to our natures as persons 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 our even deeper dependence as persons who are essentially interrelated beings.²⁵

²⁵ On the metaphysics of the essential interrelatedness of persons see P. McCormick, "The Essential Interdependence of Persons and Relationality", *Eco-Ethica*, 7, 2018.