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## Civic Virtues and Post-Truth

It is a popular opinion these days that the post-truth ethos threatens democratic regimes. The argument is that the “appeal to emotion and personal belief”, which erodes the relevance of “objective facts”, as it goes in the now famous Oxford Dictionary’s definition of “post-truth”, eradicates the sense of supra-individual objectivity from politics. The loss of supra-individual objectivity in turn brings about an uneasy conception of democracy without truth. What is sometimes forgotten, is the long tradition of thought that juxtaposes truth and democracy. This paper draws on that ambivalence in the relationship between truth and democratic polity. While in the first section we address the strained marriage between them, the second section reflects on the troublesome implications of their divorce. In the last section we develop an argument in support of the reconciliation between the indispensability of truth and democratic politics. This argument’s engagement with truth neither ignores the mainstream liberal warnings about grounding polity’s life upon “thick” metaphysical truths, nor neglects the proceduralist claim that popular will expressed by majority quorum constitutes the core of democracy.

### 1. The tension between democracy and truth

The problem of the link between truth and democracy is as old as both. Socrates was the foremost to draw attention to the difficulty of aligning the multitude of voices with the univocity of the truth. He defined truth as having an exclusive nature, in that its very essence is to silence the plurality of opinion. That the death of Socrates happened to result from precisely the same cause, namely, the conflict between truth and the binding decision of a polity’s authority, gave rise to Plato’s radical scepticism concerning democracy. In the sixth book of *The Republic* he employs two specific images to develop a critique of the authority of the many as opposed to the authentic rule of the One Truth. The first analogy depicts the helmsman removed from steering a ship by a crowd of ignorant sailors:

Picture a shipmaster in height and strength surpassing all others on the ship, but who is slightly deaf and of similarly impaired vision, and whose knowledge of navigation is on a par with his sight and hearing. Conceive the sailors to be wrangling with one another for control of the helm, each claiming that it is his right to steer though he has never learned the art and cannot point out his teacher or any time when he studied it. And what is more, they affirm that it cannot be taught at all, but they are ready to make mincemeat of anyone who says that it can be taught, and meanwhile they are always clustered about the shipmaster importuning him and sticking at nothing to induce him to turn over the helm to them. [...] They have no suspicions that the true pilot must give his attention to the time of the year, the seasons, the sky, the winds, the stars, and all that pertains to his art if he is to be a true ruler of a ship.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Republic*, Book VI, 488 A-E

What Plato suggests here is not only that adequate knowledge of the true nature of things is indispensable for the proper governing of a collective enterprise, but also that any kind of crowd is, by default, incapable of acquiring the relevant knowledge. If polity is to be ruled by those who know, and the people never know, then the polity is not to be ruled by the people.

Further on, in the same work, Plato develops the second analogy to condemn those who attempt to blur the contradiction by means of elaborating a false epistocratic legitimation of the will of the majority:

Suppose a man was in charge of a large and powerful animal, and made a study of its moods and wants; he would learn when to approach and handle it, when and why it was especially savage or gentle, what the different noises it made meant, and what tone of voice to use to soothe or annoy it. All this he might learn by long experience and familiarity, and then call it a science, and reduce it to a system and set up to teach it. But he would not really know which of the creature's tastes and desires was admirable or shameful, good or bad, right or wrong; he would simply use the terms on the basis of its reactions, calling what pleased it good, what annoyed it bad.<sup>2</sup>

This image further radicalizes the confrontation: people's opinions of what is good and what is right might be powerful in placing pressure on a ruler, but the latter must not uphold those opinions. Interestingly, the possibility of coincidence between the will of the crowd and the genuine truth is not even considered. It is equally implausible to opt for the will of the people in case it confronts the truth and artificially distort the truth to adapt it to the will of the people.

The two analogies above established the tension that persists until this day – the ancient idea that truth and democracy are mu-

tually exclusive has never been abandoned. Modern liberal political theory that began with the famous Hobbsian principle *Auctoritas non veritas facit legem* retains this innate uneasiness with the truth even though the latter is now taken to be a much more complex notion than it was conceived of by Plato. Consider a rough distinction between two kinds of politically relevant truths: factual truths, on the one hand, and normative truths, on the other. The distinction oversimplifies the matter, but it is sufficient to detect the ambivalence discussed in this paper. By factual truth we mean the correspondence of politically relevant states of affairs to the knowledge of those states of affairs which decision makers and interested parties possess. By normative truth we mean a certain vision of perfect polity, which is different from imperfect polity, as well as the steps to be taken to reach the ideal or its specific element.

Plato's articulation of truth embraces these two different kinds of politically relevant truths. It is, however, too abstract and detached from actual political life to be applicable to the evaluation of existing regimes, not to speak of using it for crafting policy. As Ian Shapiro has rightly observed, "Plato's system of indoctrination was part of his account of what would be needed to maintain a perfectly just order, not for the world of imperfect societies in which we actually live".<sup>3</sup> Shapiro's critique mostly aims at the normative component of Plato's conception: the abstract truth does not always guide us in how to act within a given configuration of contingent circumstances.

What about the factual element of truth? As a matter of fact, its political significance has also deteriorated. Hannah Arendt in her famous paper *Truth and Politics*, published by *The New Yorker* in 1967, discussed one of the strategies employed for doing so, namely, the strategy of blurring the difference between truth and opinion:

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Republic*, Book VI, 493

<sup>3</sup> Ian Shapiro, *The Moral Foundations of Politics* (Yale University Press, 2008), 200.

[...] factual truth is no more self-evident than opinion, and this may be among the reasons that opinion-holders find it relatively easy to discredit factual truth as just another opinion. Factual evidence, moreover, is established through testimony by eyewitnesses – notoriously unreliable – and by records, documents, and monuments, all of which can be suspected as forgeries. In the event of a dispute, only other witnesses but no third and higher instance can be invoked, and settlement is usually arrived at by way of a majority; that is, in the same way as the settlement of opinion disputes – a wholly unsatisfactory procedure, since there is nothing to prevent a majority of witnesses from being false witnesses.<sup>4</sup>

This technique of undermining the significance of factual truth by reducing it to mere opinion is a symptom of a deeper issue: truth has a despotic character and for that reason it is at odds with any kind of political authority as it questions the legitimacy of that authority's sovereignty.

In this way, both factual and especially normative truth cannot be easily utilized in democratic political regimes. There is, however, a difference between the ancients and the moderns on what this tension entails. Whereas Plato's corollary was "so much worse for the polity", the predominant implication today is "so much worse for the truth". In arguably the most influential book on political philosophy of the last century, *Political Liberalism*, John Rawls proposes to lay a foundation of liberal democratic order on freestanding political principles of justice rather than on the truthfulness of comprehensive metaphysical conceptions of the good.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, non-liberal and non-deliberative theories of democracy have a hard time with the truth just as much as liberal projects: truth has a potential of destroying both consensus and dissensus.

<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics", *The New Yorker* (February 25, 1967).

<sup>5</sup> John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (Columbia University Press, 2005).

Popular will, expressed by a certain constitutionally encapsulated form of majority rule deprives truth of its everlasting justificatory ambition. If the polity is ruled by those, who know the way in which it should be ruled, then what's the point of democracy? If the polity is to be ruled democratically, then what's the point of counterbalancing majority's decisions with hypothetical decisions that it should have made. As William A. Galston framed it, there are two considerations that complicate the relation between truth and democracy: "truth does not trump democratic legitimacy, and democratic governments cannot dictate truth."<sup>6</sup>

## 2. The tension between democracy and post-truth

If democracy is in persistent tension with truth, does it follow that the rhetoric of post-truth brings a relief to this tension by eliminating an obstacle to the genuine expression of the popular will? It does not. As a matter of fact, the tension between democracy and post-truth is no less remarkable.

If democracy is in persistent tension with truth, does it follow that there is no place for truth in democratic polity? It does not. In fact, there is a lot of space both for democratic procedures to function without the pressure of the truth and for the truth to triumph with no regard to the democratic decision-making mechanisms.

As to the tension between democracy and post-truth, it should be noted that the fame of post-truth-talk in relation to public affairs by itself proves the situation to be much more complex than it appears at first sight. Alternative facts that divorce truth and politics are no more appreciated than the so-called democratic deficit

<sup>6</sup> William A. Galston, "Truth and Democracy: Theme and Variations", in *Truth and Democracy*, Jeremy Elkins and Andrew Norris, eds., (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

that replaces a decision democratically arrived at by a “correct decision”. Not only philosophers suffer from a great deal of nostalgia for truth in the political realm, so do ordinary citizens. It might be the case that the two groups are concerned about different elements of publically relevant truth. While ordinary citizens primarily care about factual truth on public affairs broadly understood, philosophers’ additional concern would likely be about normative truth broadly understood. Nonetheless, both philosophers and ordinary citizens inhabit a shared democratic framework. They are in principle unified in their readiness to stand for the minimal efficacy of truth for the democratic order to be sustained.

Although the motivation for talking about post-truth arises from the present-day socio-political and economic reality, theorists predominantly draw an inspiration from the history of the twentieth century totalitarian regimes. It is hard to praise the reality analogized to George Orwell’s famous *1984*. Journalists and public intellectuals keep talking about post-truth not because they recognize it as a chance to escape the despotic character of truth, but rather because they are scared of post-truth even more than of the truth.

Further interesting observation on post-truth relevant for the public political life concerns purely descriptive nature of the term. It is now a commonsense reading of the prefix “post” that denotes reacting against something, overcoming something or coming after something. Post-truth is a descriptive notion in the sense that alternative facts, fake news, and populist rhetorical techniques are accused in coming after truth, reacting against it, and attempting to overcome it. The crucial issue here is that the creators of those phenomena manifesting post-truth would hardly endorse the accusation in building up a post-truth world. Appeals to emotions and beliefs of individuals rather than to objective reality do not openly challenge objectivity: alternative facts, even if they are “just falsehoods”, pre-

tend to be just facts as opposed to falsehoods. Post-truth phenomena disguise themselves precisely in order to look not different than truth. The reason why this is the case is that factual truth is highly valued by those involved in democratic decision making. Because factual truth is highly valued, the definitions of many post-truth phenomena, such as fake news and alternative facts, refer to deliberate misinformation.<sup>7</sup>

Since the ethos of post-truth contains instrumental use of deliberate lies, the tension between post-truth and democracy threatens the existence of democratic order. This is because factual truth is not only subjectively valued as being of great worth for a great deal of citizens. Factual truth is functionally necessary for the endurance of contemporary political and economic communities for at least two reasons. First, factual truth enables proper execution and legitimate outcomes of democratic procedures. Second, factual truth entails the ethos of trust that is inevitable for sufficiently ordered everyday life. Without a certain extent of interpersonal trust, credibility and accountability our routine would be enormously complicated. Inasmuch as post-truth undermines the minimal degree of factual truth, it endangers democracy. Consequently, some sort of “ethical infosphere”, as Luciano Floridi phrased it, is necessary for us to “save the world and ourselves from ourselves.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For an attempt to define fake news, see, for instance, Elle Hunt, “What Is Fake News? How to Spot It and What You Can Do to Stop It”, *The Guardian*, 17 December 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/dec/18/what-is-fake-news-pizzagate>., and “President Trump’s Lies, the Definitive List”, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/06/23/opinion/trumps-lies.html>. for an attempt to differentiate mistakes from deliberate lies in Donald Trump’s presidential campaign.

<sup>8</sup> Luciano Floridi, “Fake News and a 400-Year-Old Problem: We Need to Resolve the ‘post-Truth’ Crisis”, *The Guardian*, 29 November 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/nov/29/fake-news-echo-chamber-ethics-infosphere-internet-digital>.

Thus, democracy stands in tension with truth predominantly because it has a hard time with the justificatory ambition of the normative component of truth. Simultaneously, democracy stands in tension with post-truth primarily because it functionally depends on the factual component of truth. As to the former tension, in the following section we suggest a strategy of reconciliation by means of drawing a boundary line between the authority of normative truth and democratic authority. The compromise, we argue, could be reached without undermining popular sovereignty. The latter tension, however, cannot be relieved because significant perversion of the relevant factual truth hinders democratic society itself.

### 3. Truth, virtue, and political motivation: the case for reconciliation

The tension between truth and democracy is confined to the domain of legitimation. Democracy's reaction against truth goes as far as needed to silence truth's claim to be the bearer of legitimating force, but no further. On the one hand, democratic polity does not benefit from philosophical critique of truth as such. On the other hand, the truth does not benefit from the overthrowing of democratic order. The reconciliation is thus possible, but it requires a compromise to be made on both sides.

First, as Michael Walzer reminds us, the compromise requires that a distinction is made between truthfulness and legitimation. It is one thing for a law, public policy, court ruling or whatever collectively binding decision to be legitimate and quite another thing for it to reflect normative truth. Of course, in some cases *prima facie* respect to politically legitimate condition can be overridden by a moral obligation to resist this condition, but it is democratic procedure

that makes the condition legitimate in the first place. Even if it contradicts normative truth, it remains politically legitimate: "The people have a right to be wrong, a right they often exercise."<sup>9</sup>

Second, the compromise requires openness to the truth. Just as much as democracy reacts against normative truth for reclaiming the territory of legitimation, normative truth reacts against democratic regime if it does not open deliberation to let the truth to be arrived at in a better case or open the argument for it to triumph in debate in a worse case. In both cases, however, truth attempts to be legitimized by means of convincing a sufficient number of voters even though its status as truth does not depend on the democratic procedure of voting. This intuition is strongly present in the second chapter of J.S. Mill's *On Liberty*, where he argues that the freedom of expression is necessary for the truth to be manifested as well as to be tested and purified over and against competing views. Furthermore, closing such a public forum would result in depriving the truth of its capability to triumph in people's minds and define their votes.

Third, compromise requires a fallibilistic attitude to be taken in respect to the truth. On the one hand, immensely dynamic technological and scientific progress, permanent transformations of social, political and economic life as well as continuously growing amount of relevant information decrease the likelihood of arriving at reasonable decisions in accordance with factual truth. On the other hand, given that the normative truth is not empirically provable and scientifically demonstrable, the likelihood of properly distinguishing it from just another "opinion" necessitates a fallibilistic attitude: while truth is acknowledged, the possibility of holding an untrue claim is not neglected. Michel Foucault framed this

<sup>9</sup> William A. Galston, "Truth and Democracy", in *Truth and Democracy* Jeremy Elkins and Andrew Norris, eds., (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 142.

attitude in the following way: “Nothing is more inconsistent than a political regime that is indifferent to truth; but nothing is more dangerous than a political system that claims to lay down the truth. The function of ‘telling the truth’ must not take the form of law... The task of telling the truth is an endless labour.”<sup>10</sup>

Having discussed the conditions of reconciliation between truth and democracy, let us turn to the question “why reconcile?” Above we discussed the indispensability of factual truth for the sustainability of democratic regime: in order to exercise their will people must form their will, which is only possible on the condition of sufficient amount of information that reflects relevant factual truths.

Why is it the case that normative truth is needed to maintain efficient democratic order? Exemplifying the triviality of holding a true standpoint in a community that legitimizes policies contradicting the true standpoint, Galston depicts a scientist being aware of the imminent dangers posed by climate change and unsuccessfully resisting environmentally unfriendly policies. The point we will make can be developed by further elaborating on this example.

A scientist possesses factual truth that a certain policy permits actions contributing to climate change and that changing this policy would contribute to an overall decrease in negative environmental effect. He also holds the normative truth that we ought to do our best not to harm the planet and keep it safe and clean for our own wellbeing and the future generations. What difference would it make had a scientist a false opinion about environmental effect of a given policy? If the political dimension of the question is concerned, not much, as long as he would take his false opinion to be true. Lacking factual truth, he would praise the policy as safe

even though as a matter of fact the policy is harmful. Perhaps, there would be other scientists possessing factual truth on the matter. They would call to resist the policy. Eventually, the decision would be made either to leave the policy enacted or to somehow revise it. Both groups of voices would agree on the normative statement that we are responsible for the planet we inhabit and should take care of it. There would perhaps also be voices of those who do not endorse this normative statement. They would say that it is neither our moral duty nor a reasonable conduct to take care of the environment and for that reason other considerations should be weighted when making a decision on the policy in question. In all cases above the outcome for environment would be very different, but politically speaking there is no difference.

What difference would it make had a scientist not related himself to normative truth? In this case, unlike in the cases discussed above it is not clear why our scientist would be willing to get involved in political action. Normative truth that implies assuming a moral obligation to protect the environment, constitutes the decisive motive of a scientist to participate in public deliberation and manifest his political will. Even if a scientist is lacking factual truth on the effects of a policy on climate change, there is no difference in the way he gets involved in polity’s public life except for the position he takes. However, if normative truth is not taken into consideration, it is not clear what would motivate scientist’s democratic participation. Democratic order ultimately depends on civic virtues: it is a moral incentive that prompts political activity of citizens. Moral incentives, in turn, depend on a certain understanding of normative truth.

The indispensability of civic virtue and thus of normative truth is even more obvious if political life of democratic societies is taken in its broader dimension. Sometimes foundational constitutional

<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984* (Routledge, 2013), 267.

values require that citizens make a sacrifice. Sometimes an expected sacrifice requires one to suffer mentally, morally or even physically. If politics is taken to mean more than just deliberation and decision making, these are fully and undoubtedly political actions. Such a sacrifice would hardly be imaginable without relying on the recognition of supraindividual normative truth.

Thus far we have been making a case of reconciliation between democracy and truth by means of drawing three links: first, between factual and normative truth, second, between normative truth and civic virtue and, third, between civic virtue and the flourishing endurance of democratic regime. Before concluding, it should be noted that there might be other ways to arrive at the same conclusion.

Consider, for instance, an argument that is even more straightforward. It states that the indispensability of both normative and factual truths is immanent to democratic order. Suppose, as do the theorists of procedural democracy whose cautions about the place of truth in politics are most pronounced that democratic order, to be effective, does not require any prerequisites thicker than fairly executed democratic procedure expressing the will of people. The will of people fairly executed, the argument goes on, necessarily implies both normative and factual truth.

The deficiency of factual truth brings about the malformation of the will of people. In this sense, factual truth affects democratic legitimacy and the effect in question is proportional to the degree of deficiency. Therefore, besides its intrinsic axiological significance, factual truth bears instrumental value in the domain of politics.

Paradoxically, the deficiency of normative truth also has devastating consequences on democratic order even though, as argued above, it should give up its own justificatory ambition. The democratic process is to detect the will of people, but the will of people

presupposes the availability of competing ways to achieve certain collective ideals of a good polity. Otherwise it is practically impossible to explain what it is that makes buying votes or bribing voters damaging to democratic legitimacy.

It follows then, that a certain amount of factual and normative truth is a precondition of sustainable democracy. It might be true that equal political liberty is the only normative requirement necessary for a democratic polity to be genuinely democratic. But effective practice of equal political liberty necessitates the second-order demand for a certain amount of both factual and normative truth to be present in the public realm even if there is indeed a first-order conflict between epistemic and procedural notions of legitimacy.

### Conclusion

Above we explored a peculiar ambivalence of the tensions between democracy and truth, on the one hand, and post-truth, on the other. Having distinguished factual and normative components of politically relevant truth, we conclude that democratic order is capable of effectively sustaining those tensions on two conditions. Firstly, the extent of post-truth's assaults on factual truth must not overrun the minimum of factual truth needed for democratic procedures to function and for basic interpersonal trust and relational accountability necessary to secure everyday social, political, and economic life. Second, the reconciliation between democratic legitimacy and normative truth is to be made in such a way that the domains are as unconfused as inseparable. The general conclusion is that the challenge that post-truth world poses against contemporary democracies should be taken as a pending invitation to reconsider and rearticulate the right terms of reconciliation between democracy and truth.