

## FROM THE EDITORS

### FROM TRUTH TO POST-TRUTH AND... BACK TO TRUTH?

“Post-truth” is an adjective (rather than a noun), as the editors of the Oxford Dictionaries website explain in their justification of the choice of the Word of the Year 2016.<sup>1</sup> As is often the case today, information turned into promotion, rapidly making the term “post-truth” (also as a noun) popular and placing it in the center of attention that went far beyond the world of dictionaries.<sup>2</sup> It was also simultaneously clarified that although the term had been in existence for over a decade (it was probably first used in 1992<sup>3</sup>), it served in 2016 mainly to describe post-truth politics, discussed with extraordinary persistence in the context of Brexit and the United States presidential election. Abundantly commented upon, the British politics of the time, i.e., before the referendum on the United Kingdom leaving the European Union, and the American politics during the presidential campaign, became symptomatic of the new, currently much more widespread political style, adopted also beyond the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

In this “post-truth regime ... a subversion of truth for emotional or political purposes”<sup>4</sup> is enacted and, in consequence, human beings, who, as citizens, lack access to the truth about reality, become unable to assume responsibility for the common good. Without accurate, true information, citizens cannot take right decisions to “truly” serve their communities and they become politically “mutilated.” In any context, post-truth means renouncing actual knowledge of reality for the sake of emotional responses and subjective views. What counts—in the first place, or even in general—is not objective (and, in this sense, true) facts: these are challenged by “alternative facts”<sup>5</sup> or by subjective responses to facts, emotions and beliefs they originate. A result of this process is the specific choices it induces people to make. In this reality, it is

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<sup>1</sup> See “Word of the Year 2016,” OxfordLanguages, <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/>.

<sup>2</sup> The New China News Agency is reported to have announced in January 2017 that Europe adopted post-truth politics. See Jonathan Mair, “Post-truth Anthropology,” *Anthropology Today* 33, no. 3 (2017): 3.

<sup>3</sup> The term was given a slightly different meaning in the paper by Steve Tesich. See Steve T e s i c h, “A Government of Lies,” *Nation* 254, no. 1 (1992): 12).

<sup>4</sup> Saulo de Freitas Araújo, “Truth, Half-Truth, and Post-Truth: Lessons from William James,” *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* 35, no. 2 (2022): 485.

<sup>5</sup> M a i r, “Post-Truth Anthropology”: 3.

the “I” with its perceptions and feelings that is important rather than the world outside the “I.” An individual recognizes something as true because he or she “feels” it is true, and not because they have rational grounds for their convictions. It is an individual who decides, according to his or her wish, whether a given statement or a fact is true and the decision in question is based on whether the given statement or fact is consistent with his or her feelings, expectations, or beliefs.<sup>6</sup> Not only does post-truth lead to domination of feelings over facts, but it results in alienation from reality as such at the levels of both individuals and communities.<sup>7</sup>

It is not difficult to see that the contemporary preference for post-truth is not characteristic merely of certain issues or particular areas of life, but is gradually becoming a general attitude of individuals and communities towards themselves, the world, the supernatural, and, consequently, also towards God. It is also frequently pointed out that the prefix “post” does not mean that we have “overtaken” the truth by going, as it were, further, but that the truth has been in some way clouded or obscured by our personal emotions and beliefs.<sup>8</sup>

In the face of post-truth politics, it is necessary to place a fresh emphasis on responsibility and thus on the ethical dimension, indispensable if politics understood as commitment to public life is to be “true.” In the post-truth era, politics can be saved only by ethics, that is by reintroducing responsibility which presupposes a realistic attitude based on the recognition, on the one hand, of the existence of “pure” facts and, on the other, of the value of one’s own and the other’s identity; the attitude in question involves also the perception of one’s fallibility and susceptibility to doubt. Such political responsibility should become a distinctive feature of politics and politicians.<sup>9</sup>

Spreading the post-truth political culture stems from a more or less consciously given consent to “free unfreedom,” from renouncing responsibility for oneself and, ultimately,

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<sup>6</sup> See Stewart L o c k i e, “Post-truth Politics and the Social Sciences,” *Environmental Sociology* 3, no. 1 (2017): 1; Frank F i s c h e r, *Truth and Post-truth in Public Policy: Interpreting the Arguments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 13–14.

<sup>7</sup> See Lee M c I n t y r e, *Post-truth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2018), 172. Timothy Snyder expressed an inevitable consequence of post-truth: “If nothing is true, then all is spectacle.” Timothy S n y d e r, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (New York: Bodley Head, 2017), 65.

<sup>8</sup> See Kristoffer A h l s t r o m - V i j, “Do We Live in a ‘Post-truth’ Era?,” *Political Studies* 71, no. 1 (2023): 501; M c I n t y r e, *Post-Truth*. A spokesperson to Donald Trump was to say, “Anything is true if enough people believe it.” Cited after Tracy B. S t r o n g, “Foreword,” in Ilan Zvi Baron, *How to Save Politics in a Post-truth Era: Thinking through Difficult Times* (Manchester: Manchester University Press: 2018, ix.

<sup>9</sup> See B a r o n, *How to Save Politics in a Post-truth Era*, 196–98.

responsibility for one's freedom. In this way, consent is also given to manipulation by political authorities, the media, and cultural powers. Liberation from this form of enslavement and humiliation can be achieved primarily by a new, radical choice of truth, which will help individuals regain their autonomy, restore their subjectivity, and become authentically committed to public life.<sup>10</sup> Return to truth will certainly not be free from difficulty, but it is indispensable—not only in the social or political domain, but even more so in the ideological and cultural ones. Also, not infrequent contemporary skeptical attitudes towards the possibility of making universal claims require fresh and courageous reflection on the possibility of truth in the time after post-truth.<sup>11</sup>

From the sphere of politics, post-truth has moved to other areas of life and has penetrated culture, philosophy, science, law, literature, and the mass media. It is worth recalling at least some related publications. Christopher Schaberg writes about the precarious future of literature in the world of post-truth.<sup>12</sup> The theme of painting and post-truth interpretations of its significance is discussed in an essay by Enrico Terrone.<sup>13</sup> Threats posed by post-truth to science are addressed in a monograph *Pseudoscience*.<sup>14</sup> Angela Condello defends the inalienable value of factual truth in legal theory and practice,<sup>15</sup> while Matthew D'Ancona describes an alarming shift of emphasis from evidence to emotions.<sup>16</sup> Defending truth in psychology, Saulo de Freitas Araujo critically refers to William James's pragmatism and his notion of half-truths, stressing, however, that his theory cannot be used to support "the absurdity of the celebration of post-truth."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Saul Newman, "Post-Truth and the Controversy over Postmodernism: Or, Was Trump Reading Foucault?," *Continental Thought and Theory: A Journal of Intellectual Freedom* 3, no. 4 (2022): 68–69.

<sup>11</sup> See Johan Farkas and Jannick Schou, *Post-Truth, Fake News and Democracy: Mapping the Politics of Falsehood* (New York and London: Routledge, 2020), 25–28, 131–142.

<sup>12</sup> See Christopher Schaberg, *The Work of Literature in an Age of Post-truth* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> See Enrico Terrone, "The Post-Truth in Painting," in *Post-Truth, Philosophy and Law*, ed. Angela Condello and Tiziana Andina (Abingdon: Routledge 2019), 155–67.

<sup>14</sup> See *Pseudoscience: The Conspiracy Against Science*, ed. Allison B. Kaufman and James C. Kaufman (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2018).

<sup>15</sup> See Angela Condello, "After the Ordeal: Law and the Age of Post-truth," in *Post-truth, Philosophy and Law*, 21–31.

<sup>16</sup> See Matthew D'Ancona, *Post Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back* (London: Ebury Press, 2017), 68. See also: Hannah Arendt, "Lying in Politics: Reflections of the Pentagon Papers," in Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1972), 1–47; Martin Jay, *The Virtues of Mendacity: On Lying in Politics* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010).

In the context of Christian faith (which is fundamentally and in an obvious way contradictory to the idea of post-truth), reaching further than theology, one can refer to liturgy as revealing the pure truth about God. In the liturgical celebration, God reveals himself as particularly true as he makes his love, that is himself, fully present. If beauty is the splendor of truth, as Plato believed, the truth of liturgy should be recognized in its beauty.<sup>18</sup> David Fagerberg emphasizes that “something cannot be beautiful unless it is true.”<sup>19</sup> Thus the truth of liturgy makes it possible to perceive, or even to encounter, the particular beauty: God the Savior. Disregard for truth or its denial would make human condition unbearable by depriving it of beauty. It is God who became man that reveals to human beings their condition and destiny: “The truth is that only in the mystery of incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light.”<sup>20</sup> As it were, every human being recognizes the truth about himself or herself as *imago pulchritudinis* only in the face of God-Man. Therefore, being with God is beautiful for man and brings joy: we experience joy because of God and in community with him.<sup>21</sup>

Even if renouncing truth to adopt post-truth began with “mere” post-truth politics with its effectiveness at any cost, including disregard for truth and acceptance of total manipulation, and reached other realms of the human world only later, the fundamental causes of the process in question are postmodernism and the accompanying relativism. As the sources of post-facts and post-truth, postmodernism and relativism migrated from the academic world to the mass media by universally imposing the idea of an arbitrary narrative on events: “lies can be excused as ‘an alternative point of view’ or ‘an opinion,’ because ‘it’s all relative’ and ‘everyone has their own truth.’”<sup>22</sup> In this way truth was not so much suppressed or censored as radically relativized. What was previously a true fact has now been

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<sup>17</sup> de Freitas Araujo, “Truth, Half-truth, and Post-truth: Lessons from William James”: 487.

<sup>18</sup> See David W. Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 181.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>20</sup> Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, Section 22, The Holy See, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_cons\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html).

<sup>21</sup> See Joseph Ratzinger, “‘I ulitował się Bóg’ (Jon 3,10): Lectio divina,” in *Opera omnia*, vol. 14, part 2, *Kazania*, trans. Jarosław Merecki, ed. Krzysztof Gózdź and Marzena Górecka (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2020), 677.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Pomerantsev, *Why We’re Post-fact*, Granta, July 20, 2016, <https://granta.com/why-were-post-fact/>. See Mair, *Post-truth Anthropology*: 4.

transformed “into mere opinion, [drowned] out in a cacophony of competing perspectives and narratives.”<sup>23</sup>

Such a condition is often called “new subjectivism,” as “everything is subjective.”<sup>24</sup> The truth of beliefs does not depend on their facticity or reference to truth, but on a personal, subjective conviction. Thus post-truth can be described as an extreme relativization of truth. At an ideological level, such a manner of thinking can be found particularly in the writings of Michel Foucault<sup>25</sup> and Jacques Derrida<sup>26</sup> who, in turn, both endorsed Friedrich Nietzsche’s rejection of objective truth.<sup>27</sup> On their view, truth is reduced to a mere human construct and practice; it is produced by a community or a culture. This tendency became a leading factor in the transformation of modern thought into post-modern one.<sup>28</sup> The fundamental presuppositions of modernity concerning universal and objective truth and the possibility of acquiring ever deeper knowledge of the world thanks to the progress of sciences were questioned. According to Jean-François Lyotard, post-modern thought deprived scientific cognition of its authority, the metanarrative degenerated into a vision of reality incapable of providing an ontological foundation to thought and (also political) action<sup>29</sup>. There is no “dominant coherent understanding of society but, rather, a plurality of narratives or perspectives.”<sup>30</sup> The point here is not a denial of the existence of facts or of the possibility to

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<sup>23</sup> Saul Newman, “Post-truth, Postmodernism and the Public Sphere,” in *Europe in the Age of Post-truth Politics: Populism, Disinformation and the Public Sphere*, ed. Maximilian Conrad et al. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 14.

<sup>24</sup> Lawrie McFarlane, “Editorial,” *Anahin/Nimpo Lake Messenger*, 13, no. 12 (2017): 4; cited in C. G. Prado, “Introduction: The New Subjectivism,” in *America’s Post-truth Phenomenon: When Feelings and Opinions Trump Facts and Evidence*, ed. C. G. Prado, (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2018), 2.

<sup>25</sup> See Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley, New York: Random House 1985.

<sup>26</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri C. Spivak, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974.

<sup>27</sup> See, e.g., Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York: Random House, 1974.

<sup>28</sup> See Prado, “Introduction: The New Subjectivism, 2–4.” In this context, Marci Shore’s interesting reflections on the struggle with the communist lie are worth careful reading (see Marci Shore, “A Pre-History of Post-Truth, East and West,” *Eurozine*, September 1, 2017, <https://www.eurozine.com/a-pre-history-of-post-truth-east-and-west/>). For exceptionally extensive research into the sources of post-truth, see Steve Fuller, *Post-truth: Knowledge as a Power Game* (London: Anthem Press, 2018). For a discussion of the Kantian and Nietzschean sources of post-truth, see Tiziana Andina, “Truth, Lies, and Post-truth,” in *Post-truth, Philosophy and Law*, 1–13.

<sup>29</sup> See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

<sup>30</sup> Newman, “Post-truth, Postmodernism and the Public Sphere,” 20–21.

verify them but rather a rejection of the existence of one objective method of their interpretation, while the selection of facts and their explanation depends on those who are in power.<sup>31</sup>

Not without significance for the emergence of the contemporary post-truth situation (and not only post-truth politics) is the development and universal availability of communication media and, in particular, of the so-called social media. This concerns almost everyone, as almost everyone has access to them. At the same time, one must remember that journalism, where authentic social communication is increasingly replaced by propaganda, is a particularly vulnerable profession. Referring to old, yet even more apposite observations of Gabriel Marcel, Paul Fairfield describes propaganda as “technology of ideas, ‘a method not of persuasion but of seduction,’ whether for money, power, or both.”<sup>32</sup>

Transmission of unverified information on an earlier unimaginably large scale being easy, social networks have been used as tools of manifold manipulation to achieve all possible purposes. A well-known case of such manipulation was the theft by Cambridge Analytica of the data of at least fifty million Facebook users to influence their perception of election candidates. The CEO of the company “is proposing that post-truth, as a cultural phenomenon, has rendered objective facts anachronistic and ‘The Real’ as a phantasm.”<sup>33</sup> Additional issues related to post-truth arise from the fact that it is not (or, at least, not primarily) a theoretical problem, but an increasingly acceptable instrument used in practical, often large scale activities focused rather on public (particularly political) life than on everyday life of individuals.

It is also observed that using modern information technologies, the post-truth political discourse dangerously reinforces emotional and aggressive components of human communication, thus serving authoritarian ideologies, their manipulative intentions, and

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<sup>31</sup> See Sophia Rosenfeld, *Democracy and Truth: A Short History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 143–4.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Fairfield, “Lords of Mendacity,” in *America’s Post-truth Phenomenon: When Feelings and Opinions Trump Facts and Evidence*, 159. See McIntyre, *Post-truth*, 89–90; Gareth Thompson, *Post-truth Public Relations: Communication in an Era of Digital Disinformation* (London: Routledge, 2020), 25–46. An optimistic and pro-democratic perception of social platforms quickly changed into accusations of unlimited promotion of lies and destruction of democracy. See Farkas and Schou, *Post-truth, Fake News and Democracy*, 55–57.

<sup>33</sup> Michael E. Sawyer, “Post-truth, Social Media, and the ‘Real’ as Phantasm,” in *Relativism and Post-truth in Contemporary Society: Possibilities and Challenges*, ed. Mikael Stenmark, Steve Fuller, and Ulf Zackariasson (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018): 67.

social control.<sup>34</sup> Hence post-truth is sometimes described as “a precursor to authoritarianism”<sup>35</sup> or “pre-fascism.”<sup>36</sup> Not only is post-truth an obvious sign of the regression of contemporary politics towards authoritarianism and totalitarianism, but it also begins to be considered—and this is even more dangerous—as something normal and thus acceptable in political reality and, broadly speaking, public life.<sup>37</sup> It is not difficult to see that in their critique of post truth, the cited authors refer mainly to arguments based on political practice, considering post-truth as a threat to public life, democracy, state, and the like.

Advocating post-truth in any area of human life is a manifestation of the belief that, as Vittorio Bufacchi puts it, “truth is no longer essential ... truth has become obsolete,”<sup>38</sup> or of the choice of something that only “resembles truth,”<sup>39</sup> or perhaps even of a proclamation of its death.<sup>40</sup> Attitudes towards truth such as agnosticism and relativism, not infrequent today, get bogged down “in the shifting sands of widespread skepticism”<sup>41</sup> and give rise to an uncritical pluralism claiming that all opinions are equally valid, which was discussed by John Paul II in his Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*. Finding „the way and the truth and the life” (Jn 14:6) in Christ, Christianity persists in reminding that, as John Paul II stated in the opening words of the Encyclical Letter *Veritatis splendor*, “truth enlightens man’s intelligence and shapes his

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<sup>34</sup> See Lisa P o r t m e s s, “Post-truth: Marcuse and New Forms of Social Control,” in *America’s Post-truth Phenomenon*, 59–60; see also Jason H a n n a n, “Truth and Trolling,” in *America’s Post-truth Phenomenon*, 126–40.

<sup>35</sup> See Martha M e r r i l l U m p h r e y, Lawrence D o u g l a s, and Austin S a r a t, “Post-truth as a Precursor to Authoritarianism,” in *Law and Illiberalism*, ed. Austin Sarat, Lawrence Douglas, and Martha Merrill Umphrey (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2022) 78–101; Lee M c I n t y r e, “Why We Are Living in a Post-truth Era,” *Skeptic Magazine* 25, no. 1 (2020): 40–41.

<sup>36</sup> S n y d e r, *On Tyranny*, 71.

<sup>37</sup> See Stuart S i m, *Post-truth, Scepticism and Power* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 164–5.

<sup>38</sup> Vittorio B u f a c c h i, “What’s the Difference between Lies and Post-truth in Politics? A Philosopher Explains.” *The Conversation*, January 24, 2020. <https://theconversation.com/whats-the-difference-between-lies-and-post-truth-in-politics-a-philosopher-explains-130442>.

<sup>39</sup> Sondra H a l e, “Something Resembling ‘Truth’: Reflections on Critical Pedagogy in the New ‘Post-truth’ Landscape,” in *Gender in an Era of Post-truth Populism*, ed. Penny Jake et al. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022): 79–96

<sup>40</sup> See Michael H a n n o n, “The Politics of Post-truth,” *Critical Review: A Journal of Politics and Society* 35, nos. 1–2 (2023): 42; Michiko K a k u t a n i, *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018).

<sup>41</sup> J o h n P a u l I I, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*, Section 5, The Holy See, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091998\\_fides-et-ratio.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html).

freedom.”<sup>42</sup> However deep is the mark left by post-truth on the world of today and on human beings living in it, one cannot renounce truth altogether as „the concept of truth will never die ... The concept of truth is a survivor,”<sup>43</sup> yet it is possible to lose „respect for truthfulness.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> J o h n P a u l I I, Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor*, The Holy See, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_06081993\\_veritatis-splendor.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html).

<sup>43</sup> S i m o n B l a c k b u r n, *On Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 11.

<sup>44</sup> H a n n o n, “The Politics of Post-truth”: 43.