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# Tying Truth's Shoes: The Value of a Realist Notion of Truth Within Democratic Discourse

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TYING TRUTH'S SHOES:  
The Value of a Realist Notion of Truth Within Democratic  
Discourse

By: Emma Arvedon

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements of Senior Independent Study

Advisor: Garrett Thomson

Department of Philosophy  
The College of Wooster  
2018-19

# ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to answer the question; what is the value of a realist notion of truth in democratic discourse? It is divided into 4 main chapters, along with an introduction and some short concluding remarks.

In my introduction I attempt to give some preliminary reasons I became interested in this question in the first place. I also clarify some terms that I will use for the rest of the paper.

The first chapter is devoted to delineating a realist notion of truth. I focus on defining features of the theory, consider other competing theories of truth, defend a realist notion from objections, and refine some of the features to leave us with a clear understanding of the framework the rest of the paper works within.

The second chapter explores the value of expressing and believing truly. I consider both the instrumental and non-instrumental value of truthfulness using a realist notion of truth. The third chapter delves into the role truthfulness plays within democratic discourse and action. I work to show that truthfulness is not only a functioning principle of democracy but is also necessary for successful democratic action.

The last chapter focuses on the univocity of the truth predicate. I attempt to demonstrate how ‘is true’ means the same thing for scientific claims as it does for political claims, which I hope works to clear up the confusion amidst political opinions parading as claims to truthfulness.

To close the paper, I attempt to succinctly bring these thoughts together and make salient their connection. Additionally, I recognize where this project ends and what is still left to discuss.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank first and foremost my mother, father, and brother for always exposing me to their ideas, engaging me in thought, and teaching me to care about the world, care about education, and care about other people. I'd like to thank my advisor, Garrett Thomson, for constantly pushing me to be a better philosopher. I'd like to thank the entire philosophy department, past and present, for creating a welcoming community that cultivated my love for thinking through things. I'd like to thank Daniel for his direction during the final hours of this project. Finally, I'd like to thank my friends for supporting me always and challenging me when I needed it; their presence is an eternally sunlit safe space.

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# INTRODUCTION

*“A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes”<sup>12</sup>*

## *POST-TRUTH AS PROLOGUE*

It was around 2016 when I stopped reading the news. Or rather, that was around the time when I stopped caring about the news that I read. The notion that I could no longer parse the true from the false felt like a get out of jail free card for doing hard, compassionate work. If there was no longer a way for me to know *the truth* of the matter, I was no longer obligated to care about the possible moral and material failings in front of me. I was sure that I was being fed lies and that there was nothing I could do about that or about the state of the world because of that. I figured I would have to ride it out and wait for a more truthful time in our political sphere to begin caring again. Maybe 2020.

Part of this indifference came from unintentionally buying into the attitudes surrounding ‘post-truth.’ Joshua Forstenzer, in his paper *Something has Cracked: Post Truth Politics and Richard Rorty’s Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism* explains that the ““post-truth” character of our politics refers to the relative irrelevance of the value of

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<sup>1</sup> “Commonly attributed to Mark Twain, that quotation instead appears to be a descendant of a line published centuries ago by the satirist Jonathan Swift. Variants emerged and mutated over time until a modern version of the saying was popularized by a Victorian-era preacher, according to Garson O’Toole, a researcher who, like Twain, prefers a pseudonym.”

<sup>2</sup> Niraj Chokshi, “That Wasn’t Mark Twain: How a Misquotation Is Born,” *The New York Times*, January 20, 2018, sec. Books,

truth in contemporary public affairs.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, being true is no longer the predominant aim of political speech. Or, at least, we the people were starting to realize this phenomenon as a trend. There are a few theories as to how and when this cultural shift occurred. I do not think that the 2016 election was the first time a reverence for the truth has been disregarded in political discourse. I do know, from dozens of headlines passed around online, that “post-truth” was Oxford Dictionaries 2016 word of the year. I also realize now that 2016 was the year I began acting as if I did not value expressing or believing truly. It was when I gave up on the ideals of truthfulness.

Evan Davis, in his book *Post Truth* offers some reasons for why the realization of this trend this may have happened recently. He speaks of the ubiquity of professional communicators (think ad men and press secretaries) who, “turn out to be the worst offenders when it comes to mangling the message in a way that obscures the plain truth. Political spin and obfuscation; clumsily drafted corporate press releases; the weasel words and excises of mediocre bureaucrats; the faux-friendly signage[...]”<sup>4</sup> etc. This seems to surround us always with the rise of the internet and smartphones. So many of us have access to so much information written with so many different intentions and levels of research backing them. The task for filtering what is true and what is false is partly complicated because of this oversaturation. Instead of turning away from this ubiquity of uncertainty, Davis argues that there was a move made headfirst into it.

“The reaction came and it was not the emergence of a new breed of plain-speaking, common-sense honest politician; rather, it was an international wave of populist politicians who smashed through the old conventions of political obfuscation, and who introduced us to a new style of

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<sup>3</sup>Forstenzer, Joshua. “Something Has Cracked: Post-Truth Politics and Richard Rorty’s Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism.” *Ash Center Occasional Papers* (2018), 8.

<sup>4</sup> Evan Davis, *Post-Truth: Why We Have Reached Peak Bullshit and What We Can Do About It* (Little, Brown Book Group, 2017).

communication, replete with attention grabbing propositions that have no basis in fact or expert judgement at all.”<sup>5</sup>

Because of this rather transparent disregard for expressing truly, the perceived importance of that act was put in danger. I, myself, felt like attempting to seek out what was true was a pointless endeavor. I doubt I was the only person who felt this way.

This general attitude of indifference about the state the world is in runs harshly against ideals I have held deeply for my entire life. I was disappointed in myself for turning away from the world at a time when I should have faced it head on. I wanted to do this project, deep down, because I wanted to explore how to get out from my willful ignorance, out of my ambivalence. I wanted to convince myself that this time is no less fruitful for change than any other time in history when those in power are being deceptive for one reason or another. My first step was to turn away from a ‘post-truth’ attitude and to do that, I had to turn toward theories of truth that could withstand abuse, which was the first inkling of this project actualizing.

## *THE QUESTION(S) AT HAND*

This thesis, then, aims to answer the question, ‘In what ways is a realist theory of truth a functioning principle of democracy?’ The underlying questions guiding me toward this larger answer were *in what ways is truth valuable* and *why is it important that we recognize that value, particularly in politics?*

I find part of an answer to these questions in Rebecca Solnit’s book *Hope in the Dark*. Here she illustrates one of the reasons we should care about the truth being

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<sup>5</sup> Evan Davis, *Post-Truth: Why We Have Reached Peak Bullshit and What We Can Do About It* (Little, Brown Book Group, 2017), xi.

expressed. She says that “changing the story isn’t enough in itself, but it has often been foundational to real changes. Making an injury visible and public is often the first step in remedying it, and political change often follows culture, as what was long tolerated is seen to be intolerable, or what was overlooked becomes obvious.”<sup>6</sup> I use this project to demonstrate and explore the ways in which expressing and believing truly are valuable, for bettering the world through democratic political change and for those acts as ends in themselves.

## *CLARIFICATIONS*

Before we move onto the nitty gritty chapters, I want to go over a few preliminary clarifications to keep in mind throughout this project.

The first clarification is about the theory of truth I will be focusing on. Throughout this paper I will be writing about a realist notion of truth. I hope to demonstrate, particularly in my first and second chapters, why it is that a realist notion of truth is the best notion to use when evaluating political discourse. I hope to argue, by the end of this project, that the *only* notion of truth that serves our purposes is a realist notion of truth. All other notions fail to capture what we mean when we use the truth predicate; all other notions fail to be minimally objective through reference to the world.

The second clarification is of the truth predicate and its variations. The immediate dichotomy that comes to mind when considering the truth predicate is that of true versus false. This dichotomy, though, seems to miss the mark and misconstrue the ways in which something can be more or less true. A claim that is not true is not necessarily

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<sup>6</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (Haymarket Books, 2016), xvi.

entirely false. A claim can be mistaken in a few ways; it can be ignorant, misleading, atomistically true, it can capture one aspect of the case but miss others. False does not seem to capture all of the ways that a sentence (that should aim to be true) can fail. Truth talk requires more than just true and false. In order to fully capture the important ways in which claims can miss the mark of being true, we must think of claims as being more in a gradient of truth and falsity than in a binary.

There is a great example of why we need this complex notion of truth that my advisor, Garrett Thomson, offered to me in one of our first meetings. Let us say that there is an advertisement for a house in the newspaper. There is a picture of the exterior of the house, pictures of the inside, details about the size and amenities included. It is advertised as a beautiful dream house, and looks just the part. What is not included in this advertisement, though, is the fact that the house is located across the street from a factory farm that spreads animal fecal matter through a misting process right onto the front yard. We can't necessarily say that the advertisement is false; the measurements are right and the pictures are real. But it is clear that the advertisement is not quite *right* in selling the property as a dream house. We would feel duped if we bought the house sight unseen and would deny that the advertisement was true. Thus, we would say that this advertisement falls somewhere on the gradient between true and false. It is *less* true.

At the start of this paper I will still use the true and false dichotomy in order to explain a realist theory of truth in the clearest fashion possible. The rest of the paper, I hope, will work to show why a claim being less true is distinct from a claim being fully false, and why we should care about the failure of both.

Finally, I want to address the kinds of things I will be considering in regards to truth in this project. To narrow the field at first, I am only considering empirical

propositions, propositions that say something about the world. To narrow it further, this project, particularly in its later chapters, will predominantly focus on political claims. By this I mean claims made by those who have official relevance in political decisions about facts relevant to their decision making. This is to say that I am not that concerned if an elected official miscounts the number of blades of grass that are in her yard and thus has a false thought regarding her yard that she mentions to her partner. I am instead concerned by the true or less than true beliefs she has that then effect the way political decisions are made.

With these preliminary problems out of the way, I will begin this project by delineating what a realist notion of truth is and why it works well for our purposes.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### WHAT IS A REALIST THEORY OF TRUTH?

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce us to a realist theory of truth. To do this, I will begin by delineating the theory's features and expanding on important and defining details. I will then distinguish a general realist notion of truth from its specific offspring; a correspondence theory. Finally, I will consider objections common and condemning in the literature to a realist notion of truth and then defend it against those objections. I hope, by the end of this chapter, that a strong explanation of a realist theory and notion of truth will stand- one that lines up with the value of believing truly that we will explore in the next chapter.

#### *A REALIST THEORY OF TRUTH*

A realist theory of truth, at its most basic, can be formulated as;

A proposition is true iff it describes the world as it is.

This formulation could also be something like;

“Minimally speaking, a proposition is true in the realist sense when the world is as proposition says it.”<sup>7</sup>

Or

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Patrick Lynch, *Truth in Context: An Essay on Pluralism and Objectivity* (MIT Press, 1998), 125.

“A statement (proposition, belief...) is true if and only if what the statement says to be the case actually is the case”<sup>8</sup>

A realist notion of truth can be dated all the way back to Aristotle who states in *The Metaphysics* that;

“To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true”<sup>9</sup>

Despite the variance between these expressions of the theory, all of them are first and foremost definitions of when to use the truth predicate ‘...*is true*.’ The predicate ‘...*is true*’ can be used only if the empirical proposition being asserted describes the way the world is. For example, only when it is really raining outside is the proposition, ‘It is raining,’ true. A proposition is then false when the world is not the way the proposition describes it.

This theory, through how it guides us to use the truth predicate, implies truth itself is a relation between certain kinds of propositions and the world when those propositions describe it as it is. In other words, truth is the relational agreement between the truth-bearer and the truthmaker. These three features, truth-bearers, truthmakers, and the truth relation, are what the theory takes to be fundamental. The truth-bearers here are certain kinds of empirical propositions, the truthmaker is the world, and ‘truth’ is the relation between the two.

The world as truthmaker is what makes this theory realist. When a proposition describes the world as it is, the proposition is true. So, what makes the proposition ‘S is 5’9” true is S actually being 5’9”. This is in opposition to other theories of truth where

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<sup>8</sup> William P. Alston, *A Realist Conception of Truth* (Cornell University Press, 1997), 5.

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *The Metaphysics of Aristotle* (G. Bell and sons, 1896).

the truthmaker is not the world, such as a subjective theory or a theory of agreement. Under a subjective theory of truth, what would make the proposition, 'It is raining outside' true would be the held belief that it is raining outside. This would mean that if a despotic ruler, or someone hallucinating, believed that it was raining, that claim would be true regardless of the weather. The statement could be said while standing in a sunny field during a drought and still be true, under a subjective theory. I use this example to show that subjective theories of truth fail. While beliefs necessitate the notion of truth<sup>10</sup>, not all beliefs are true just because they are held. One need not a refined understanding of theories of truth to be able to understand that having a belief does not make it true. A belief can be false if it does not accord with the way the world is. A strong suit of a realist notion of truth is that it explains this understanding of believing something not making it true with its reference to the world, its minimal objectivity.

Minimal objectivity about truth, being able to be mistaken about what we think is true or false, is a key feature of the realist notion. A realist theory of truth is minimally objective because of its fundamental reference to the world. Let us say that I think it is true that snow is green. The reason that I can be mistaken about this being true is because that is not the way the world really is. We want this because we want to allow for disagreement and then be able to move beyond disagreement, which requires us to first conceive of disagreement. We would not be able to conceive of contradicting beliefs about the same world if we did not have the realist notion of reference to that same world first. Without minimal objectivity, the truth predicate becomes subjective. Subjective theories of truth say nothing about actual truth or falsity of claims, they merely say something about the perceived truth or falsity of a claim. In order to say anything about

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<sup>10</sup> More on this later in the chapter under Objections to A Realist Notion of Truth.

the actual truth of a claim we need reference to the world. These ideas are premises in the following argument for a realist notion of truth;

- I. Without minimal objectivity, the truth predicate would have no meaning
- II. Reference to the world is what allows true claims their objectivity
- III. Reference to the world is a realist notion
- IV. The truth predicate is meaningful
- V. Therefore, a realist theory of truth is true

In other words, this argument claims that the truth predicate is only meaningful if it is used under a realist theory of truth. Because the truth predicate is meaningful, because we mean something by it when we use it, a realist notion of truth must be true. This is so because without minimal objectivity, the truth predicate would say nothing about the actual truth or falsity of a claim. It would instead, at best, say something about what the speaker *thought* about the truth of the claim, which does not accomplish what we want when we use the truth predicate. We will consider how subjective theories are mistaken later on in more detail as well as objections to this notion of minimal objectivity.

We have considered the truth maker but just as important is the truth bearer; propositions. A proposition is the content of a sentence, statement, or belief. The kind of propositional content that can be evaluated for truth value is the content that can be expressed in assertions and the like. Propositions like these are the only things that the truth predicate can primarily apply to. This is in response to other uses of the truth predicate that truth theorists including William Alston list but then ignore, such as genuine, faithful, legitimate, and the like. Instead of ignoring these uses, I want to eventually ask how these uses of the truth predicate can play a role in propositional truth. With that being said, it can also be said that propositions are the only thing that can primarily be true because they are the only things that can primarily describe the world

that allow for the whole truth. There are other things that can describe the world, but they can only do so through the expression of propositions. This is why sentences, beliefs, and statements can be true. We can easily see how these things express their propositional content. In a more extrapolated way, paintings can be true but only derivatively so. The painting itself is not true or false, for it is just a thing in the world, static. The content that the painting expresses, though, can be true or false. This can be made clear by comparing a painting to a tree, let's say. A tree cannot be true or false, it just is. When someone says 'That tree is not true,' they probably mean something along the lines of, 'that tree is actually made of plastic,' or something of the sort. Statements of that sort, though, are *about* the tree. They can be true or false because they are propositions. A proposition is about the world and so we evaluate the truth or falsity of it. Because the tree is not about anything, we cannot compare it to itself in any meaningful way. Propositions are solely content which allows for the fluidity to describe things as they are, the fluidity to capture the complexity of the world.

A realist theory of truth is propositional because it applies to propositional content that can then be expressed through beliefs, statements, or sentences. We want to focus on propositions because we do not want the expression of content to be necessary for truth value. We want to avoid this because we don't want to mix up the belief's content being true and the having of the belief being true. For example, it can be true that I believe that snow is green, but this does not make the content of that belief true. We also want to avoid expression being necessary because we want content to have truth value even if it was never expressed. For example, the proposition that 'On December 2nd, 1273 at 2pm it was raining,' is either true or not true, despite it having probably never been expressed before.

The propositional nature of truth does not rule out other ways of being truthful, though. There are also derivations of the truth predicate that we see in everyday language, such as when we call something genuine, or say that something is faithful to something else; when a movie is faithful to the book it was adapted from, for example. All of these concepts come from a realist notion of truth. They are derivations of propositional expressions getting something about the world right. We will consider the importance of these other ways of being true in the third chapter on value.

With that being said, the rest of this project is only going to address certain propositional content. This project is concerned with empirical claims relevant to democratic political discourse. I will avoid discussing moral, mathematical, poetic, metaphorical and other propositions of the same kind because, while they are of great interest, they are outside the scope of this project.

## *THE CORRESPONDENCE THEORY*

Before we begin to answer questions and objections against a realist theory of truth, we should make clear what the realist theory of truth is not.

The correspondence theory is the most well known variation of a realist theory of truth. In fact, most realist theories are falsely labeled as correspondence theories, a sort of synecdoche that confuses the difference between a general realist theory and a specific correspondence version of it, due to the popularity of the correspondence theory. This confusion attributes unnecessary problems to a general realist theory of truth. While general theories run into their own problems of vagueness, over defining a theory can introduce problems that were never there to begin with.

A general notion of realist truth is best characterized through description. A proposition is true when it describes the bit of the world that it is about. A correspondence theory attempts to make the definition more complex, in an attempt, probably, to bring out something more philosophically interesting about truth.

The correspondence theory formulated is;

‘P’ is true iff ‘p’ corresponds to the fact that p.

This follows the same schema as the more general realist theory does. Where it differs is that it attempts to formulate what the specific relation between a proposition and the world is. This seems unnecessary and I will explain why using fundamental aspects of language. Before we begin to object toward this specification of the realist theory, let us lay out what it is about.

The correspondence theory attempts to answer Marian David’s question, of “what is it for a sentence to correspond to a fact?”<sup>11</sup> This question is in regards to realist theories of truth and assumes that the relationship between propositions and the world is too vague. Instead of description being sufficient, David states that, “if we are to make sense of a correspondence theory of truth, our best hope of doing so is surely to try to relate the structure of truth-bearers, whatever these may be, to the structure of the states of affairs which they purport to describe.”<sup>12</sup> This is what the correspondence theory attempts to do. A proposition does not merely describe the way the world is, it corresponds in structure to the fact it is about. We can imagine this being the case using the subject-predicate forms of a proposition. Let us take the proposition that *the coffee is black*. This

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<sup>11</sup> Marian Alexander David, *Correspondence and Disquotation: An Essay on the Nature of Truth* (Oxford University Press, 1994), 21.

<sup>12</sup> David, 21.

proposition has a subject-predicate form, and so we can compare the subject of the proposition with its referent, the coffee, and see if the coffee has the predicate of blackness. Thus, for something to be a truth bearer in the correspondence theory of truth it must have an assertive, subject-predicate, linguistic structure that we can then compare to the supposedly similar structure of our world.

The correspondence theory is a specified version of the realist theory of truth that specifies the truth relation between the world and our propositions through the reification of propositions. We will now go on to show why doing this causes more problems than it solves for a realist theory of truth.

### *OBJECTIONS TO THE CORRESPONDENCE VARIATION*

There are two problems with this attempt to specify what the truth relation is. One flaw of correspondence is that it reifies propositions, which are the content of sentences. It does this because it demands that the structure of a proposition be similar to the structure of the world. In order for these structures to be similar, we must reify the content of propositions. Thus, to structure the content of a proposition, the content must be turned into a *thing* in the same way facts in the world are things, which is the exact opposite of what a proposition is.<sup>13</sup>

A more general realist theory does not demand this reification because it does not require the relation of truth to be one of correspondence. A realist theory merely wants the content to describe the way the world really is, which aligns with how we conceive of what content can do. We do not need correspondence to explain how words and the world

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<sup>13</sup> Propositions are, by definition, the content of an assertion, belief, statement and the like.

can relate to one another. This can be done merely by looking at how language itself interacts with the world. Propositions, the content of sentences, work to reference objects in the world and describe them. This description of objects in the world is enough to form the truth relation without the need to reify our propositions.

A second flaw of the correspondence theory is that it implies atomism. It demands that a certain proposition correspond to a certain fact in the world. This does not allow for a holistic notion of truth because it does not account for all the relevant facts when evaluating a proposition. How are we supposed to make a separate but relevant fact correspond to a proposition that does not directly reference it? If we cannot do that, our notion of truth becomes too atomistic. We would be losing much the gray area between true and false that we wish to maintain in order to actually understand the truth value a proposition has. For example, if we evaluated the claim that, 'Carmen is the smartest person in the room,' and Carmen was the only adult in a room full of babies, we would say that the statement was true because it corresponded to the facts of the room, but this is misleading. The correspondence theory does not account for the way in which that claim is not holistically true. Thus, the correspondence theory is too atomistic to be an account of the whole truth.

Instead of the correspondence theory's focus on specific facts, we should take a step back to the realist theory and its focus on the world in general. The correspondence theory is an attempt to combat the critique of general realist theories that the relation between propositions and the world is too vague, but it does not help answer that. The critique of vagueness of a realist theory is more a critique of a certain theory of language instead of a realist theory itself.

Really, a theory of language that takes into account sense and reference when evaluating content does that work for us. As long as language can describe the world, a realist theory seems to stand.

### *REFINING A REALIST NOTION: HOLISM*

Before we critique a realist theory, I want to bring to light the holism implicit in a realist notion of truth. Let us begin with evaluating fact talk in the literature of truth. There is much contention over what a truthmaker actually is. In most theories, it is called a fact. In some it is state of affairs, other times it is the case. All of these refer to the world, or the way the world is. This broadness seems vague to some, which can then lead to atomistic that cut the world up into a specific definition of facts.<sup>14</sup> These strict definitions of facts cut the world up into distinct and unrelated facts that can be expressed through distinct and unrelated propositions. This runs the risk of not capturing the fluidity and interrelatedness of states of affairs of the world.

The world, it seems, is not atomistic in an unrelated sense. One bit of the world can have a direct relevance to another bit of the world. Because of this we want to understand the world holistically. We should not just look at parts of the world in order to understand the whole of it.

Let us take an example of where looking at a part does not express the truth of the whole. Let us say that my father calls me to ask if I have made a dentist appointment yet. There is a list of facts relevant to this question being asked. There is the relevant fact that I made an appointment a month ago, but there is also a relevant fact that the appointment

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<sup>14</sup> Refer to the last section, Objections to the Correspondence Variation.

got cancelled a week later. It is yet another relevant fact that I have yet to reschedule and do not currently have any appointment set with my dentist. All of these are distinct facts outside of the direct question being asked, but they are all relevant to the holistic truth of my answer. To answer my father that I did make a dentist appointment is atomistically true, I did make an appointment, but it is not capturing the holistic truth. I still mislead my father, which is not a virtue of telling the truth. Thus, we must bring out the sense of holism that a realist theory has. A realist notion of truth is not a relation between a proposition and a mere fact, but instead is the relation between a proposition and the bits of world that it describes. This bit of the world is larger than a single, contextless, fact. Now that we have an understanding of a realist notion of truth, we can begin to critique it and use it as a reply to competing theories.

## *ABSOLUTE TRUTH*

One preliminary objection to a realist notion of truth is that it is not capable of accounting for absolute truths. This idea of absolutely true claims probably stems from the Platonic ideal of ‘eternal truths’ that reside outside of our human, Earthly realm. Some skeptics about the notion of truth in general as well as the value believing and expressing truly holds deny that truth exists. By this, they usually mean that they doubt the existence of absolute truth, or they doubt our ability to access it.

This seems to be a false objection to a realist notion of truth, though. It argues against a meaningful notion of truth using an objection aimed at a separate theory that is diametrically opposed to realist notions. ‘Absolute truth’ is absolute *because* it has no relation to the world. A realist notion of truth necessitates this relation to the world. Minimal objectivity requires this relation to the world.

Particularly for the aims of this project, I will not consider the concept of absolute truth. This concept has nothing to do with the truth or falsity of empirical claims related to democratic discourse. That is to say, for the rest of this project, I will no longer consider objections aimed at a notion of absolute truth parading as objections to a realist notion.

## *OBJECTIONS TO A REALIST THEORY OF TRUTH*

I want to organize this section of objections and challenges to a realist theory or notion of truth by level of strength. I will start with some of the challenges that I find easier to refute and move onto the challenges that are more biting as we go on.

The first challenge I will address is that of the deflationists. Deflationary theories of truth do one of the following two things; they either deny that truth is a real property or they deflate realist truth as a substantial theory by making the truth predicate redundant.

This first form of deflationism states that the property of truth is unsubstantial, for there is nothing that all true propositions share with one another that make them true, and so there is no one unifying property of truth. This idea is shared by the likes of Richard Rorty, who states simply that, “Truth is not a substantive property.”<sup>15</sup>

This attempt to reduce a realist notion truth seems to miss what ‘truth’ is, which is a relation between propositions and the world. All true empirical propositions do in fact share this relationship of agreement with the world that they describe. So, the property of truth is not a thing that we can see in the propositions themselves alone, but rather what they share is describing the world as it is. It is their agreement in description with the way

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<sup>15</sup> Alexis G. Burgess and John P. Burgess, *Truth* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 47.

the world actually is. What all true propositions share with one another is the same truth value, the same kind of relation to the world, which is something very substantial indeed. This is in response to the idea that, “we do not have to posit that the use of “true” is to report the detection of the presence of some interesting property all truths share.”<sup>16</sup> This seems to misconstrue what the property of the truth predicate *could* be, which is the ability to understand the world through the understanding of a true proposition. All true propositions share this ability.

A second form of deflationism are redundancy theories. An apt name for this form of deflationism, which takes the truth predicate to be redundant. Redundancy theorists posit that when we learn something is true we learn nothing new about the proposition. This implies that realist truth is not a substantial theory of truth because it, at best, gives us a sort of pragmatics of truth and not a semantic explanation of what truth is because the notion of truth is merely pragmatic and the truth predicate has no semantic meaning; it is merely redundant. This means that the truth predicate says nothing about the propositions but rather only does something *to* the proposition, like affirms it. For example, if I said ‘It is true that snow is white,’ I would be saying nothing about the proposition snow is white and its truth or falsity, I would only be approving or affirming the proposition ‘snow is white.’ This theory states that ‘p is true’ is equivalent to ‘p,’ or that “applying the truth predicate to something is equivalent to just saying it.”<sup>17</sup>

This reduction of the notion of truth is mistaken because it ignores how necessary the truth relation is to language and life itself. It takes the simplicity and self-evidence of a realist notion of truth for granted, and tries to turn this self-evidence against itself. To

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<sup>16</sup> Alexis G. Burgess and John P. Burgess, *Truth* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 47.

<sup>17</sup> Burgess, 52.

explain this, I will turn to assertions and beliefs and show that truth is logically prior to both.

Let us first think about beliefs. Beliefs partly constitute cognition. In being alive in the world, we form beliefs. Those beliefs are formed through interactions with the world we live in. To believe something is to think that it is the case in the world. When I believe something, I implicitly believe it to be true. For example, when a child believes in Santa Claus, they believe that there really is a man in a red suit who delivers them presents through their chimneys on Christmas Eve, etc. This may not actually be true, but it is believed to be true, even if it is false by the nature of belief. The same can be said of assertions. When I say ‘the cat is on the mat’ (when I am not using it as an example) I am either assuming that the cat actually is on the mat or I know the claim to be false and am trying to deceive my audience. Either way, truth or falsity is assumed when I make the claim. Thus, when I believe or assert something, even if I do not use the truth predicate, I am still implying the truth or falsity of the proposition being expressed.

This is relevant to the deflationist challenge because it shows that the truth predicate is not redundant just because it is self evident. When we assume something is the case, even without the truth predicate being used, we are still using the truth relation. To believe something is the case is to believe it as true, by definition of a realist notion of truth. Just because we learn nothing *new* when the truth predicate is used does not mean that we did not learn something to be true from the *assumption* of the truth relation. This self-evidence of truth, instead of demonstrating truth’s unimportance, actually demonstrates that truth is logically prior to all assertions, beliefs, and the like.

William Alston states this aptly by saying that, when substituting the truth predicate for another word,

“We have not gotten rid of truth and falsity; we have only gotten rid of ‘true’ and ‘false’. The concepts of truth and falsity are still there; it is just that they are not exhibited by the manifest verbal content of the sentence...For even when we eschew ‘true’ and ‘false’ in favor of substitutional quantification over propositions, we are still considering truth and falsity, but by another name, the rose still smells as sweet.”<sup>18</sup>

A third challenge to a realist notion of truth is the idea that what is true is decided by human agreement. This notion of truth is a form of subjectivism, which is notioned at by the likes of Ludwig Wittgenstein. This notion states that, “we cannot explain the concept of true without reference to human agreement.”<sup>19</sup> This statement seems to mix up the semantics of the truth predicate with the pragmatics of the truth predicate and our epistemic notion of truth. It seems right that when trying to figure out what is true, we look to what humans around us agree is true. This is how we *look* for truth, but this agreement is not what *makes* something true. When we know something is true because it describes the world, we may agree about it being true, and that agreement may make what is true easier to know because it may become common knowledge, but this agreement is still not what makes the claim true.

The problem with this idea of truth being agreement can be seen when we think about disagreement. How can we conceive of disagreement without first having a realist notion of truth? In order to disagree about one’s claim we appeal to the world. The same can be said about coming to an agreement. If two people are arguing about the weather, it is because one disagrees that the claim the other made about the weather is true to the actual weather. To settle the dispute, one of them can lead the other to a window and compare the way the weather was described to the actual weather. There are other ways of settling disagreement that don’t explicitly appeal to the world around us,

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<sup>18</sup> William P. Alston, *A Realist Conception of Truth* (Cornell University Press, 1997), 237.

<sup>19</sup> Sara Ellenbogen, *Wittgenstein’s Account of Truth* (SUNY Press, 2012), 12.

but this seems to be one of the only ways to convince people about the truth or falsity of an empirical claim especially when the person trying to convince is in the minority. This person cannot point to other people's agreement or reasoning when they are alone in their belief. Instead, their only recourse would be to reference the world. Such was the case with Galileo. We do not want to say that Galileo was wrong about his planetary model just because no one at the time agreed with him. His claims were true even when he was in the minority. If our notion of truth was based on agreement, if the truthmaker was agreement instead of the world, Galileo's claims would be false, and he would have no way of convincing people otherwise. Thus, coming to an agreement presupposes a notion of truth. Agreement would also not take into account how our beliefs about what is true can change without anyone else's input or agreement.

This same line of reasoning could be used against coherence theories of truth. A coherence theory posits that what is true is what makes sense within our logical framework. This can of course be mistaken. Something can make sense to us and still not be the case. It can make sense within a certain framework that young women in Salem during the Salem Witch Trials were possessed by the Devil. In 1962 this would have been a very coherent thought to have. Despite that, the women were probably not possessed by the Devil. That was probably a false belief despite the sense it made at the time. A coherence theory not only allow for false beliefs to be true given one's timely conceptual framework, it would also allow for contradicting frameworks to be true at once, as long as they both made some sort of sense. Without recourse to a realist notion, there would be no objective way to decide upon the validity of differing frameworks.

With this being said, it seems important to highlight the difference between the pragmatics of finding what is true and the semantics of the truth predicate. Semantically,

‘is true’ implies a realist notion of truth. When trying to learn what is true, notions of coherence, pragmatism, and agreement are useful along with reference to the world.

A fourth challenge to a realist notion of truth is skepticism. This worry seems to stem from the idea of value that is tied to true claims. Bernard Williams states the slide of this view aptly; “the desire for truthfulness drives a process of criticism which weakens the assurance that there is any...truth.”<sup>20</sup> By this he means that we value truth highly, we assign a lot of power to things labeled as true, we trust something when it is labeled as true. So, according to this view, when we are wrong about what is true, or when someone misuses the truth predicate, we worry about believing that *anything* is true. We don’t want to be duped by truth, and so we want to throw out the whole enterprise of truth in general. This view implies that if there is no truth, we don’t have to worry about being misled by predicates that might be used incorrectly. This worry seems misaimed, though, and it seems to stem from something that is not a challenge against a realist theory, but rather a necessary feature of it.

I first want to state that skeptics don’t always disregard the possibility of truth entirely or of something being true as a whole. Much of the time it seems like they turn to other theories of truth, like a pragmatist theory or a coherence theory, instead. This is so because these theories don’t have the weight of objectivism, and they are easier to be right under, they are easier to meld. I want to show that the move away from a realist notion of truth is the wrong move to make. Ridding a notion of truth of realism denies it any value it once held. Without a realist notion, we lose everything useful and valuable that we want truth to have. So even if one doesn’t get rid of the notion of truth entirely,

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<sup>20</sup> Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton University Press, 2010), 1.

skeptically getting rid of a realist notion, in essence, is doing the same thing. We will go into the mechanics of this idea in our next chapter. With that being said, let us now turn to a skeptical critique of a realist notion of truth.

Let us first think about the mechanics of this challenge. This challenge is asserting that ‘there is no such thing as truth or true propositions because of x, y, and z worries’ This is a problem, *prima facie*, because it is an assertion against the notion of truth, but as we established earlier, assertions presuppose truth. One would then be using an assertion that claims to be true, that claims to describe the way the world is, to argue against being able to do that. Off the bat, then, this objection seems to not work because of the fundamental nature of the notion of truth.

More deeply, though, this worry seems to stem from a place of uncertainty about being able to certainly find what is true. Thus, this is an epistemological worry about truth, and not a semantic worry which would be more biting. This worry stems from the possibility that we can believe something falsely, which makes us worry that everything we believe is false, that we cannot escape this uncertainty. This possibility of being mistaken about a belief we hold to be true, though, is not a mark against truth existing at all. This epistemological worry actually strengthens the semantic notion of realist truth. It is a necessary feature of truth being minimally objective that we can be wrong about what we think is true. If it were impossible for our beliefs about the world to be mistaken, then we would either be some sort of omniscient creature (which we are not) or truth would be subjective because we would always be right, even if our beliefs about what was true contradicted with one another or the world. Therefore, the possibility of us being wrong about what is true and false does not negate the possibility of us being right about what is true and false, rather it makes objective truth possible.

A final, more biting critique of a realist notion of truth is what William Alston labeled the “no way of telling” objection<sup>21</sup>. This is an epistemic objection that has to do with the semantics of truth rather than the pragmatics, which is why we are focusing on it. The argument is as follows;

1. Realist truth requires propositions, the world, and the ability to compare the two objectively
2. We cannot have access to the world in the way a realist theory of truth would require us to because we can only perceive our own perceptions
3. So, realist theory of truth is false

The truth relation, being that it must be minimally objective in order to be meaningful at all, must be between our propositions and the world itself. This argument, though, states that we are not perceiving the world, we are only perceiving our own perceptions of the world. This makes what we take to be the world subjective. Brand Blanshard states the worry aptly by saying that “the realist theory assumes that, corresponding to our judgement, there is some solid chunk of fact, directly presented to sense...to which thought must adjust itself. And this “solid fact” is a fiction. What the theory takes as a fact...is another judgement.”<sup>22</sup> Therefore, this objection posits that whenever we think the world is what makes something true, it is really our *belief* about the world that makes it true. This turns a realist theory of truth into something like a coherence or subjectivist theory of truth. When we lose reference to the world as it is, we lose the minimal objectivity we need from a realist notion of truth.

This argument is a hard one to get around when working inside of it. The solution to it seems to be stepping outside of the argument and its empiricist theory of perception framework. This argument presupposes an empiricist theory of perception which states

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<sup>21</sup> William P. Alston, *A Realist Conception of Truth* (Cornell University Press, 1997), 87.

<sup>22</sup> Alston, 88.

that the only things we can perceive are our own perceptions, or sense data. The mistake made here is that we cannot perceive objects directly. There is no reason that our perception is a roadblock to seeing things as they are instead of merely being the way that we do perceive objects directly. It seems that a wild and crude consequence follows from this, which is that our perceptions are illusions that prevent us from seeing the world in the way that it really is. It denies our perceptions from being a way of seeing the world as it really is. This seems to be the key mistake made in the no way of telling objection. The mistake is that our perceptions are a roadblock to our perceiving objects directly when really our perceptions are how we do that. Perception is how we see objects in the world. There is no reason to think that they are a veil between us and how the world really is, nor is there reason to believe that along the road they misrepresent the world. Instead, we can take perceptions to be objective because they are about the world and can therefore be wrong. On the other hand, and just as importantly, though, our perceptions can be right about how the world is.

I take these three types of critiques, deflationist, skepticist, and epistemic, to be the most challenging to a realist theory of truth. I hope these responses to them are sufficient for this but I think that we have responded sufficiently for our purposes to them.

### *THE VIRTUES OF A REALIST NOTION OF TRUTH*

Before we reach the end of this chapter, it is important that we also mention the virtues associated with it. Bernard Williams gives a partial account of such virtues in his book *Truth and Truthfulness* that I found to be helpful in understanding the general idea. He states that the two main virtuous dispositions of truthfulness are Accuracy and

Sincerity (*capitalized by Williams as proper nouns here*)<sup>23</sup>. By Accuracy and Sincerity, he means that one must be accurate in one's claims and sincere when making them in order to be truthful. This is a good start but does not fully capture the virtues of being truthful. One must also, for example, actively avoid ignorance, consider different beliefs from one's own and be open to revising said beliefs. One must attempt to express what is true holistically and in a way that is clear and easy to understand, as opposed to misleading. This is just a start to the kinds of virtuous dispositions one must take into account when being truthful, but it is a good place to start when considering how believe and express truly.

## *CONCLUSION*

A realist theory of truth, at its most general, has what I take to be 6 main features;

1. Truth-bearer
2. Truthmaker
3. Truth relation
4. Minimal Objectivity
5. Self evidence
6. Holism

With these features in mind, I want to give a final positive argument for a realist notion of truth.

- I. A theory of truth must account for the way we understand and use the truth predicate
- II. The way we use the truth predicate allows for objectivity and mistakes
- III. A realist theory of truth allows for objectivity and mistakes because it is a relation between the world (indifferent to our beliefs) and our beliefs about the world (which can be mistaken)

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<sup>23</sup> Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton University Press, 2010), 44.

IV. A realist notion of truth accounts for our understanding and use of the truth predicate

I hope this chapter has demonstrated that the truth predicate is meaningful, and is made so by a realist notion. I want to continue on with how a realist notion of truth characterizes the value in having and expressing true beliefs.

## CHAPTER TWO:

# THE VALUE OF EXPRESSING AND BELIEVING TRULY

In this chapter, I hope to demonstrate how having and expressing true beliefs is intrinsically and extrinsically valuable. I want to say that it is worth caring about whether our beliefs are true, and I want to say that having and expressing truly partly embodies other valuable aspects of life, such as autonomy.

I want to begin with an example of how expressing true beliefs can be instrumentally valuable. Bernard Williams does a good job of explaining the functional value of having true beliefs through a genealogy. He asks us to think about a basic, early society. One functional value of believing truly illustrated with this genealogical approach is sharing true beliefs through their expression. This is a nonmaterial sort of parallel to the pooling of goods one can look forward to by living in a community.

Let's think about two people that might make up this small, proto-community. There is Tom, who lives on the top of a hill and Lily who lives at the bottom. Lily has a better understanding of what things are like at the bottom of the hill while Tom has a better understanding of goings-on at the top of the hill. If Tom wants to know about the bottom of the hill and Lily about the top, they can form a community where they express to each other true claims about their surroundings. Having true beliefs about their greater surroundings is useful for both Tom and Lily. Tom can learn earlier about the danger of

rising water and Lily can learn earlier about incoming avalanches. Thus, being able to believe truly is one reason that we decide to live in communities. Communities help us believe truly about the world beyond our own direct experience of it, and these beliefs are useful to our flourishing, just as a nutritious meal that is made up from Tom's vegetables and eggs from Lily's chicken helps each to flourish in a way that they might not on their own.

We can take a step back from this genealogical explanation of how believing truly has been useful in the past and think about survival more immediately. We use true beliefs constantly in order to live in the world at all. This is because part of believing truly is understanding the world and one's place in it. To believe something true about the world makes interaction with that bit of the world easier. Our expectations match reality, so to speak. William Alston writes that, "If our interactions with X are guided by true beliefs about X they are much more likely to be successful in attaining the goals of that interaction...than if they are guided by false beliefs."<sup>24</sup> Our actions are much more likely to be rational if our reasons for action are true. Think, for example, of trying to pin the tail on the donkey. If the donkey is in front of us, it is much easier to pin the tail if we are told that. The task becomes much harder if we are told that it is behind us. This is because our expectations do not align with the way the world really is and so our reason for acting, and the action itself, is misguided. We are trying to interact with an untrue version of reality, making the aim of our goals much harder to attain.

This can be explained by the direction of fit between our beliefs and the world. The world forms our beliefs, not the other way around. The world is mostly indifferent to what we believe about it. Believing something about the world does not make it so. Just

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<sup>24</sup> William P. Alston, *A Realist Conception of Truth* (Cornell University Press, 1997), 237.

because I believe that the tooth fairy is real does not mean that she is. Just because someone believes that their partner is cheating does not necessarily make it so. Thus, in order for our interactions in the world to be successful, it is helpful to have true beliefs about the world to base our actions on. To interact with the world successfully, unless one is incredibly randomly lucky, is to partly have and act on true beliefs about the world.

Harry Frankfurt states the instrumental value of truth causally, by stating that;

“When we are engaged in active life, or when we attempt to plan and to manage our various practical affairs, we are undertaking to cope with reality. The outcomes of our efforts- as well as the value to us of those outcomes- will depend, at least in part, on the properties of the real objects and events with which we are dealing. They will depend...on how, given their causally relevant features, they respond to what we do.”<sup>25</sup>

This is to say that there will be consequences to one's actions and what that consequence will be will depend not only on the action taken but also on the way that bit of the world being acted on is, regardless of how we think it is or want it to be. This highlights the fact that we are part of the world in which we live. Our beliefs about what is true affect *how* we interact with the world. The world, then, interacts back in a way. In order to hope for a desired result, one should have at least a true belief to base one's action on.

There is, finally, instrumental value in the way we can use a notion of truth to resolve disputes. There is value in an objective and realist notion of truth in that it allows us to recognize disputes in the first place. The objective nature of true claims, and the realist tactics we use to prove them, allows us to use true claims to convince, to settle disputes, and to change minds in general. If our notion of truth was not objective, we would not have this useful value.

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<sup>25</sup> Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Truth* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2006), 52.

We should also consider the instrumental value of expressing the truth, along with believing truly. It can be very instrumentally useful to tell the truth in attaining other ends. For example, expressing the truth is necessary for building trust between people. Avoiding the truth in expression is also a difficult ordeal. We live in a world indifferent to our beliefs and expressions, indifferent to our wishes. What is the case is likely to be discovered in some way or another. To not mince words, it just seems easier to tell the truth. One need not hide anything, or do much extra work to keep a story straight, so to speak.

There is additional, more traditional instrumental value in expressing truly. I ask my friend to pick up a coffee for me. It is in my best interest for attaining my goal that I express my true beliefs to her about where the coffee shop is located. There are of course many cases where lying and deception can attain one's goal, and we will address these now.

### *THE INSTRUMENTAL DISVALUE OF BELIEVING TRULY*

I hope through these first examples that we have begun to see how having true beliefs can be instrumentally useful in attaining certain ends. With that being said, we can consider an objection to the value of having true beliefs; sometimes believing truly is not instrumentally useful. While there are many instances where believing truly is instrumentally valuable, there are also cases where it can be argued that it is not useful or practical or helpful for attaining other goals and ends for a person to have true beliefs. Think for example of the phrase, *what they don't know can't hurt them*. This is a contentious phrase when applied too widely, since knowing the truth is usually good, but there are situations where this does seem to be the case. For example, it is not useful at all for someone who likes surprise parties to find out beforehand that their friends are

throwing them a surprise party. Having this true belief is antithetical to the goal of having a surprise party thrown for you.

There are also, of course, cases when expressing the truth is not useful for attaining one's goal. For example, let's say that a child's guppy fish dies. The parent of this child may not want to tell the child the truth because doing so would not help them attain their goal of keeping the child happy. The child would be sad if they learned the truth. A *prima facie* reply to this is that it is in the child's ultimate best interest to tell them the truth. The child must learn about the cycle of life, loss, and unfairness at some point. Plus, if the child does find out that her parent's deceived her, she may no longer trust her parents. Despite these replies, though, there are certainly cases where one's immediate goals would be most successfully attained by not telling the truth. Thus, while there are many cases where expressing the truth and believing truly are instrumentally useful, there are also cases where it may not be instrumentally useful at all to do so.

Some philosophers will argue that instrumental value exhausts the value of expressing and believing truly. Stephen Stich, for example, argues that we do not (and should not) care about our beliefs being true. This is so because other beliefs that may or may not be true can be more useful for attaining one's goals, or in his words;

“There is a huge space of possible systems of mental computation and storage whose component states have no truth conditions and thus cannot be true. [...] A much more likely possibility is that in this huge space there are systems that would vastly increase their user's power or happiness or biological fitness, systems that would lead to substantial reductions in the amount of suffering in the universe, and systems that would significantly reduce the possibility that we will bomb ourselves into oblivion along with much of the biosphere.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Stephen P. Stich, *The Fragmentation of Reason: Preface to a Pragmatic Theory of Cognitive Evaluation* (MIT Press, 1993), 118.

All of these are systems, or “domains in which there is neither truth nor falsity.”<sup>27</sup> Stich uses this to argue against the value of ‘truth’. He assumes that the only value believing truly can have is through how it helps us attain other goals.

In light of this objection, I want to demonstrate that the value of believing truly and expressing those beliefs is not exhausted by instrumental value. The value of having and expressing true beliefs does not end with instrumental value. A true belief, I want to say, can be valuable as its own end as well as a way of attaining other ends.

### *TRUTH AS A COGNITIVE VIRTUE*<sup>28</sup>

The non-instrumental value in believing truly can be explained as the a priori aim of belief. Bernard Williams, in his book *Truth and Truthfulness*, states that, “Truth has an internal connection with beliefs and assertions. In a sense, truth figures in that connection as a value.”<sup>29</sup> This is so because to believe something is to believe it as true. The very nature of belief presuppose a notion of realist truth. A belief being false, then, is a failure of that belief; to believe falsely is a mistaken way of believing, since beliefs aim at being true. The same can be said of assertions; “assertions can be assessed for truth, and they would not be assertions if they could not.”<sup>30</sup> An assertion needs a truth value in order to be an assertion, and to assert is to state a fact so if the truth value of that assertion is not true, that is a way that the assertion fails. Thus, the non-instrumental value of having a true belief stems from the inherent aim of beliefs, which is to be true.

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<sup>27</sup> Stephen P. Stich, *The Fragmentation of Reason: Preface to a Pragmatic Theory of Cognitive Evaluation* (MIT Press, 1993), 119.

<sup>28</sup> Stich, 104.

<sup>29</sup> Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton University Press, 2010), 84.

<sup>30</sup> Williams, 84.

Additionally, the very nature of believing requires that one's beliefs be satisfied using a realist notion of truth. This returns us to our talk of belief in the first chapter. Knowing and expressing the truth is inherently valuable in this way *because* it uses a realist notion. To have a belief is to believe that something really is the case. For example, to believe that, 'it is raining outside' is to think that it really is raining outside. To believe 'the cat is on the mat' is to believe that if one looked at the mat, a cat would actually be on it. We can think of this as well when we believe *in* something. When a child believes in the tooth fairy, she believes that there really is a fairy that collects her baby teeth at night. This may not be true, but that aim of the belief is to be true in a realist sense. The tooth fairy *really* exists, the child believes. This, therefore, is a realist notion of satisfaction. To believe something is to believe it is true *in a realist sense*.

The same can be said, I think, for rationality. Believing truly is one of the a priori aims of rationality. Harry Frankfurt states that, "the notions of truth and factuality are indispensable, then, for imbuing the exercise of rationality with meaningful substance. They are indispensable even for understanding the very concept of rationality itself."<sup>31</sup> He argues this because, "to be rational is fundamentally a matter of being appropriately responsive to reasons,"<sup>32</sup> and reasons are facts. We know facts by making true claims about the world. Therefore, to respond appropriately to reasons, to be rational, one must be able to know the relevant facts. In other words, to be rational one must first believe truly in a realist sense.

Thus, because a realist notion of truth is prior to beliefs, and because believing truly is a form of cognition, we can connect a realist notion of truth as a cognitive virtue.

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<sup>31</sup> Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Truth* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2006), 64.

<sup>32</sup> Frankfurt, 63.

It is cognitively valuable to have true beliefs for their own sake. It is an addition that having true beliefs can then help us attain other cognitive and non-cognitive goals as well.

## *THE ACT OF TELLING THE TRUTH*

Another way that we can conceive of the non-instrumental value of telling the truth is through the action of expressing itself instead of the action's consequences.

Expressing truly is a way of respecting the listener's autonomy. We can think of this from a negative approach. To lie to someone is to disrespect them; to not respect them as autonomous agents. When one lies, one tries to force the listener to, "acquire a view of the world that has its source in [the liar's] imagination rather than being directly and reliably grounded in the relevant facts."<sup>33</sup> Autonomy is one's condition of being able to administer one's own affairs.<sup>34</sup> Lying to someone does not respect their condition of being an autonomous agent. It does not respect their right to make decisions freely. A decision is not made freely if it involves manipulation. Lying in particular, then, is an attempt to deceive the listener in their beliefs, which they then use to make decisions. One cannot make an autonomous decision when the affairs they are deliberating on are actually deceptions formed by the will of another agent. All of this, regardless of the actual consequences, disrespects the listener's autonomy. This seems to differ from our other examples of value because the act of lying here is what is disrespectful of one's autonomy. Only by acting truthfully (seeking out what is true and expressing that clearly, and the like) can one respect another's autonomy.

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<sup>33</sup> Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Truth* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2006), 77.

<sup>34</sup> "Home: Oxford English Dictionary," accessed March 5, 2019, <http://www.oed.com/>.

I can argue this in the following way;

- i. Respecting another's autonomy is non-instrumentally valuable
- ii. Respecting another's autonomy entails avoiding manipulating the other in their decision-making process
- iii. Expressing falsely manipulates the listeners beliefs, which they use to make decisions
- iv. Expressing truly is non-instrumentally valuable

It is outside of the scope of this chapter to argue that respecting another's autonomy is non-instrumentally valuable. I will instead attempt to illustrate the fact by stating that we value our autonomy for no other end than having it. Even if given the opportunity to live in a utopia with all of our choices made for us, most of us would feel wronged by living in this utopia. I want this example to appeal to our recognition of autonomy as a non-instrumental value, and in turn I hope one can see that expressing truly is non-instrumentally valuable in the same way. Another quick example of this would be if someone you knew for 10 years suddenly told you that on a whim, she has been lying to you about her name the entire relationship. Nothing about the relationship is necessarily different other than the name of one of the persons in it, but still, you might feel duped or like the relationship is not genuine, even if she assures you that is the only lie she ever told you. Again, I think this thought might bring out the idea that expressing truly is valuable as its own end, regardless of its consequences.

I want to say the same thing of trust. Without the acts of telling the truth or even knowing the truth, these concepts have no substance. Just as how the concept of respecting another's autonomy is ruined by lying, the same can be said of trust. Trust, in one important sense of the word, requires that the truth be told between the trusting parties. When one party lies to the other, this does not respect the sense of trust built between the two parties.

Through these examples, I want to make clear that without expressing realist truth, we do not respect other important values such as autonomy and trust.

### *REALIZING THE VALUE OF EXPRESSING TRULY*

Finally, I want to provide some examples of how we act when we *do* recognize the value of expressing the truth. I hope these examples show the self evident importance of believing and expressing truly that critics ignore as unimportant.

The non-instrumental value in believing truly is illustrated when people hold onto their beliefs even in the face of adversity. When they continue to hold and express truly even if they are being persecuted for those exact beliefs. We hold onto them because we believe them to be true, not because it is necessarily useful for us to do so. We hold onto them even if the consequences of holding that belief are harmful. For example, a civil rights activist in 1966 holds onto the belief of racial equality and expresses that belief through non-violent protest. This expression is dangerous for the activist. The activist could be arrested, tear gassed, or physically beaten for holding that belief, but the activist still holds that belief, even though it may be easier to give up on it at the moment, even if they think there is nothing to gain from it. Part of the reason the activist still holds that belief is because they believe it to be true.

We also illustrate our recognition of the value of having or believing truly when we turn the truth predicate into a compliment. For example, words such as genuine, faithful, legitimate, authentic, pure and the like. All of these tend to have positive connotations and all seem to derive their meaning from the truth predicate. At times these words are even replaced with the truth predicate. For example, when one says that someone is a true friend, one means that the friend is a good one in some way or another.

We also call something genuine, or say that it is faithful; when a movie is true to the book it was adapted from. These ways that we describe valuable things are connected to the ways that expressing and believing truly are valuable, both instrumentally and non-instrumentally. I think this second nature recognition of the value in expressing and believing truly is something.

Finally, I want to give an example to help usher us into the next chapter on politics. I want to illustrate the value of a realist notion of truth in working to resolve disagreements. I am going to recall an example of the time I found the truth predicate to be of extreme instrumental value, although the consequences of that particular use of the truth predicate didn't do much, I think that it has the potential to.

The example is well known by now. At the first official press briefing during Trump's presidency, his Press Secretary at the time, Sean Spicer, asserted a false claim about the crowd size at the inauguration. When I heard the claim on TV, my first reaction was to simply say to the screen, 'that's not true!' I found this simple act to be very useful. In simply denying his claim, I began to fight for the truth. While my words did not reach Sean Spicer, this sort of disagreement about what is the case using a realist notion could have very useful consequences in certain situations. By bringing in the idea of truth or falsity into the conversation, we begin to realize that we value true claims over false ones. When we are told a claim is false, we are less willing to take it seriously. When we know it to be false, we do not believe it at all, by virtue of what a belief is.

This disagreement about what is the case, and this recourse to the world we share in common, is a useful aspect about a realist notion of truth. A realist notion allows us to disagree with one another and gives us an avenue to begin to methodically resolve that disagreement.

## *CONCLUSION*

To bring this section to a close, I want to recap the important ways in which expressing and believing truly, using a realist notion of truth, can be both useful and valuable for their own sake. Even when believing and expressing truly are not instrumentally valuable, the nature of belief presupposes a notion of truth. A belief attempts to be true and in failing to be so, fails as a belief. Expressing truly is valuable for itself as an act. To express truly is to respect another's autonomy, or the trust built between the speaker and the listener. The value we recognize in being truthful is then reflected in the ways we use the truth predicate itself and its derivations. There are cases where we demonstrate our respect for the value of believing and expressing truly and should do so, when it is and even when it is not useful.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### POLITICS AND TRUTHFULNESS

In this chapter, I hope to demonstrate that democracy conceptually embodies seeking and expressing true claims relevant to political discourse. I also hope to illustrate how seeking and believing truly are necessary political virtues for successful democratic action. The claims made in this chapter may have applications to other political systems but that is beyond the scope of this project.

#### *IN WHAT WAYS IS TRUTHFULNESS IN DANGER?*

I first want to address a concern I introduced at the start of this paper; the view that politics, particularly contemporary democratic discourse, is ‘post-truth.’

Hannah Arendt, in her essay *Truth and Politics*, asks about the “injury political power is capable of inflicting upon truth?”<sup>35</sup> I want to unpack what this question is implying. This line of questioning seems to misconstrue the role a notion of truth plays in political discourse and action. First, I want to say that truth itself is never in danger from political action or discourse. What is true is true regardless of who is in power and regardless of what they say or do. To comment on an example Arendt uses, Germany will always have invaded Belgium in 1914.<sup>36</sup> Even if Germany had won the war and taught in

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<sup>35</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” February 18, 1967, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1967/02/25/truth-and-politics>.

<sup>36</sup> Arendt.

all their textbooks that Belgium invaded Germany, even if all those who remembered what was the case died and there was no one left to dissent against this statement made by those in power, it would still be a false statement. Remember that what is true in a realist sense is true regardless of what people, even those in positions of power and authority, think of it. What is true is never in danger of losing the property of being true.

What *is* in danger, then, seems to be 1) what we come to believe and 2) our respect for truthfulness in political discourse and decision making. Instead of putting it in terms of the truth itself, the danger seems to be what the abuse of power can do to the process of seeking out what is true and the respect we have for the act of expressing what is true. The *value* in finding and expressing what is true itself is never tarnished. Believing truly, as we established in our last chapter, is valuable for itself. It is our perception and recognition of this value that is in danger. The worry with political abuse is that the perceived value of truthfulness and the possibility of acting truthfully may be in danger. When persons in power disregard the importance of finding and expressing true assertions, the public can lose sight of the importance as well. The project of parsing the true from the less true can seem hopeless and pointless when one is surrounded by claims that disregard the aim of asserting truly. The term ‘post-truth politics’ needs this sort of clarification as well.

We are never post-truth. The nature of beliefs and assertions ensures this. The very notion of assertions and beliefs require a notion of truth, so as long as we are thinking, we involve the notion of truth. What ‘post-truth politics’ really gestures at, I want to say, is a disregard for truthfulness (the seeking out of, vetting for, and expressing clearly true beliefs). Politics being post-truth means that political discussion is primarily and exclusively aimed at something other than being true in a realist sense which is the

only meaningful sense of the truth predicate. We are not in danger of being post-truth but rather in danger of being post-truthfulness. What I want to argue onwards is that when we accept politics as being post-truthfulness, even implicitly by disregarding the virtues of truthfulness, we delegitimize our political actions as being democratic. In order to demonstrate this, I will first delineate some important features of democracy as they pertain to truthfulness.

### *A DEFINITION OF DEMOCRACY*

In order to demonstrate the legitimizing role truthfulness plays in democratic discourse, I will consider conceptions of what makes democracies legitimate and from there apply those conceptions to democratic discourse. To do this, I will first define democracy and give some illustrations of how truthfulness plays an instrumental role in democratic action. I hope this will lead us well into a discussion of the non-instrumental and formative value truthfulness plays in democracy.

Quite loosely, we can define democracy as a form of government that involves in the decision-making process those about whom the decisions are being made. There are other nuances necessary and contended over for what makes a democracy justified, but most of those nuances are best considered in depth in another paper.

Democracy is the form American politics purports to take; we elect those in political power under the conviction that they will represent us and our desires in political decision making. This claim, of course, is also much contended over given that our democracy is representative, which some argue is not truly democratic. There is also contention over that claim given the way our democracy is practiced, which again some would argue is not really democratic. This, again, is a vitally important and interesting

topic but is unfortunately outside of the scope of this project. Regardless, I will be focusing on democracy in this chapter, for the purposes of this project. When I refer to politics, unless otherwise specified, it is safe for the reader to assume that I am referring to a democracy, including our (ideal) system in the US.

I now want to consider the aims of democratic politics relevant to this paper. One aim of political action is to make decisions regarding the well-being of those being governed.<sup>37</sup> Part of this aim is collaborative between the politician and the people represented.<sup>38</sup> In our democracy in the US, for example, citizens vote for the politician that they believe will make the best decision based on their behalf. They decide who and what to vote for partly through the assertions that candidates make. A requirement of this system is a sense of trust. One should be able to trust elected officials to perform certain political virtues. One of these political virtues, I want to say, is expressing the truth.

The question now becomes how is truthfulness a political virtue? Why must politicians be truthful at all? Why is it necessary that they, to their fullest ability, seek and express truly? Concerns of this sort become vital in the aftermath of thinkers such as Arendt, who states in “Truth and Politics” that “truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other. No one as far as I know has ever encountered truthfulness among the political virtues.”<sup>39</sup> She asks, as I want to ask, is “the very essence of power to be deceitful?”<sup>40</sup> Why is it that politicians avoid truthfulness? And should we hold them accountable for that, or is truthfulness not important in democratic political discourse?

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<sup>37</sup> John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples: With “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited”* (Harvard University Press, 2001), 132.

<sup>38</sup> Politician here meaning, very loosely, a person who holds official sway within political discourse.

<sup>39</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” February 18, 1967, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1967/02/25/truth-and-politics>.

<sup>40</sup> Arendt.

## *THE INSTRUMENTAL VALUE OF BELIEVING TRULY*

I want to begin answering these questions by considering first the fundamental instrumental value that believing truly plays within political discourse. First, there is the responsibility of a politician to affect the world with their actions to the benefit of those they govern. As we discussed in our last chapter, we are more likely to attain our goals if we have true beliefs about the bit of the world we are trying to affect. Jeremy Elkins, in his collection, *Truth and Democracy* states that,

“It is hard to maintain that it makes no difference how attentive we are to the specific conditions of the world that we seek to affect, or that the quality of the decisions that we make is wholly unrelated to the strength of the evidence behind them and the care of the analysis underlying them.”<sup>41</sup>

When trying to have a specific effect on the world, first having an accurate idea of what the world is like seems to be a prerequisite. If a decision is made on a false understanding of the world, the decision is less likely to be successful.<sup>42</sup> Thus, in order to attain any sort of aim regarding even the most basic of political actions, having a realist notion of truth is necessary.

A second aim of democracy is to represent those that one governs. This is true even outside of a strictly representative democracy. Even when considering the opinions of others in a casual setting, their opinions are represented to us. Hannah Arendt explains this representational process as; “I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are

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<sup>41</sup> Jeremy Elkins and Andrew Norris, *Truth and Democracy* (Philadelphia, UNITED STATES: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 2.

<sup>42</sup> For more on this, return to our talk of instrumental value in the second chapter.

absent; that is, I represent them.”<sup>43</sup> To represent someone is, in part, to seek out the relevant true claims about their desires and needs. For example, when deciding on statewide standardized test policies, part of the duty of the politician is to listen to the true accounts from students, teachers, parents, and the like. Without these true claims, the representative would not be able to make a legitimate democratic decision, for the people’s political input would be ignored. In this way, a realist notion of believing truly is necessary for political action.

I now want to transition away from merely believing truly and consider the non-instrumental democratic value of expressing truly.

### *THE NON-INSTRUMENTAL VALUE OF EXPRESSING TRULY*

In order to understand the non-instrumental value of truthfulness in democratic discourse, I want to consider how truthfulness is characterized through democracy. I want to ask; what are the essential features of democracy? What features would democracy no longer be itself without? Another way to go about answering this latter question can be found within the literature of political philosophy; what makes a democracy legitimate?

Political philosophers such as John Rawls have deliberated over what sort of features are necessary for political legitimacy. In this paper, I want to focus on the kinds of features that must be instantiated in democracy in order for it to be legitimate. It seems that figuring out what those features are involves looking at the aims of democracy.

Philosopher Joshua Cohen, in his essay *Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy*

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<sup>43</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” February 18, 1967, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1967/02/25/truth-and-politics>.

attempts to delineate a specific theory of deliberative democracy based on a Rawlsian view of political legitimation. I am not focusing on his paper, or Rawl's exact notion of justice as fairness, but I think that one of the points Cohen establishes is a useful way to think about the legitimizing functions of democracy in general. He states that his theory, "accounts for the common view that the notion of democratic association is tied to notions of autonomy and the common good."<sup>44</sup>

I take these two features, a respect for autonomy and a regard and aim at the common good, to be fundamental democratic principles. In other words, without these two goals in mind, a political system could not be a democracy. I want to first focus on the aim of respecting the autonomy of citizens as a fundamental aim of democracy.

In order to respect another's autonomy, as we illustrated in the previous chapter, one must express truly to the other person. This is particularly true in democratic discourse. Democratic decisions, in order to be legitimately democratic, must be made freely. Consider a democracy that threatens its citizens if they vote in a certain way. The citizens may make a decision, but that decision is not freely made because of manipulation involved. The same can be said for a decision made on false pretenses.

The argument for this can be delineated as follows:

- I. A fundamental principle of democracy is respecting the autonomy of citizens
- II. The act of telling the truth is a form of respecting another's autonomy
- III. Truth telling is a functioning principle of democracy

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<sup>44</sup> James Bohman and William Rehg, eds., *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1997).

We will address the questions begged by this argument after we fully hash out what it means. I hope that the following anti-tyranny argument will help us do this.

### *THE ANTI-TYRANNY ARGUMENT*

Another way we can go about illustrating the foundational nature of truthfulness in democracy is by hashing out the relationship between citizens and those who officially make political decisions. Williams expands on how the relationship between an elected official and the people or person being represented can become tarnished by the expression of a less-than-true or misleading claim. Simply put, the trust we need from an elected official is greater than the trust we need from others because of the responsibilities and authority they hold as elected officials. These responsibilities are, in a sense, what it is to be in a government. In another sense, to be an elected official is to have some sort of authority over those who trust you. Williams here states, in the persona of an elected official that, “I lead the hearer to rely on what I say, when she has good reason to do so.”<sup>45</sup> This good reason is that he has been elected to represent her. He has been put in a position, let us say, through a representative democracy that implies trust between himself as a representative and those that he represents. When he tells a falsehood of any kind “I abuse the relationship...even if it is for good reasons of concern for her, I do not give her a chance, in this particular respect, to form her own reactions to the facts (as I suppose them to be), something that I would give her if I spoke,” truly<sup>46</sup>. For example, when someone is badly injured and the recovery is going to be long and arduous, the doctor may tell the patient a different story about the recovery, one that puts

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<sup>45</sup> Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton University Press, 2010), 118.

<sup>46</sup> Williams, 118.

it in an untrue light but makes it more palatable. This may be in the patient's best interest but it does not allow the patient the chance to make an autonomous decision. Instead, the patient (or person being represented) gets "a picture of the world which is a product of my will. Replacing the world in its impact on her by my will, I put her, to that extent, in my power and so take away...her freedom."<sup>47</sup> In lying, one disrespects the other's autonomy. The person, or patient in my example, is not making a decision based on the truth of the matter but rather is making a decision based on the wishes of the person lying. The person lying makes a statement in order to get what they want (regardless of if this want is morally good or bad) and, thus, deceives the person and does not respect their autonomy.

This type of deceit negates the point of a democracy. There is no protection or representation of freedom through the actions of a politician if the politician is acting on decisions made by voters who are being misled about the situation at hand. It might be *easier* for politicians and government officials to express a falsehood to the people they govern, in one way or another, but this shortcut works to rid the government of part of its legitimate authority. It breaks one of the commitments made between those being governed and those governing in a democracy which is the sense of trust between the two.

Of course, it is in the voters' duty to go about seeking and expressing the truth as well, and holding those in power accountable, but this should not fall on the person being represented alone.

This requirement that a legitimate democratic claim be true seems to be the case because of what being in a democracy entails. What do we ultimately want from the

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<sup>47</sup> Williams, 118.

politicians that serve us in a democracy? Very simply, the aim of a democracy is first and foremost the general good.<sup>48</sup> This aim of the general good in a democracy is ideally achieved through the representation, in some way or another, of those being governed in the decision-making process. Additionally, a fundamental end for democracy that this paper focuses on is a respect for liberty. We would not consider a system where those represented are forced to vote a certain way by those in power a democracy at all, let alone a legitimate one. A requirement of democracy is that those who vote for decisions can choose freely who and what to vote for. This is where truthfulness being expressed becomes a functioning principle for democracy. It seems that what makes a democratic decision legitimate is partly that it is made autonomously. One cannot make a legitimate decision then if one is being misled about the relevant facts about the matter at hand. By being misled, the person is no longer making a decision on their own. They are instead making a decision partly based on the reasoning of the person misleading them. Thus, legitimate democratic decisions are instantiated by a notion of truthfulness.

Williams focuses on the politician's unique responsibility to tell the truth. To do this he introduces an anti-tyranny argument that gives an answer to the question, 'should politicians be expected to tell the truth, given their specific position in society?' His answer is a resounding yes. The argument relies on the unique responsibilities and authority that politicians hold in connection to the citizens that they represent. The argument is as follows;

- I. Because of their peculiar powers and opportunities, governments are disposed to commit illegitimate actions which they will wish to conceal
- II. It is in the citizen's interest that these be checked
- III. These actions cannot be checked without true claims relevant to political discourse

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<sup>48</sup> Jeremy Elkins and Andrew Norris, *Truth and Democracy* (Philadelphia, UNITED STATES: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 28.

#### IV. True claims relevant to political discourse should be available to all the potentially tyrannized

The idea behind this argument is that the concealment of goings-on can slide easily into the arbitrary use of power in a tyrannical sense. This can happen because politicians have access to what is true, particularly in the case of political decision making, and they also have the authority to back the decisions they make. Thus, elected officials have a dangerous ability to hide actions that could affect those who they govern. The use of power here can become arbitrary because there is no one to check it outside of the regime in power. It is no longer legitimized through the voices of those represented. Thus, it is in the people's best interest to demand truthfulness from those in power, to ensure that decisions are being made legitimately instead of arbitrarily. Without this legitimization through the expression of what is the case, democracy can be turned into tyranny.

These arguments for truthfulness do beg questions when other principles of democracy are considered, though. For example, what if the greater good requires the expression of a falsehood in political discourse? We can return to our non-political example of a doctor lying to a patient about the difficulty and length of their recovery. This lie, we can say, was necessary for the best interests of the patient. How do we balance this instrumental and non-instrumental value when they conflict with one another?

One answer could be a mixed conception of democratic legitimacy. This conception considers instrumental and non-instrumental values when considering the features necessary for a democracy to be legitimate. Jürgen Habermas explains this sort of conception by stating that, "deliberative politics acquires its legitimating force from the discursive structure of an opinion- and will-formation that can fulfill its socially

integrative function only because citizens expect its results to have a reasonable *quality*.”<sup>49</sup> This conception of legitimacy takes into account both the necessity of respect for autonomy in legitimate democratic discussion but also democracy’s aim of affecting the world toward a common good. The account is neither absolutist about truth telling nor consequentialist about democratic legitimacy, but still takes both into account. The balance between the two is for another project. What I do want to say is that truthfulness is a functioning principle of democracy, in some capacity or another.

### *BULLSHIT, A KIND OF POLITICAL FALSEHOOD*

There are, of course, many ways a politician can go about not expressing the truth. One of these ways, characterized by Harry Frankfurt, is *bullshit*. I want to hash out this form of falsehood because of the nuances it captures about political dialogue.

Bullshit is defined as speech that is “unconnected to a concern with the truth.”<sup>50</sup> He describes a statement of *bullshit* as one that “is not germane to the enterprise of describing reality.”<sup>51</sup> Frankfurt argues that bullshit, in its intention and semantics, is not an outright lie. One is not trying to merely hide the way the world is. Instead, one is missing the mark of being true in a way that is much less carefully related to truth conditions.

I believe that some instances of politicians expressing claims that are less than fully true are instances of bullshit. This can happen when the concern for expressing and finding the truth is replaced with a concern for accruing power, of getting what one

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<sup>49</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 304.

<sup>50</sup> Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton University Press, 2009), 30.

<sup>51</sup> Frankfurt, 30.

wants. This differs from a politician lying because the less than true statement made in this case is not necessarily made to be *believed* by the listeners, but rather it is meant to do something else either to the person listening or for the person speaking. It could be made to make the speaker look good, powerful, or smart in the eyes of the audience. It could be made to buy time for the speaker or to turn the line of questioning away from the subject at hand.<sup>52</sup><sup>53</sup> There are all sorts of uses for misleading, bullshit statements that have little to do with a “regard for how things really are.”<sup>54</sup>

We can make a non-political parallel here. A scientist publishes a false study that poses to confirm that stem cell research has cured the effects of spinal cord injury in rats, even though no such findings were discovered. One of the reasons the scientist may have published this false study may have been in order to get more funding, to gain recognition in the scientific community, or some other power inflating reason. The same can be said for reasons that politicians spread falsehoods; deceiving others can be helpful in getting what one wants.

Frankfurt’s description of bullshit illuminates some of the things going on with the spread of political falsehoods. He says that someone making a bullshit statement, “offers a description of a certain state of affairs without genuinely submitting to the constraints which the endeavor to provide an accurate representation of reality

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<sup>52</sup> Mike Pence said about an unfounded claim of Donald Trump’s that; “it’s his right to express his opinion as president-elect of the United States. I think one of the things that’s refreshing about our president-elect and one of the reasons why I think he made such an incredible connection with people all across this country is because he tells you what’s on his mind”<sup>52</sup> This explanation gives us no indication of whether the claim made by Trump was true, whether it is even a belief that Trump holds, or if it is bullshit. It of course might not be bullshit, but we are left with little recourse from the source to figure it out.

<sup>53</sup> David Smith, “Donald Trump Rails against China as Team Runs Damage Control over Taiwan,” *The Guardian*, December 5, 2016, sec. US news.

<sup>54</sup> Frankfurt, 30.

imposes.”<sup>55</sup> The fault of a bullshitter is “not that she fails to get things right, but that she is not even trying.”<sup>56</sup> Frankfurt states that there is a semantic difference between outright lying and bullshitting, which is that the bullshitter’s statement “is grounded neither in a belief that it is true nor, as a lie must be, in a belief that it is not true.”<sup>57</sup> Rather, there is no thought put into the truth value of the assertion being made by the bullshitter. This is a problem because assertions are claims to being true. An assertion is the expression of a belief, which is always the belief that something is the case; there is always the presupposition that the belief is true. When someone does not perform the virtue of truthfulness that is attempting to figure out what is true before making a claim, particularly a politician who we trust to assert truly, they are disrespecting the value of expressing and believing truly. They are also misleading the audience who goes into democratic discourse with a level of trust that is being broken. An audience takes an assertion to be a true statement, so when the work has not been done to vet that statement for accuracy (for whatever reason) there is a problem.

The problem is that the audience has no way of making an autonomous decision regarding the statement made. Regardless of why the statement is misleading, the audience *is* misled. To make a decision based on information that is not true would be to make a decision within the hands of whoever misled you.

The problem also seems to be that a politician who is bullshitting is not holding themselves accountable to what is true. This poses a problem in their own judgement. We want a politician to act based on the facts of the world. We want them to have a (positive) effect on the world and part of that requires taking into account where we are and where

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<sup>55</sup> Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton University Press, 2009), 32.

<sup>56</sup> Frankfurt, 32.

<sup>57</sup> Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton University Press, 2009), 32.

it is now possible that we go. When someone spouts bullshit, it shows a disregard for expressing truly at the least, and for seeking out what is true at the worst. It implies that the speaker is cognitively disconnected from reality. This is not something we want from someone who should be able to successfully interact with the world as one of their main responsibilities.

This definition of bullshit serves us well because it does not let the ignorant off of the hook. It makes salient the importance of seeking out what is true and all the virtuous actions that go along with that. One cannot just attempt to sincerely express the truth, one must also do their best to vet their claims for accuracy as well by looking beyond the claim itself. Only then can one avoid bullshit.

## *OBJECTIONS TO A REALIST NOTION OF TRUTH IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE*

With this in mind, we can now face some critiques regarding a realist notion of truth in democratic discourse. One of these critiques is that bullshit is endemic in political discourse, that bullshit in fact embodies democratic discourse. This critique stems from the idea that democratic politics requires that claims be made with aims other than truthfulness in mind, or that true claims in politics are not realist claims. For example, a candidate running for office makes assertions that are relevant to the concerns of the group that might vote for her. Her claims are made, in part, to convince people to vote for her. This tactic of using claims within power structures to convince others seems to be a requirement of democratic action. Under this view, true claims in a realist sense are excluded from certain political aims. What must be kept in mind, though, is that true claims can be made with other purposes in mind as well. An assertion must primarily aim

to be true, as an assertion, but speech acts can aim at other ends as well. For example, I can state truly that it is raining outside, when it is actually raining outside, in hopes that someone inside will lend me their umbrella. The claim is true, but it also has another end along with its aim of being true. The same can be said for our political candidate. Her claims at rallies and debates may be said with the goal of being elected in mind, but as assertions, specifically ones made as a legitimate democratic claims, they must primarily aim at being true in a realist sense. Otherwise, they are failed assertions and are not true in any meaningful way. The truth of the claim cannot be excluded by other purposes the speech act may serve while still being a legitimate democratic assertion. But the claim *can* still be a legitimate democratic claim of it is aimed at being true, amongst other ends.

Another objection comes from Arendt, who states that,

“The trouble is that factual truth, like all other truth, peremptorily claims to be acknowledged and precludes debate, and debate constitutes the very essence of political life. The modes of thought and communication that deal with truth, if seen from the political perspective, are necessarily domineering; they don’t take into account other people’s opinions, and taking these into account is the hallmark of all strictly political thinking.”<sup>58</sup>

Here, Arendt claims that the hallmark of political thinking is debating what is the case. This could mean a few things. First, it could mean that once we are given a true claim, political discussion is made null. Political discussion must primarily be about opinions, and opinions are made null by true claims. This seems off though, doesn’t it? First, we are not given true claims; they are not dropped down to us

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<sup>58</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” February 18, 1967, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1967/02/25/truth-and-politics>.

from the sky. Second, this conception seems to misconstrue how true claims work in political discourse.

First, it misconstrues the *role* that true claims play in political discourse. Political debates occur over what is perceived as true, of course, and what is said during these sort of debates does not, in fact, have any bearing on what is actually true or false. But true claims play another role within political debate. They also serve as reasons for making one decision over another. Instead of merely debating over what is the case, much of political discourse is about what decision to make, given this or that true claim about the world. Thus, true claims do not preclude democratic discourse. Instead, true claims are *necessary* for political discourse. We could also return to our first and second chapters and rehash the fact that assertions at all require a notion of truth. If we precluded notions of truth from democratic discourse, we would also need to preclude all assertions and beliefs as well, which would not bode well for the possibility of any discussion, let alone political discourse.

A final objection to the role of true claims in political discourse occurs when we turn away from a realist notion of truth. One objection stated against the importance of a notion of truth in political discourse is that, the “attention to [truth]...is said to be unnecessary, unhelpful, and even pernicious in its effects on political life.”<sup>59</sup> For this view, I will focus on the possible pernicious effects of a notion of truth in politics. One of these effects is that reverence for true claims in general has, “at times, in intention or effect, unduly narrowed the range of voices, ideas, and perspectives- that claims to truth-knowledge have, in short, had their victims- is undeniable.”<sup>60</sup> In other words, a reverence

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<sup>59</sup> Jeremy Elkins and Andrew Norris, *Truth and Democracy* (Philadelphia, UNITED STATES: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 51.

<sup>60</sup> Jeremy Elkins and Andrew Norris, 26.

for true claims in political discourse can end up marginalize voices that are necessary to legitimate democratic discourse. These silenced voices often include those who are underrepresented and oppressed by political systems in the first place. Part of this, I want to say, stems from a mistaken notion of truth that is tainted by racism, classism, disenfranchisement and the like.

Part of this possible rejection of other voices comes from a rejection of a realist notion of truth, and in turn a rejection of pluralism. When one has in mind an absolute notion of truth instead of a realist notion, there can be a false justification in denying the expression of claims that disagree with what is perceived as absolutely true. This is a misconception of the kind of true propositions politics concerns itself with, though. This absolute notion, as we mentioned in the first chapter, is meaningless for it is not relative to the world. It is not minimally objective through reference to the world and so it is not a meaningful notion of truth.

By requiring that political discourse use certain knowledge of what is true, we preclude a meaningful notion of truth from being used. With that being said, a realist notion of truth actually requires the expression of true claims from *all* those represented. We can return to the necessity of believing truly in representing. In order to understand a certain state of affairs, particularly a complex political state of affairs, one must see it from different perspectives. Thus, a notion of truth in political discourse involves taking into account true claims made by those who are part of the democracy, those who decisions are being made about, including (and maybe particularly) marginalized voices.

This concern, I think, strengthens the case for of a realist notion of truth. A realist notion of truth is indifferent, semantically, to the opinions of those in power. What we are convinced to believe is true may be affected by manipulation, but that does not make the

claim proposed *true*. In other words, our epistemological tactics regarding what is true can be tarnished but what is true is true regardless of what we think about it. This is relevant when we think about the false justifications colonial powers used to against colonized nations. Part of this attempted justification was an appeal to a non-realist notion of truth. The claims certain colonial powers presented as true were in fact misleading, or out rightly false, according to a realist notion. The aim of the claims made by colonial powers were economic, at the expense of being true.<sup>61</sup> Sylvia Wynter, a decolonial philosopher and Jamaican novelist, in *The Pope Must have Been Drunk The King of Castile a Madman: Culture as Actuality, and the Caribbean Rethinking of Man* challenges, “the ostensibly supracultural and therefore value-free nature of the ‘objective knowledge’ of our present episteme.”<sup>62</sup> I think that this worry is a vital concern to keep in mind. The abuse of the truth predicate in political discourse not only delegitimizes democratic action but it can also cause material harm.

I think the introduction of a realist notion of truth can help with this worry though. In a realist sense, the justifications that colonial powers used were never true. They were touted as true, but they were not legitimate reasons for action, their truth value being just one of the reasons that they were not legitimate. Their “objective knowledge” was a misuse of the term objective. It was, at best, a case of bullshit.

Finally, another reason that we should be using a realist notion of truth above others is that without a realist notion of truth grounding us, there can be no discussion

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<sup>61</sup> Wynter, Sylvia. “*The Pope Must Have Been Drunk The King of Castile a Madman: Culture as Actuality, and the Caribbean Rethinking Modernity.*” In *Reordering of Culture: Latin American, The Caribbean and Canada in the Hood*, edited by Ruprecht Alvina and Taiana Cecilia (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995), 22.

<sup>62</sup> Wynter, 30.

between those who disagree with one another. A false statement can no longer be disagreed with if the criteria for what is true is no longer made objective by the world we live in, in common. This disagreement about what is right and what is mistaken is a key component of democracy, just as discussion between people is. Without a realist notion, at every point of contention there is no hope for recognizing difference, let alone resolving it.

### *WHAT'S LEFT*

With all of this being said, it seems important to notice where believing and expressing truly leaves off in politics. Legitimate democratic action requires more than just believing and expressing truly. Democratic actions requires an entire set of sensibilities that are best explored in another paper. What I want to say about democratic actions at the very least is that the expressing truly to all those involved in democracy is a prerequisite to any action taken in a democracy to be legitimate.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

# POLITICAL SPINS AND HOW A REALIST NOTION OF TRUTH CAN HELP

Now that we have an understanding of expressing truly as a political virtue, I want to explore the ways in which truthfulness can still be misconstrued in democratic discourse. This chapter will focus on the interpretive nature of certain kinds of political discourse. This interpretive nature works to complicate the act of parsing the true from the false in political discourse. When political discourse turns into the art of interpretation, the value and perceived possibility of believing and expressing truly can appear muddled.

Let us begin by stating that interpretation is a form of cognition. Making this clear will be important later in this chapter when dealing with objections to true interpretations. Taylor describes interpretation as, “an attempt to make clear, to make sense of, an object of study.”<sup>63</sup> To put this in more cognitive language, interpretation is the process of attempting to discover meaning in the world we live in. Part of the process of encountering the world we live in is encountering an *understanding* of that world. To do this, we form narratives that help make clear to us the sense of the world we encounter. When we encounter something, we begin to understand it as part of that narrative. For example, something as simple as seeing a new animal for the first time. In labeling

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<sup>63</sup> Charles Taylor and Taylor Charles, *Philosophical Papers: Volume 2, Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 15.

something one sees as an animal, one works to make sense of that thing using their past understanding of the world.

This idea of using our past knowledge to vet new experiences might at first glance imply a coherence notion of truth because of the role coherence plays in how we shape interpretations. However, just because we shape interpretations through cognitive coherence does not mean that they are true by virtue of their coherence. In other words, an interpretation can be shaped falsely. It can be about a misconstrued perception or it can be made sense of through a false understanding. An interpretation is not true because it has been shaped through our past understanding. Rather, that attempt to understand the world through our past understanding is merely what an interpretation is. Our attempts at understanding the world can of course be mistaken. We can tell ourselves a narrative that is not true about the bit of the world we are interpreting, or we can mistakenly perceive the bit of the world in the first place. In the rest of this chapter, I hope to show how an interpretation can be more or less true under a realist notion of truth.

I will start by hashing out how our past understanding shapes the way we understand things. Our current understanding of the world seems to be made up of cognitive work we have done in the past. It is made up of, in part, things we have been told, things we have picked up on, and the contexts we have lived within. We cannot understand the world without this sort of interpretive nature. To understand the world is to be able to understand what things in the world *mean*, which requires interpretation. With that being said, this sort of background knowledge that informs our interpretations are why they can vary so wildly between people. We all live different lives, come from different cultural, religious, racial, and generational backgrounds and, thus, have different

understandings of the world which affect what we end up believing or not believing. Of course, the meaning that we extrapolate from these experiences will be different.

Think, for example, of the classic 1976 horror movie, *Carrie*. The title character is a sheltered teenage girl raised by her religious zealot of a mother. Carrie gets her period for the first time in her school's locker room, surrounded by classmates whose understanding of the world, we can assume, is shaped through lens of their 1970's American public-school education. Her classmates interpret the period as a normal physical effect of going through puberty. Carrie, on the other hand, only has the knowledge of blood leading to death to work with and so interprets this bleeding as a fatal injury. Likewise, Carrie's mother understands the world as borne by and for God and interprets the blood as a punishment for sinning. These interpretations are incompatible with one another. One cannot hold more than one at the same time and still make sense of the event. I want to say these interpretations fall on the gradient between true and false, some being more true than the others. The same can be said of the background knowledge that led to these beliefs. There would need to be meaning-changing revisions to these different belief systems if one were to hold them all at the same time and not contradict them self. Thus, some of the parties involved in this example must be mistaken. Someone's belief about Carrie's period must be false. What we can extrapolate from this example is that the way one understands the world may not be true and so the interpretations one derives from that understanding may not be true either.

## *POLITICS AND THE ART OF INTERPRETATION*

Before we get to the crux of the issue, I must also establish my claim that political discourse is partly an art of interpretation. By this claim I mean that part of political discourse involves interpreting intensional content and expressing those interpretations as reasons for action. Those involved in political discourse must evaluate the meaning of intensional claims in order to first understand them and then use that understanding in order to make a decision about that bit of the world. For example, a voter must evaluate an intensional claim made by a presidential candidate for meaning and based on that evaluation decide how to vote in the election. In another sense, a politician may interpret the constitution for meaning when deciding to back a new law or not.

Despite these differences between the way we evaluate extensional claims and intensional claims, I want to say that some interpretations are more true than others. I want to show that the truth predicate is univocal in that it means the same thing for intensional claims as it does for extensional ones. In other words, it means the same thing for scientific claims as it does for political statements about intensional content. We can evaluate the *meaning* of both intensional and extensional claim for truth or falsity. The question then is how can we apply a realist notion of truth to interpretations? Or as Brice Wachterhauser asks, “how should those of us who accept the inescapability of interpretation think about truth?”<sup>64</sup> It seems antithetical to political discourse to preclude intensional content, so how do we reconcile interpretations with functioning principle of truthfulness inherent in democracy? Interpretation does seem inevitable in political

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<sup>64</sup> Brice Wachterhauser, *Hermeneutics and Truth* (Northwestern University Press, 1994), 3.

discourse, but this does not condemn political discourse from being more or less true. I want to show this possibility in light of three critiques.

## *INTERPRETATION'S SUPPOSED INCOMPATIBILITY WITH TRUTH VALUE*

The three main objections to interpretations being evaluable for truth value seem to be the following. The first (1) is that interpretations are manipulations of reality, and so cannot be evaluated for realist truth or falsity. The second (2) critique is that our cultural understandings shape our world(s), and so we have no world in common to base realist truth on. The third (3) critique is a step less radical than the second critique but based on the same framework; that because interpretations are the products of differing cultural understandings and because we cannot label cultural understandings as true or false, all interpretations are either of equal or of no truth value. These last two critiques are conceptual and cultural relativism. All three of these critiques conclude with interpretations being incompatible with a realist notion of truth.

These objections become problematic for the expression of truth in politics because in denying the possibility of interpretations being true or false, we in turn deny the ability of being true or false to a large part of political discourse. This problem is exemplified by politicians when they specifically 'spin' facts to work in their favor. An attempt to justify this manipulative 'interpretation' is by positing that interpretations cannot be evaluated using a realist notion of truth and so a (false) spin is the same as positing a true interpretation. This seems to be an attempt at finding a loophole for truthful political discourse, since an interpretation supposedly cannot be true or false. Thus, a political spin of the facts does not need the same vetting that a true claim would.

According to this view, all interpretations are either true or false, depending on who is talking. This way of thinking about interpretations, I want to say, is mistaken. We can and should evaluate political discourse, including interpretations, for truth value.

I first want to address the supposed incompatibility of interpretations and the grasping of reality by returning to the ‘no way of telling objection’ we looked at in the first chapter. This objection to interpretations implies that all interpretations are false. If we recall, a problem posited with a realist notion of truth was that we have no direct contact with the world, and so our perceptions are merely manipulations of the way the world really is. This problem stems from an empiricist theory of perception and seems to carry over to interpretations as well. I want to say that interpretations need not be manipulations of the world. Instead, like perceptions, interpretations are the way we directly cognize aspects of the world. There is nothing inherent in interpretation that would manipulate our understanding of the world. As with perception, interpretation is a part of cognition, and our cognition need not prevent us from seeing the world as it is.

Additionally, calling all interpretations false seems mistaken given that our interpretations are open to revision. If anything, interpretations and their process imply that we can come to see the world even more clearly than we do at first glance. As Wachterhauser puts it, “It is much easier to incorporate into our concept of rationality an awareness of the contingent cognitive rhetorical practical...that inevitably makes thought a kind of interpretation than it is to separate the notion of truth from our concept of rational conversation.”<sup>65</sup> Why would we preclude interpretations, a key part of cognition (which are partly constituted by true and false propositions), from being true when we could instead reconcile the two?

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<sup>65</sup> Wachterhauser, 3.

With this in mind, I want to tackle the critique of conceptual relativism. This is the view that different cultural and historical understandings shape the world we live in to the point that people of differing cultures live in different worlds. Roger Trigg explains this idea by stating that, “different concepts, therefore, mean a different world,” and “if the members of different societies live in ‘different worlds’ and do not merely have varying and conflicting beliefs about the same reality, there will not necessarily be point of contact between the concepts of one society and those of another.”<sup>66</sup> We lose the minimal objectivity that reference to the world in common gave us.

Thus, according to this view, one cannot attempt to understand or judge for truth-value claims about different societies because one cannot understand the world people from that society live in and refer to. This view, though, seems like a misreading of Kant to me. While we need not assume that our minds are passive in receiving the world, we also need not assume that they are active in such radically different ways. This is illustrated through the understanding we can garner between different cultures and societies. Wachterhauser explains this reply by writing that, “the claim that interpretive differences result in the construction of different worlds, all hermetically sealed off from each other, fails to account for the fact that we in fact understand our differences as differences *of perspective*, and such an ability presupposes a shared sense of reality beyond our interpretive differences.”<sup>67</sup> He argues that,

“Because I understand the differences inherent in different interpretive perspectives as genuinely different from each other and because understanding can itself only be understood if there is a logically prior, common reality which all interpretations share and in terms of which

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<sup>66</sup> Roger Trigg, *Reason and Commitment* (Cambridge University Press, 1973), 14.

<sup>67</sup> Brice Wachterhauser, *Hermeneutics and Truth* (Northwestern University Press, 1994), 7.

such differences can show themselves as differences, such a shared common reality must be accepted and affirmed.”<sup>68</sup>

This means that differences in conceptual schemas are not the radical difference in Kantian categories that some make them out to be. Rather, they are merely cultural differences, which leads to the less radical but possibly more biting objection to commensurable interpretations, cultural relativism.

Cultural relativism posits that because understanding comes from cultural backgrounds, understanding between cultures is incommensurable. The conclusion of this view is the assumption that contradicting cultural interpretations have the same truth value. This is because each culture’s background understanding cannot be judged for truth or falsity. “Each system sets its own standard of truth, but is not itself the kind of thing which can be true or false.”<sup>69</sup> The implicit premise here is that we cannot evaluate cultural understandings using a realist notion of truth and so the claims born from them are true, as long as they are accepted as true in that culture.

This assumed impossibility of judgement seems to have two sources. The first is the idea that cultural understanding is a sort of private language. A cultural relativist might say that one needs to be in the mind of someone from another culture in order to understand their claim, but this seems misguided to me. We need not be in the mind of the person with a different view from our own. Instead, we can understand their claim because we live in a world in common and our expressions are public languages. Because of this, there is the possibility of translation between languages and cultures which means that we can come to understand and therefore evaluate claims for truth and falsity, despite these claims coming from distinct and even radically different cultures. If we can

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<sup>68</sup> Wachterhauser, 7.

<sup>69</sup> Roger Trigg, *Reason and Commitment* (Cambridge University Press, 1973), 7.

understand a culture, we can understand the reasoning and past experience behind the claim from that culture, and we can come to understand claims from that culture's truth value. This is, of course, easier said than done, which leads us to our second source of concern that cultural relativism is supposed to answer.

This second worry is that it might be insensitive to judge another's culture and their understanding of the world. This view posits that we should give equal truth value to all claims of all cultures. Richard Rorty states in favor of a sort of postmodern take on cultural relativism that, "[n]o organism, human or non-human, is ever more or less in touch with reality than any other organism."<sup>70</sup> This idea assumes that one group is no better at evaluating claims for truth or falsity than any other group is. Social anthropologist John Beattie "criticizes the Victorians for thinking of other cultures as 'primitive' and inferior to their own, and remarks that 'childish' was one of their favourite adjectives when dealing with non-European cultures."<sup>71</sup> This concern seems like a good one to have, but I do not think that it must lead to cultural relativism. Instead, when evaluating for truth and falsity across cultural differences, we should work not to dismiss lived and learned experiences or claim superiority in being 'right'. We must be careful in our attempts to judge for truth-value the claims of other cultures and first work to understand people with different interpretations and views. Part of this process involves being open to revising one's own beliefs in light of another person's. Part of finding truth involves being open to revising one's own false beliefs and accepting true claims that may contradict one's original held belief.

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<sup>70</sup> Forstenzer, Joshua. "Something Has Cracked: Post-Truth Politics and Richard Rorty's Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism." *Ash Center Occasional Papers* (2018), 8.

<sup>71</sup> Roger Trigg, *Reason and Commitment* (Cambridge University Press, 1973), 8.

With this being said, there is no reason to assume that all interpretations are true merely because they are born from different cultural backgrounds. Cultural relativism need not deny claims their possibility of being mistaken in some way or another simply because they are rooted in a misunderstanding of the world. This misunderstanding can and should be critiqued. By denying the possibility of using what is true to revise our cultural understanding, which then shapes what we believe, we lose minimal objectivity. By turning the criteria for truth and falsity into subjective cultural relativism, we lose the ability to deny the claims made by the cultures in power, which is a dangerous place to be. We lose the value truth has to make a case against the claims being made by a culture or society, particularly one that is abusing power.

I now want to illustrate how one can mistakenly interpret a claim using an example extrapolated from a quirk my family has. At some point in my very early childhood, possibly in my older brother's early childhood, my immediate family began to refer to our television remote control as 'the box.' That is the word I learned to mean remote control. Now let's assume that this was the only definition of the word *box* that I understood, due to my upbringing, the family culture (if you will) that I grew up with. So, I live my life with this definition and somehow get by until I become employed by a moving company. On my first day of the job, my boss tells me to, '*move that box downstairs.*' In hearing that sentence, I interpret it to mean, *move that remote control downstairs.* We can agree that I have misconstrued the meaning of his sentence, I have attempted to fit that sentence into a false understanding of the world. The true interpretation of that sentence presumably referred to a cardboard box filled with items to be moved downstairs. This meaning something different to me does not mean that my interpretation is as true as my boss's. In fact, I want to say that my interpretation

illustrates that understandings and interpretations born from them can be false. I have a false understanding of what the name for *remote control* is that leads to contradictory interpretations that involve that concept for me.

Let us now consider a political analogy in the same terms; the meaning of the word criminal, for example. The word can be used in different ways and mean different things. It is a matter of interpretation, in one sense, how we use and understand the word. For example, it could be used in political discourse to mean something more than just “Of the nature of or involving a crime punishable by law.”<sup>72</sup> It could also be understood as meaning morally corrupt, inferior, denoting a certain phenotype or nationality, and the like. By this I mean that the term can be used, through interpretation, mistakenly. Certain traits are learned to be associated with the word and then the word is understood through those associations. Thus, the word can be mistakenly interpreted to mean something it does not and misunderstanding arises when the word criminal is used in the future. This could be part of the reason that the prison system is<sup>73</sup> unjust, or why the word criminal and associated terms are to be used more likely with certain racial groups than others.

### *“WE CAN SPIN THIS...”*

The task for us now remains to show *how* political interpretations can be false and how political spins are manipulations that miss the mark of being true. If we can show that they are false, we can return to our previous section about why expressing falsehoods politically is antithetical to democracy in general in order to demonstrate that false interpretations in politics should also be avoided.

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<sup>72</sup> “Home: Oxford English Dictionary,” accessed March 5, 2019.

<sup>73</sup> Considered by some to be, at the very least.

A first objection to political discourse being capable of having truth value at all is the intensionality of political claims. Political interpretations must be evaluated for their meaning and intentional content. Some thinkers will deny that a realist notion of truth applies to non-extensional sentences. Such a denial is usually supported with metaphysical considerations. This view seems to be a false, though. There are bits of the world with intensional content and we can evaluate claims about them using a realist notion of truth. We can evaluate the expression of intensional claims for truth-value in the same way we can evaluate extensional claims. Both are states of the world. For example, let's take the claim, 'when X texts you y, it means that X loves you.' This is an intensional claim of the kind 'y means that p' but it can be evaluated for truth or falsity because it is referring to an intensional state in the world. That text either means that x really was trying to express their feelings of love, or it means they were doing something else with that text. This intensional claim is made true by the state of the world that it is about. Therefore, an intensional political claim can be true in the same way that a scientific claim can be true, using a realist notion of truth.

Let us take a modern example of a political spin of a fact and try to analyze why this might be done, how it is false, and in what ways it is antithetical to the fundamental aims of democratic politics. Let us consider the moniker *fake news*. When someone labels a factual article as *fake news* it is a way of explaining the article's publication and content within a narrative it is working against. It claims that the news story in question is unfounded, when that claim about the news article itself is unfounded. It is a way of explaining (usually unsavory) news into an understanding of the world that avoids the unsavory aspect of the article from shining through. The publication of this unflattering news can now be spun against the people who published it in the first place. Now, the

person being attacked by the media, for example, is no longer seen as the nefarious figure. Instead, the journalist spouting ‘fake news’ (that for the sake of this example we can assume is sometimes not fake at all) is. This spin is not made with capturing and expressing what is true as its aim. This spinning of facts is a sort of bullshit.<sup>74</sup> When we spin a claim to our advantage, we can preclude it from being true. When we pass this off as an interpretation, we involve a notion that complicates the use of the truth and false predicates regarding that claim.

This relates to the views of cultural relativism. Joshua Forstenzer, in his paper *Something Has Cracked: Post-Truth Politics and Richard Rorty’s Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism* states that “some claim that traditional epistemic norms do not apply because these merely express the interests of another community—the so-called “elite”.”<sup>75</sup> This is part of the grounding behind the claim of fake news. Some use the term fake news to denote that the journalism we credit with reliability today serves the elite. It is just as biased as the unfounded claims that contradict it. This is because the claims from each belong to different cultures, the left and the right, for example, and from this it is extrapolated that the notions of truth and truthfulness that one side uses need not be used on the other side’s claim. The perceived validity of realist truth is lost when the label of fake news is used. When one interprets a claim as fake news, one evaluates an empirical claim outside of a realist notion of truth which leads to a false interpretation.

Labeling a false causal claim an interpretation, such as using the moniker fake news when the news is not fake, is a tool used to get away with expressing falsely. The interpretations we are concerned with are about intensional content. A causal claim is

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<sup>74</sup> Return to the third chapter’s explanation of Harry Frankfurt’s notion of bullshit

<sup>75</sup> Forstenzer, Joshua. “Something Has Cracked: Post-Truth Politics and Richard Rorty’s Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism.” *Ash Center Occasional Papers* (2018), 23.

about empirical data. One “misinterpreting” through a causal claim is just making a false assertion. For example, discourse about climate change and the disagreements about its existence and effects. These disagreements are spun as being different interpretations of the same data. Spinning them this way is an attempt to put the claims for and against climate change on equal footing. If they are both interpretations, one would need to work to demonstrate how the background understanding is false as well as the claim itself. This is a misuse of the label of interpretation, though, since interpretations cannot be causal claims. The claim that climate change is not real, for example, is an empirical claim that is false. There is extensional evidence for the validity of climate change. To ignore that data is not a misinterpretation, for it is not really about intentional content, but rather a poor commitment to truthfulness.

This poor commitment to truthfulness has consequences in that the climate is changing regardless of how we understand the numbers and phenomenon. The importance of figuring out what is true about the environment is that we can take action to counteract climate change. If we are guided to act according to a less true spin of the facts, by a misleading claim about the environment, the legislation we make to guide our interaction with the environment will go against the way the world actually is. We will miss an opportunity to improve the way we live in the world, which politics purports to partly be about.

This is part of the reason that misinterpretation should be avoided in politics, on top of the other reasons we have for seeking and expressing the truth politically. It seems like one of the reasons we have such trouble identifying and doing anything about spins is because of our hesitance to comment on contradicting interpretations. Dialogue comes to a standstill when we reach our bedrock beliefs that contradict one another. It is made to

seem not useful at all to speak about differing opinions because one is made to feel like they are talking past the other person. Disagreements between Christian fundamentalists and radical atheists about how the world is and how to make sense of it, and therefore how to act as a being in the world, are so different that they can seem incommensurable. It can *seem* fruitless to try to discuss past differences, but this disregards the possibility of using a realist notion of truth to get on the same page first.

It is misguided, I believe, to think that contradicting views cannot be understood in terms of one another. It seems misguided to believe that we can never come to an understanding, let alone an agreement or a realization of what is true, between contradicting beliefs or interpretations. Using our replies to the philosophical objections made above, I want to say that fruitful discussion between people with fundamentally different understandings of the world is possible, particularly in the context of democratic politics. We do all live in the same world, and we can use this commonality as our bedrock instead of our dogmatic beliefs. In doing so, we can work to understand one another and understand what is the case.

With that being said, I am not implying that this possibility is one easy to actualize. In fact, I think tremendous work must be done in order to get to a place where such mutual understanding is possible. This work, though, can be characterized by certain virtues of truth, such as the following;

1. Being open to revising the narrative one tells oneself about the world through a realist notion of truth
2. Being curious
3. Avoiding ignorance
4. Questioning background assumption and the culture one grew up in
5. The ability to question one's own beliefs
6. Care about expressing the truth
7. Discussion
8. Desire and commitment to seek out what is true

9. Pluralism
10. Contextualization
11. Holism

By pulling all of these threads together, we can begin to get at true interpretations. The first few steps seem to be losing dogmatic edges; questioning where one gets one's background assumptions, questioning the narrative one tells oneself about the world, and trying to look at the world anew. The next step, or a concurrent one, is to discuss with other people, to look at other views. It seems as if pluralism could be the meta-view that we need in order to determine the truth value between different interpretive views. This pluralism does not lead to subjectivism. Rather, it makes salient the importance of multiple views to avoid only seeing one side of a story. The world is always in motion, always complex. We must capture this complexity in our understanding.

Wachterhauser defines and explains pluralism as “the thesis that truth is served by many accounts of the same phenomenon rather than a single account.”<sup>76</sup> This is so because, “a single, perspective less, exhaustive account is precluded by the inherent richness of the phenomenon as well as the inherent embeddedness of phenomena in historical contexts.”<sup>77</sup> This pluralism works hand in hand with a holistic notion of truth. A true account is one that sees something clearly, which might mean taking more than one point of view into account. It can be said that a true account captures the complexity of a situation, which a single perspective may not do. With that metaphor though, it must be made clear that the true account is not merely a static picture but rather an account that expresses the moving parts and the context surrounding the event being described.

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<sup>76</sup> Brice Wachterhauser, *Hermeneutics and Truth* (Northwestern University Press, 1994), 9.

<sup>77</sup> Wachterhauser, 9.

In political discourse especially, what is true relevant to a politician is pluralistic. When considering the best course of action to take to improve the livelihood of the people being governed, multiple claims must be taken into account. The true lived experiences and desires of the people are multiple and necessary for political action. We can return to this Arendt quote which states that, "I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them."<sup>78</sup> To represent those one is governing, one must take their viewpoints (plural) into account. Thus, political discourse cannot be one voice but rather multiple voices expressing true claims.

This pluralism does not seem to contradict that the truth predicate is univocal. We also evaluate scientific claims for truth value from different perspectives and take into account context and the like. Pluralism need not be present in every true claim, but claims of interpretation can be evaluated for truth using a pluralist notion of truth. The same can be said of interpretive claims in the sciences.

In order to understand something, it seems that we must also understand the context, and the historical one at that, of the thing at hand. As we saw earlier, this can be a challenge since our views and the narratives we tell ourselves may not accord with the world. The solution to this problem seems to be having an openness to self revision. This in turn involves questioning the beliefs one holds, where those beliefs come from, and questioning the grand narrative one tells oneself about the world. It is of course possible that we can be mistaken about how we make sense of the world and so these views we hold must not be held dogmatically.

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<sup>78</sup> Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," February 18, 1967, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1967/02/25/truth-and-politics>.

Part of this process would include discussing with other people and looking at the world. Once again, this seems to mean that one should have a sense of pluralism and a sense of holism when looking at the world and trying to decide what is true, what is the case.

Thus, part of the process of avoiding the less true in political discourse is avoiding political spins. A claim should be made to primarily express what is true, not to spin the fact into something more flattering for the speaker.

# CONCLUSION:

## THE QUILT

I hope that by now one reading this thesis has an inclination towards why expressing and believing truly are important activities, particularly in democratic discourse. I also hope that the reader has an idea of what it means for a claim to be true holistically.

In case we are not there just yet, I want to use this last chapter to quilt together all of the material I have been working with so far. I want to answer rather succinctly here why it is important for democratic politics that we believe and express truly. I also want to provide an answer to my rambling in the introduction. I want to see if I have gotten myself out of the hole of ambivalence.

I started this project by delineating what a realist notion of truth is, which is the relationship between a bit of the world and the proposition that describes that bit of the world. This was an important place to start since a realist notion of truth is the only notion that provides substantial meaning to the truth predicate. A realist notion of truth is the only notion that allows for minimal objectivity, it is the only notion that allows us to realize our mistakes, and therefore work to fix them.

With that being said, a realist notion of truth also allows for the instrumental and non-instrumental value we discuss in the second chapter. This value is instrumental in that it is very useful at times to believe truly. Even when that is not the case, though, there is still a sense of non-instrumental value in believing truly. This can be explained in

two ways. The first simple illustration of this is when we defend our beliefs in the face of adversity. We think our beliefs to be true and we are inclined to defend them for that fact alone. The second illustration of the non-instrumental value of believing truly comes from this same notion that to believe a claim is to believe it to be true. Thus, the a priori aim of belief is to be true. This first example is an illustration of this second example realized, because of the way we value truthfulness for its virtues. We value truthfulness, in part, because of its connection to accuracy, sincerity, openness, revision, holism, and the like.

There seem to be other virtues and values to truthfulness when it comes to politics, which is what we discuss in the third chapter. A notion of realist truth is necessary for a representative democratic discourse for a few reasons. First, elected officials must believe truly about the state of the world and the opinions of those they represent in order to make good political decisions. Additionally, it is necessary for a legitimate democracy that those who represent the people express truly to those that they represent. This is because in order to make a legitimate democratic decision, the information one is given regarding the decision must be truly expressed. If it is expressed with any other aim than being primarily true, one's ability to make an autonomous decision is not respected. If one is precluded from making an autonomous political decision, it is not legitimately democratic.

We finally end with a complication regarding true political claims, which is that some are about intentional content. I argue in reply to this that the truth predicate is univocal; that it means the same thing when applied to extensional claims as well as intentional ones. This helps us make a useful distinction between political interpretations and political spins. Political interpretations are about intensional content; they aim to be

true, or at least should. Political spins, on the other hand, are attempts to manipulate reality. Both of these can be true, but they can also be false. It is part of democratic discourse to parse the true interpretations from the false spins.

There are, of course, other interesting aspects about a notion of truth that I was not able to touch on during this project. I am very interested in the univocality of metaphorically true claim and in the truth value of moral claims. I am interested in the political philosophy that justifies democracy. I take democracy as the framework within which I write about, but would be curious to see how true claims are emphasized or deemphasized in other political systems. I am interested in how true claims and a notion of truth can be used to battle racism, colonization, sexism, and the like. How far true claims can get us and where their power ends. I want to know more about certainty, and the epistemology of a realist notion of truth. There is so much more to say about notions of truth, their virtues and values. Unfortunately, most are too broad for the limits of this thesis, but my hope is that this thesis can serve as a starting point to other thought about notions of truth. I find that it has served that purpose for me, at the very least.

What I hope this project is able to do is to provide an outline of a theory of truth that offers hope in a time of deception. I think that a realist notion of truth does this. Despite how far we get away from respecting truthfulness and its virtuous actions, what is true will always be there, waiting for us. It is just a question of looking for it.

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