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POLITICS, TRUTH, POST-TRUTH,
AND POSTMODERNISM

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1 Epistemology

I believe, and indeed take myself to know, quite a lot of things about political life. I believe that democracy is a better system than tyranny, that freedom under the law and other basic political rights belong equally to everyone, and that they are important and should be defended. I think such things are beyond reasonable doubt, and do not even demand discussion. Fortunately, at least until recently, most of the people with whom I could imagine discussing them thought the same. So they were not themselves matters of political urgency. They were the background against which day-to-day activities of politics took place. For the rest of this essay I shall put them to one side. I shall mean by “politics” only the practical activities of those involved in making and assessing actual projects and decisions, and the thoughts and passions in the foreground of those activities. It should be apparent that what is background at one time may slide into the foreground at another, as presuppositions themselves become contested. But at any moment there will be this difference.

Many people think that there is precious little of either truth or knowledge in practical politics. As I shall explain, in many respects I agree with them, although not because I have much sympathy with the idea of a “post-truth” environment, nor with elements in postmodernism that are supposed to nourish that idea. As I am about to describe, on those matters I am quite conservative. Nevertheless, I do think that truth and knowledge are rare in practical politics. I even find the topic to which this volume is addressed, “political epistemology”, quite hard to parse, and I shall start by explaining why.

Epistemology is traditionally the theory of knowledge. It is often said to have started with Plato’s account of knowledge as true belief plus logos, this being thought of as some kind of grounding, rationale, or justification. As the second half of the twentieth century showed, it is fiendishly difficult to clarify what this means, and the hangdog failure of those who chose to toil in the salt-mines opened by Edmund Gettier in 1963 suggests that we might do better not to ask what it means. Fortunately, this leaves open a different avenue to understanding the notion. The way was cleared by the long succession of pragmatists, from Hobbes through Berkeley, Hume, to Peirce, Dewey, Ramsey, and Wittgenstein. What these have in common is a direction of approach to philosophical clarity that is not premised on the possibility of straightforward analysis. Instead, it looks at the use of a vocabulary and the concepts it expresses, and asks how that use might have arisen, and what it does for us.
It only became clear how to apply this to the idea of knowledge when Edward Craig wrote his groundbreaking book *Knowledge and the State of Nature* (1990). Craig saw himself as “synthesizing” rather than analysing knowledge: that is, seeing how the notion might have evolved to answer various human needs, and in particular the need to evaluate and grade potential sources of information. We need to do this, first, because as agents in the world we need to select courses of action, and second, because we often have to do so in conditions of uncertainty. This has ever been the human lot, and so we can realistically imagine a genealogy whereby the concept of knowledge grows in this soil. Our ancestors tackled the problem by evaluating our own position and those of would-be informants, since anything that diminishes uncertainty is valuable. This can go on up to the point where we decide our beliefs have become fixed, and when we do this we become able to deem ourselves, or our sources of information, to know something. Knowledge is the limit of an evaluative exercise, but on any particular issue we may fail to reach that limit. With repeated or predictable failures we give up on knowledge, and retreat to opinion, or hunches, or remain in two minds.

As well as concentrating on the rationale for this kind of evaluation, Craig does justice to the various ideas that were excavated in the Gettier literature: causal links, tracking, counterfactuals telling us that had something not been so the information at our disposal would not have been as it is, reliability, and so on—all of them likely symptoms that knowledge is on the way—but he also shows why there is always the threat of cases where such conditions were met, but the purpose of the evaluation is not. It is the same with evaluations in general. A judgement that someone is a good person, for example, is not monotonic, meaning that each additional piece of information will chime in with what has already been established. A new light on someone may throw what hitherto looked likely into complete reverse, and so it is with the features that may be building up the credentials of a person, or a process, as giving us only true informant. Until a final verdict is in, there is always room for the 13th strike of the clock, the one that casts doubt on all the rest.

Deeming that we ourselves, or some informants, know something is the end point, at which we suppose that what was once an open question is now beyond doubt, done and dusted. More inquiry is unnecessary. The answer is fixed. We can, of course, accord an answer this status when in fact it does not deserve it, and conversely we can be too cautious, and refuse to so dignify a source when it is in fact totally reliable, and deserved complete trust. Sound judgement requires both the ability to grade sources of information and a just sense of when to call off inquiry, sometimes because it is predictably futile, but also because it has completed its work.

Armed with this way of positioning our concept of knowledge, what can we say about political epistemology? Politics, as the art of solving real world problems, certainly demands information from many sources, and like any practice we can expect it to go better if these sources are reliable, up to the point we have been describing. But these sources will themselves be diverse and themselves have their own methodologies. A decision, for instance, whether to build a railway line, and then where and when to build it will require input from geography, geology, engineering, economics, population statistics, and more besides, and each of these disciplines has its own epistemological problems, and, one hopes, mature methodologies for solving them. But after these sources have delivered their data and their projections, is there room left for more epistemology—a specifically political one?

I do not think there is. There is room for judgement, certainly. But the question of what to do is not a political one because there is more to know, although there may be, but because there is a decision to make. The best or the right decision is to be found, if possible. But it is often unlikely to be known to be the best. There will be no algorithm for recognizing it, no
specifically political mark of truth about it as it rolls into implementation. We might go so far as to say that a question is only a political one because it has arisen in a world of trade-offs, opportunity costs, and priorities. And these are not themselves issues where knowledge is likely to be in ready supply. Given the competitive nature of politics, and given the personality traits that take people to the top of the greasy pole, consensus is unlikely. And if consensus is achieved it will often be not because an answer has, as it were, shouted at us, but because of persuasion, preferences in the widest sense, and shared emotions and visions. And all too often shared illusions. Some of these may be the personal property of individual politicians, but others will be shared by cliques, and other still may be widely current in the society.

With hindsight it may be possible to know that a decision was disastrous, but it will seldom be possible to know that it was the best that we could have made. The space of possibilities is unlikely to have had definite, and knowable, boundaries. We cannot accurately foresee future events or future needs, and so do well to acknowledge an element of luck, good or bad. And as Plato saw, when luck enters the picture, knowledge departs. In many political contexts it enters very early indeed. A scientist may know that a question is answered, and the answer done and dusted, the last word on the matter. But in human affairs, politics, and history, nobody ever has the last word.

2 Truth or post-truth?

Decisions may legitimately be said to be post-truth, since they are themselves neither true nor false, although sensible, silly, well or ill thought-out, practical or impractical. So when people began to seize on the idea of a “post-truth” environment as new and peculiar to our times, it was quite hard to know what exactly they had in mind. A minimal interpretation was that politicians could no longer be trusted, or could not be trusted as much as they once had been. Perhaps they have become more casual about lying or breaking promises. They can shrug off things that would previously have sunk their careers. We would be talking about a moral change, whereby people become disinclined to hold each other responsible, and reprehensibly so, for things that had previously been taken much more seriously. There may be such a change, just as there has been a notable opposite chance to more severe attitudes in sexual mores. But it is worth remembering that from time immemorial politicians have been charged with infamous trespasses against honesty and truth. Famously, the nineteenth-century politician Joseph Chamberlain said of Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli what many of us think about Donald Trump that he never told the truth except by accident. Politics, as a domain of hopes, fears, visions, and emotions, is inevitably a cockpit in which truth has to struggle, and not only because of the advantage politicians may hope to gain by deceiving others. As often as not, this only follows on from first deceiving themselves. As Francis Bacon said at the beginning of the seventeenth century “The human understanding is not composed of dry light, but is subject to influence from the will and the emotions, a fact that creates fanciful knowledge; man prefers to believe what he wants to be true” (Jardine and Silverthorne, 2000).

A different aspect of a supposed moral and epistemological decline would be the view that even if politicians, and also news sources, are about as reliable and trustworthy as they have ever been, we the public trust them less. We badly underestimate their integrity. If this is a change, it is easy to sketch how it might have happened. Huge numbers of people get their information or misinformation from the web. And the giants of the web such as Google monetize this by noticing what they like, and directing them to sites that conform to those likes, that they will therefore visit again and again, thereby creating more revenue.
for Google. This leads to silos or bubbles within which people confine themselves, listening only to voices that confirm their own views of the world. So, to take an example at random, if a mother has heard, from whatever doubtful source, that vaccination is dangerous for her baby, she may seek confirmation from the web and easily find it. Her fear will be echoed and exacerbated, and before long she will be believing that orthodox medical opinion is itself some kind of conspiracy against the people in general, and her baby in particular. She has become untrusting, not because the science is untrustworthy, but because of groundless fears about the safety of vaccines, wickedly exploited.

It has been well said that conspiracy theories flourish so that stupid people can feel smart. A good elementary education in epistemology might do something to protect against them, but it is unfortunately on few school syllabuses. It might start with Hume’s great essay on miracles, reminding people to lend very little faith to reports that flatter the passions of the reporter. One might move on to introducing what is in fact the formalization of the structure of Hume’s argument, the three components of a Bayesian calculation. This varies directly as the antecedent probability of the story before the evidence came in; the “likelihood”, or more accurately the probability of the evidence being as it is if the story is true, and inversely as the probability of the evidence being due to something other than the truth of the story. With conspiracy theories in general the first two are usually very low, and the third, quite high, giving a low probability overall.

Before we lament living in a post-truth world, we might remember that in simple affairs of life we are extremely good at judging what’s true, and we would not survive if we could not do so. We have a shrewd sense of how to determine many things about the world around us. We trust our ways of telling if there is butter in the fridge, if it is a sunny day or raining, or if it is safe to cross the road. We have designed, tested, and trusted instruments to help detect whether an electrical circuit is live, whether there is petrol in the car or pressure in the tyres. We make and use good, reliable maps and charts. We also tailor our confidence to the track records of our sources, for as children we learn that not everyone is to be trusted equally about everything. We grow into being good practical epistemologists. Sitting in the study a sceptic may be proud of having seen through and deconstructed truth, objectivity, and reason, but will then turn around and join the rest of the human race in consulting maps and timetables, listening to doctors and finding out whether his brake pads are worn, all of which presuppose both that some descriptions have consequences, and that some sources of information are more trustworthy than others.

We do well enough in routine and proximate matters, but on others we quite quickly go astray. We cannot settle doubts ourselves, and therefore trust authority, sometimes unwisely. Our hopes and fears lead us astray. We are addicted to certainty, and therefore become dogmatic. We hate changing our minds, and therefore dismiss inconvenient facts. Some of us find conspiracy theories irresistible. The will to get things right often has to battle with carelessness, self-deception, vanity, credulity, and the will to power, and it often loses. The philosopher William James was no sceptic about the notion of truth, but he did lament that “Objective evidence and certitude are doubtless very fine ideals to play with, but where on this and dream-visited planet are they found?” (James, 1986, pp. 55–71) – not, at any rate, in the blandishments of advertisers, the assertions of politicians, or the cacophony of social media.

However, these familiar human infirmities give us no cause to doubt the difference between truth and falsity. They just take us into areas in which we are not very good at knowing where truth lies.

I think that more radical scepticism has two main causes. First, people tend not to concentrate on small, worldly, empirical matters but to worry about the so-called big questions:
life, the universe, and everything. And sure enough, if we perplex ourselves about the direction of society, the meaning of liberalism or the rights of the citizen bewilderment is quick to set in.

A, second, deeper cause of worry arises when we pose highly general questions about our categories of thought. How do we know whether our categories faithfully reflect the nature of things? How do we determine when we are describing how things are in reality, and when we are imposing categories of thought on them? Are liberalism and democracy, right and left, race and identity, good categories with which to work? The thought arises that our minds or brains impose interpretations on the world—but how are we to know what distortions they manufacture? How much is discovery, and how much invention?

We seem to have a relentless, but unreliable appetite for finding words, and often enough become entrenched and embattled about their use. In newspapers heated arguments recently broke out about where in Britain the North begins after one academic put Sheffield in the South. Is this merely a matter of definition, or was the academic simply wrong? Here we may suspect that the issue is more verbal than substantive, with people attaching more importance to the labels than they deserve. Similar worries beset almost all the terms we use when we try to describe social and political affairs, complex psychological states, or issues of race and gender. The worry is not new. Indeed, according to Aristotle the problem of finding ways of describing things that truly reflect their real properties so exercised one philosopher, Cratylus, that he was reduced to silence and would only communicate by wagging his finger.

Both problems have an abstract air, and to solve them it is best instead to dig into some detail. My guiding motto here is therefore a saying of the great American philosopher C. S. Peirce, “We must not begin by talking of pure ideas—vagabond thoughts that tramp the public highways without any human habitation—but must begin with men and their conversation”. That is, we are not to lose ourselves in abstract thoughts about truth, reason, or objectivity, but have to look at the actual uses of words. We can then find out the practical implications of a description, which means that way it gives rise to systematic inferences and predictions, or whether it just gives rise to verbal disputes and confusions. It may be silly to become exercised whether Sheffield is in the North, but not at all silly to be exercised whether an annoying little lump is a cancer. The second description has definite practical implications that the first lacks. So we do not have to join Cratylus. We can sift out descriptions that have real practical implications from ones that do not.

And then, when an inquiry appears to have settled a question, we deem ourselves to know the answer, and deem the answer to be true. With the notion of truth, we do no more than signal assent to a belief or a claim. So, talking about the truth of an issue is just talking about the issue itself. The importance of this was first noticed by the German logician Gottlob Frege, writing around the beginning of the twentieth century. Frege noticed that if you express a commitment of any kind, you can add “it is true that…” without changing the content of what you have said. I hold that the United States is larger than the United Kingdom. So I equally hold that it is true that the United States is larger than the United Kingdom. If you concur with that judgement, then you can signify agreement by saying “that’s true”. You could equally have said “right” or you could have just grunted assent. This suggests that saying that a commitment is true is not making a remark about it. If it were there would be one question whether the United States is bigger than the United Kingdom, and another different question whether that is true. In fact, there would be an endless list of assertions each saying that the previous one is true, but each introducing a different fact. Since that is flatly unacceptable, it is better to regard the attribution of truth simply as a device for falling in with whatever was claimed. Saying that something is false is simply rejecting it. In
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this case, so long as we have commitments—which means so long as we have thoughts and beliefs at all—we will have the notions of truth and falsity, in the same way that so long as we have chess at all we will have the notions of a winning position and a good or bad move. This, in turn, means that post-truth life is no more an option than post-winning chess. The notion of truth turns out not to be an optional extra to having beliefs, nor an optional extra to the linguistic performances of communicating those beliefs and concurring with them or rejecting them. It is part and parcel of the very same activities.

A way of putting this that I like is to think of Pontius Pilate, musing “What is truth?” when he was asked to judge Jesus. According to Francis Bacon he was jesting, and would not stay for an answer. I do not know why Bacon thought he was jesting, but Peirce and Frege can help Pilate by counselling that he should not be asking such an abstract question: he should be concentrating on the inquiries he needs to settle. In effect Frege tells us that if Pilate does ask “What is truth?”, the right answer is: “you tell me”. Not, “you tell me what truth is” but “you tell me what you’re trying to judge”. If you are trying to judge whether this defendant is guilty of some particular crime, then the truth would just be his being guilty of that particular crime. And it was Pilate’s job to find that out. Unfortunately, as far as we are told he did not do that very satisfactorily.

If this leaves the notion of truth in perfectly good standing, what about William James’s mistrust of ever-finding objectivity and certainty? Again, if we dig into the detail, there are answers to be found. It is best to think of objectivity not as describing a particular sort of truth, but as characterizing the difference between well-conducted and badly conducted inquiry. There are virtues of good inquiries. They should be sober, open minded, careful and diligent, or to use the familiar phrase, ones that leave no stone unturned. These are the marks of objective inquiry, and an objective truth is simply one that has survived, or would survive, objective inquiry. And after all, there are questions that are answered, and inquiries that are done and dusted. When George Orwell worried that the very idea of objective truth was fading from the world, he would have done better to worry that it was the possibility of objective inquiry that was becoming ever harder, in an age of mass communication, propaganda, and state-sponsored lies.

Of course, as every policeman, or lawyer, or scientist knows, sometimes the best inquiries draw a blank, and we are left in the dark. We may never know who committed the crime, or whether there will one day be a better theory than quantum mechanics. There are also some issues where we have only a poor sense of how inquiries might be mounted. The right methods for settling moral or political uncertainties are as controversial and contested as the issues themselves. When we encounter such issues it is tempting to sit back, shrug our shoulders, and not let them bother us. This was the course of tranquillity, advocated by classical sceptics, and it is in effect the position of modern-day relativists, happy that on such matters each side may have its own truth. But of course such soggy withdrawal leaves the field open for the propagandists, ideologues, dogmatists, and charlatans to run riot. Better is to soldier on, drawing up the costs and benefits, finding what John Stuart Mill called “considerations capable of swaying the intellect”. Similarly, the answer to Orwell’s worry is not to give up inquiry, but to conduct it with even more care, diligence, and imagination. Even with intractable issues we have to do our best and live in hope.

Where does this leave the concept of truth? If we agree with Frege’s deflationism can we any longer say that truth is correspondence with the facts? Yes, we can certainly say it, but it is of little use. We must remember that talk of facts, like talk of knowledge, only comes when inquiry is thought to have been completed. When it is contested whether inquiry has delivered one result or another, or any result at all, wheeling up the notion of a fact adds
nothing new. It adds nothing for any of the contestants, except perhaps a rhetorical excuse for thumping the table. It provides no back door from which we can gain an independent view of whatever is left obscure by our best methods of inquiry. This should not be put by saying with Nietzsche that “there are no facts, only interpretations” (Nietzsche, Kaufmann and Hollingdale, 1968). Still less should it be put, as it often is, in the silly assertion that science never discovers facts, only hypotheses. There are facts, and science has discovered many of them. It is a fact that the earth is roughly spherical, that dinosaurs never existed alongside people, and that injecting yourself with disinfectants does not safely confer immunity against the Covid virus. We are perfectly within our rights to conceive of our inquiries as directed towards uncovering facts of the matter, and to say sometimes that they have succeeded. The notion is only of little use in epistemology, because finding what to believe is just the same thing as identifying the facts of the case. Nietzsche was right to think that this requires the interpretation of (what is taken to be) data, but wrong to think that there was an intrinsic opposition between interpretation and fact. There is nothing subjective about interpreting the geological record as showing that the earth is more than 6,000 years old.

3 Postmodernism

Postmodernism named a fairly impenetrable swathe of attitudes and views. Only a few still permeate our culture, and myself I doubt whether the movement brought anything new to political epistemology. For the currents that came together in an apparently nihilistic, ironic attitude that “anything goes” had sources in many older mainstream ideas, especially in epistemology and the philosophy of science.

In 1935 the Polish biologist and historian Ludwik Fleck developed the idea that scientists become locked into a “thought style” (a Denkstil) that determined the concepts they would use. A shared Denkstil characterized a Denkkollectiv, a group, or a sect, locked into the same styles of thought. Fleck’s views foreshadowed Thomas Kuhn’s (1996) famous idea that normal science proceeds in terms of a shared paradigm, a governing style of thought which, like all governments, will be stable until sufficient pressures generate a revolution, which then, in turn, settles into its own Denkstil or paradigm (Fleck, 1979). It was in this vein that postmodernists sometimes wrote as if the sciences dealt with social constructions rather than the real world, or that it invented categories of thought rather than discovering facts about nature.

As well as this less than reverential attitude to science postmodernists were able to feed on other aspects of modern philosophy. After Wilfrid Sellars’s attack on the “myth of the given” many epistemologists came to agree that we cannot see knowledge as resting on unassailable foundations in experience and observation (Sellars, 1956). Justification starts only when sense experience is interpreted, even if the interpretation is automatic and instant. Then the flexibility in our powers of observation gives rise to the possibility of error, right at the beginning of our epistemological journeys (apart from forays into pure mathematics and logic, perhaps). A candidate for a basic observation or “given” would be a judgement made in the blink of an eye, without conscious inference or processing, but such immediacy does not by itself ensure that it is true. I might be able to see at a glance that a bird is a chaffinch, but on occasion I might be wrong, and I might even be wrong if I retreat to saying that at any rate it looks like a chaffinch, having forgotten a salient distinguishing feature of these birds. My verdict made in the blink of an eye can be checked, repeated and verified, or discarded or adjusted. It does not stand as an independent rock of truth, immune to relationships of confirmation or disconfirmation.
It is also true that as people gain experience their perceptual capacities change. More things, and different things, can leap to the eye, or the ear or the palate. The experienced tracker can see at a glance that a leopard has passed this way, when the rest of us might be hard put even to notice the dent in the dust. The radiologist sees a tumour where we see only a white and grey pattern. The musician hears that the piece is by Schubert and the tailor can tell by feel that a material is silk or not. Our perceptions select, and they adapt to enable us to be quicker at selecting. But such adaptive mechanisms are far from suggesting an “anything goes” irony about our interpretations of things, for on the contrary they give us an ascending scale of ability, whereby the experts further up the scale are quicker and better at seeing things the rest of us miss.

Even the relativistic or sceptical significance that postmodernists attach to the idea of there being different perspectives on things dissolve here. There are different perspectives, for instance if you look at the Eiffel tower from Montmartre or from the Champ de Mars. But far from conflicting, they work together to give us our sense of the one monument and our different relations to it. The spatio-temporal framework within which the notion of perspective has its place has precisely this objectifying, synthesizing function, uniting what might otherwise have been a bewildering jumble of experiences. If different versions of events and things clash, it is not simply because they represent different perspectives.

A final general point that we can derive from Peirce’s counsel to avoid abstractions is that particular worries over meaning only arise within a context in which, at least for the moment, we are not worried. They do not open an avenue to a general scepticism. So suppose we are interpreting a law banning vehicles in the park. We may reasonably be worried whether “vehicle” is supposed to cover lawnmowers or not. But in framing that worry, or any worry like it, we would be relying, for the moment, on our identification of lawnmowers. If that, in turn, raises a problem—are ride-on mowers banned or push mowers as well?—then, in turn, we rely on “ride-on” and “push”. We have to stand somewhere. We do not, and could not, raise or solve all possible exegetical problems simultaneously. So there is no context of interpretation in which the insouciant or ironical attitude that anything goes has a proper foothold.

Of course, I see none of this as denial that there are special reasons why epistemology is difficult in connection with politics. To return to my original point, politics is unusual in being an area in which many competing players have an interest in concealing the truth. The government is more or less bound to be addicted to denying that things have gone wrong, while the opposition is equally likely to be addicted to denying that they have gone right. Few of us get behind the scenes to find out which, and those who do, having their own agendas and loyalties, are unlikely to come back speaking with one voice. Sometimes only time will tell, but time only speaks through histories, which themselves are selective, filtered, interpreted, and reinterpreted. A very bare diary or chronicle of events may stand a good chance of being true, but only by steering as clear as possible of whatever it may have been that animated the politics of an era. And as R. G. Collingwood rightly emphasized, such a bare chronicle would scarcely be history at all, for that only starts with sympathetic re-enactment of the thoughts and passions that motivated, or may have motivated, the original actors, who are now known to us only through stories. So it is not unduly sceptical, but more like part of common sense, to take a very cautious view of the epistemological credentials not only of politics in the here and now, but also of annals of political life.

My suspicion is that once postmodernism had enjoyed its day cavorting in the sceptical and ironic playground, it became a more sombre or more adult presence than its reputation.
suggests. Even the enfant terrible Jacques Derrida gave an apparently sincere rebuttal of the idea that his views have nihilistic implications, saying that:

It must be understood that the value of truth (and all those values associated with it) is never contested or destroyed in my writings, but only reinscribed in more powerful, larger, more stratified contexts. And that within interpretive contexts...that are relatively stable, sometimes apparently almost unshakeable, it should be possible to invoke rules of competence, criteria of discussion and of consensus, good faith, lucidity, rigor, criticism, and pedagogy. (Derrida, 1988, p. 146)

What more should any epistemologist expect?

**Note**

1 The same mistake can be seen throughout the “slash-and-burn” writings of Richard Rorty.

**References**


