

The virtues we need in a post-truth world

Telling the truth requires more than right thinking. It requires being a particular sort of person.

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In order to describe a world in which widely available facts seem unable to dent the appeal of attractive falsehoods, political commentators have reached for a new adjective: *post-truth*. As in: “We live in a post-truth world.” The editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary* picked *post-truth* as the 2016 word of the year, defining it as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”

There have always been instances of political propaganda, and of leaders (and publics) adjusting the truth to suit their perceived self-interest. In the 2016 presidential election, however, the blatant disregard of facts reached an unprecedented level. Also new was the capacity of the Internet to accelerate the spread of falsehoods, to cocoon people in communities of misinformation, and to dismantle old hierarchies of credibility.

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The specter of a post-truth world calls for a renewed commitment to truth telling as essential to democracy. As the *New York Times* declared, “Media organizations that report facts without regard for partisanship, and citizens who think for themselves, will need to light the way.”

But if anything has become clear in recent months, it’s that telling the truth is more than a matter of thinking hard or having access to reliable information. It is also a matter of being a certain kind of person. The virtue of truth telling is intertwined with the exercise of other moral virtues.

In particular, truth telling involves having the humility to be corrected and the humility to join in a shared public world of argument and debate. It also involves a fundamental openness to the world and to other people and a respect for their worth and perspectives. This is why Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote (in his essay “What Is Meant by ‘Telling the Truth?’”) that “to speak truthfully, one’s gaze and one’s thought must be directed toward the way the real exists in God and through God and for God.” Rephrased in secular terms: there has to be a shared reality beyond self-interest for the concept of telling the truth to gain traction; otherwise speech is mere self-assertion.

The post-truth world bears within it a genuine insight: facts do come to us embedded in larger narratives about how the world is and what is worth our attention. Christians don’t pretend to operate without a larger narrative. Rather, we claim that the Christian narrative—which is about humans as both precious and flawed, and about the world as God’s good and ordered creation, meant for the flourishing of all creatures—is what provides the basis for humility, openness, correction, and argument. That, in turn, is what allows for a community of truth telling.

Liberal societies, knowingly or not, have long depended on such virtues to structure public life. Sustaining and reviving those virtues will be essential to living truthfully in a post-truth world.

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