

LEIDEN UNIVERSITY

MASTER THESIS

---

**Is Post-Truth Politics Really  
Post-Truth?**

---

*Author:*

Cas Bezembinder

*Supervisor:*

Prof. Göran Sundholm

*A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements  
for the programme of Philosophy, Politics and Economics*

Institute for Philosophy

June 7, 2018



LEIDEN UNIVERSITY

# *Abstract*

Faculty of Humanities

Institute for Philosophy

Philosophy, Politics and Economics

## **Is Post-Truth Politics Really Post-Truth?**

by Cas Bezembinder

Contemporary politics seems to suffer from a carelessness with regards to truth. This thesis aimed to clarify whether contemporary politics is really post-truth. It did this through an analysis of multiple theories of truth and an overview of the historical origins of post-truth. It concluded that while there are multiple possible substantial theories of truth, all theories of truth have in common the existence of a correctness-notion. Analysis of modern politics shows that correctness-notions are still held by all relevant actors, which entails that they hold at least some theory of truth. Rather than being post-truth, contemporary politics suffers from political communities that have deeply differing worldviews due to lobbying by interest groups, changes to modern media, and post-modernism.

Word Count: 19,965



# Contents

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2 Theories of Truth</b>	<b>5</b>
2.1 The Correspondence Theory of Truth . . . . .	5
2.2 Alternative Theories of Truth . . . . .	10
2.3 Reasons For a Coherence Theory of Truth . . . . .	12
2.3.1 Ontological Reasons . . . . .	13
2.3.2 Epistemological Reasons . . . . .	14
2.4 Conclusion . . . . .	17
<b>3 Realism and Idealism</b>	<b>19</b>
3.1 Ontological Realism and Idealism . . . . .	19
3.2 Epistemological Realism and Idealism . . . . .	21
3.3 Conclusion . . . . .	23
<b>4 Truth, Epistemology and Metaphysics</b>	<b>25</b>
4.1 Correspondence and Ontology . . . . .	25
4.2 Coherence and Ontology . . . . .	26
4.2.1 Coherence and Epistemological Realism . . . . .	26
4.2.2 Coherence and Epistemological Idealism . . . . .	31
4.3 Comparison of Different Coherence Theories . . . . .	33
4.4 Responding to the Criticisms of the Coherence Theory . . . . .	35
4.4.1 The Specification Objection . . . . .	35

4.4.2	The Transcendence Objection . . . . .	39
4.4.3	Circularity of Truth . . . . .	40
4.4.4	Confusion between Criterion and Definition . . . . .	42
4.4.5	Leading to Ontological Idealism . . . . .	43
4.5	Conclusion . . . . .	44
<b>5</b>	<b>The Origins of Post-Truth</b>	<b>45</b>
5.1	What Is Post-Truth? . . . . .	45
5.2	Rise of the Post-Truth Era . . . . .	47
5.2.1	Science Denialism . . . . .	47
5.2.2	Modern Media . . . . .	51
5.2.3	Post-Modernism . . . . .	55
5.3	Conclusion . . . . .	59
<b>6</b>	<b>Is the Post-Truth Era Post Truth?</b>	<b>61</b>
6.1	Post-Truth for Whom? . . . . .	61
6.1.1	The General Public . . . . .	62
6.1.2	The Informational Elite . . . . .	65
6.2	Conclusion . . . . .	67
	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>69</b>
	<b>Works Cited</b>	<b>73</b>

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

The political landscape of the western world seemed to change fundamentally in 2016. Both the campaign for Brexit and the presidential campaign of Donald Trump were filled with statements made without any regards for truth and outright lies. Yet despite these lies, both campaigns experienced great success. People worried that this disregard for truth was the beginning of a larger phenomenon, that of 'post-truth'. Lee McIntyre writes in his overview of post-truth politics: "If Donald Trump could claim – without evidence – that if he lost the election it was because it was rigged against him, did facts and truth even matter?" (2). This carelessness with regards to how the world really is continued after the elections, for example when President Donald Trump claimed without evidence that he actually won the popular vote if the three million illegal votes were disregarded, or when he claimed that the Russians had not hacked the American elections, despite consensus of all major American intelligence agencies (Holan; Sherman).

When asked about one of these discrepancies, a White House spokesperson talked about 'alternative facts', which John Searle states did not refer to the trivially true claim that there are facts beyond the facts currently discussed, but rather that there might be one acknowledged fact, and another equally valid fact that is inconsistent with the first (88). It can, if we accept alternative facts, both be the case that the size of Trump's inauguration crowd

was much smaller than other inauguration crowds in recent history and that it was the biggest ever. If we are currently in a post-truth era, this would have major consequences for how we live our lives and how we do politics.

What would it mean for an era to be post-truth? Searle writes that “In intellectual matters the idea that some phenomenon B is ‘post’ some other phenomenon A typically suggests more than just that A and B are in a temporal sequence but that somehow phenomena A has been superseded or surpassed by phenomenon B and even on occasion that A has now become obsolete” (87). Following this, post-truth would not merely be a term that happens after the notion of ‘truth’, but offer such a rejection of truth that the entire notion of truth is made obsolete. It would have to argue that the notion of truth is meaningless because it does not in fact name anything.

This thesis will attempt to uncover whether modern politics has indeed made a shift from truth to post-truth in the sense given above. To do this, it is first necessary to define what exactly is meant by ‘truth’. If truth is not given a clear definition, it will be impossible to determine whether the current political climate is post-truth. It will do this by first discussing the most important theories of truth, then by discussing the different meanings given to the terms realism and idealism, and finally by looking at the relation between these theories of truth, epistemology and ontology. It will also aim to find common ground between these theories.

The second part of this thesis will first provide more insight into post-truth by looking at its origins in science denialism, changes in modern media, and post-modernism. Then, it will discuss the relation between truth and post-truth by looking at the relation to truth of each of these parts of the origin.



This thesis will argue that 'post-truth' is a misnomer, and that rather than a diminished importance of truth in contemporary politics, the real issue is a use of partisan media and post-modern rhetoric by those in power and a divide in accepted authorities and sources of information between different political communities.



## Chapter 2

# Theories of Truth

As stated in the introduction, to establish whether the current political era has moved beyond the concept of truth, it is first necessary to define the concept of truth. This is not a straightforward task, as there are many different theories of what 'truth' is. While one theory (or group of theories), the correspondence theory of truth, can be said to be the most commonly accepted, this theory is not without problems, and there are valid reasons to adopt other theories of truth. This chapter will outline the most common theories of truth, and the reasons for adopting them.

### 2.1 The Correspondence Theory of Truth

Generally, most people, either consciously or unconsciously, act on the basis of a conception of truth in which we hold that a judgement or statement is true when what the statements expresses actually is the case. This is, in a general form, the correspondence theory of truth. The correspondence theory of truth states that a judgement is true if and only if it corresponds to the facts or state of affairs in the world. Any theory that characterises the truth of a judgement as a certain relation between the judgement and the world is a correspondence theory. There is not a single correspondence theory, but rather a cluster of theories, that differ in how exactly they categorise what is being related to the world (judgement, proposition, etc.), the exact nature

of this relation (correspondence, agreement, picture-relation, representation, etc.), and their conceptualisation of the relevant parts of the world (facts, states of affairs, tropes, etc.). Furthermore, there are differences in what exactly the correspondence theory of truth is taken to be a theory of. It can either be seen as a definition of truth, where it explains the meaning of 'being true', or as providing the criterion of truth, arguing that the (best) way to determine whether a judgement is true is by comparing it to the world. While there is no single correspondence theory of truth, it is useful to discuss them as a class, as these theories share a lot of qualities.

Correspondence theories have a lot of historic and present-day importance. It can be found in the works of Aristotle, who stated 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" (Warrington, 1011b25). Similar statements can be found in Plato (Sedley & Margaret, 385b2; Plato trans. Rowe, 263b). It has maintained this prominent position throughout the history of philosophy. The correspondence theory also best describes how 'truth' is used in everyday discourse. Most people will say that 'the table is square' is true if the table is square.

A correspondence theorist needs to clarify three things, namely what part of the judgement corresponds to the world, what this correspondence relation consists of, and which part of reality the judgement coheres to.

First of all, the idea of a judgement corresponding to anything other than a judgement has been criticised. Berkeley, for example, writes that "an idea can be like nothing but an idea" (27). However, this problem might rest on the double meaning of the term 'judgement', which refers both to the act of

judging and to the product of this act. In the case of the correspondence theory, it is not the act, but the content that is taken to correspond. While the act of judging might not be comparable to the world, this is not the case for the product of this act. It is this product of judgement of which the theory says that it is true or not. The act of judging is correct or not based on whether its content is true. When we talk about a judgement being correct, this refers to the act of judging, whereas a judgement being true refers to the product of this judging. The abstract content of the judgement can also be called the proposition, which is taken to be a non-psychological, non-physical entity that exist independent of the act of judging (Ewing, 197).

Secondly, it needs to be clarified what correspondence consists of and how we determine when something corresponds. Opponents of the correspondence theory hold that no satisfactory account can be given of this relation. Whether it is seen as copying, similarity in structure or one-to-one relation, serious issues seem to arise. However, this does not necessarily need to bother the correspondence theorist. A. C. Ewing states that the issues are unproblematic and can safely be ignored:

*It seems clear, however, that such criticism cannot be final, for the reason why all accounts of it involve great difficulties may be simply that the relation is unique and unanalysable. In that case we need not be troubled by our failure to give an account of it in terms of other relations, because it is simply not identical in character with any other relation or combination of relations. Our failure to define it may be simply due to the fact that it is intrinsically such as neither to require nor to admit of a definition. (195-196)*

Even if the correspondence relation needs clarification, this does not entail that the definition of truth could not follow the correspondence notion, but

simply that our current correspondence theory might fail in capturing this notion. To reject the correspondence theory of truth it is not enough to show that it currently does not work, but rather that it cannot work.

Thirdly, the theory needs to explain which part of reality the judgement corresponds to. The family of correspondence theories can be divided into object-based theories and fact-based theories. The object-based theories assume that the judgement has a subject-predicate structure and take the judgement to be true if this subject-predicate relation holds for the relevant object in the world. Object-based theories include two relations, one between the subject and the predicate, and one between the subject of the judgement with the object in the world. For fact-based theories judgements do not have to have this subject-predicate structure, but rather should describe a fact or state of affairs in the world. The proposition is taken to be true if the fact or state of affairs obtain.

However, both types suffer from the same issue. If truth is based on correspondence with facts or objects in the world, we cannot not know whether judgements correspond to these facts or objects. To do so would either require us to have judgements about these facts and objects existing in a certain way, which would make the theory circular, or would require us to have direct access to the facts, which we do not seem to have. Ewing writes that

*We cannot test the truth of a judgment by seeing whether it corresponds to facts without, so to speak, translating these facts into other judgments. Facts can only be reached through cognitive processes, and therefore the results of a cognitive process can only be tested by other processes. What we call testing by reference to facts is really testing by reference to more elementary cognitions. Sensation as mere feeling must give rise to judgment before it can be*

*used as a test.* (198)

This refutes the view that correspondence is the criterion of truth, but not necessarily that it is the definition of truth. Correspondence could constitute the nature of truth without constituting its criterion. However, this does lead to a position of radical scepticism, as it entails that it is possible that we can be wrong about everything we hold to be true. Many reject this form of the correspondence theory, as they think that this possibility is absurd. This also leads some verificationists to reject the theory. According to verificationism a claim must be implied by a finite number of observations in order to be meaningful. Holding the correspondence theory to be a definitional theory of truth would turn all our judgements meaningless, as no amount of observations could ever confirm them.

Another objection doubts the possibility of a connection between judgements and 'the facts'. This objection comes in two forms: either it denies that facts exist, or that objective similarities exist. The denial of facts is based on the connection between true judgements and the facts. While the correspondence theorist might argue that correspondence is a necessary notion because it is obvious that what is true is that which is the case, it can similarly be said that what is the case is obviously that which is true. If facts are determined by true sentences, we cannot base the notion of truth on them, as this would be circular. Quine argues that facts are fictions "projected from true sentences for the sake of correspondence" (213). If facts are fictitious entities, then we cannot base truth on them, and an alternative must be found. The second form of this objections calls into question the possibility of objective similarities between judgements and the world. This objection is based on the assumption that there are infinitely many different ways in which things

can be classified, and that in the end it is us that determine the classification. Concepts like Goodman's 'grue', which classifies together things that are green before midnight tonight and things that are blue after midnight tonight, or Kripke's 'quus', where ' $x$  quus  $y$ ' =  $x + y$  if  $x, y < 57$ , but = 5 otherwise, can be argued to be as valid a way of classifying things as 'blue', 'green' and 'plus'. It is not the case that we freely choose which concepts to use, but that something in our minds chooses which concepts are used. However, the objection argues, we cannot say that 'greenness' constitutes an objective similarity between things any more than 'grueness' does. Not even existence can be ascribed to independent reality. Existence is one of our concepts, which divides between existents and non-existents, and could equally well be replaced by the notion of 'quexistence' (Walker, 16). If we accept these arguments, we have to conclude that there are either no similarities with or features of reality independent of our system of concepts or endlessly many. Neither can be permitted for the correspondence theory of truth to function. If there do not exist privileged similarities with reality independent of our concepts, we cannot depend on reality for the truth of our judgements. In the absence of facts or privileged similarities between judgements and facts, the correspondence theory of truth fails to specify a specific notion of truth based on the way the world is. As such, an alternative will need to be found.

## 2.2 Alternative Theories of Truth

In the previous section we have seen that there are issues with the correspondence theory of truth. If the correspondence theory of truth cannot be maintained, it is necessary to look for other theories of truth. These theories can be divided into two categories: substantial theories, which hold certain views of what truth is, and deflationary theories, which hold that a substantive



analysis of truth is not possible. Substantial theories of truth include the correspondence theory of truth, but also coherence theories of truth, which hold that what it is for something to be true is for it to cohere with a defined set of beliefs, where beliefs are taken to be accepted judgements, and traditional pragmatic theories of truth, which (roughly) holds that theories are true if they are useful to believe. Deflational theories hold that no definition can be given of the concept 'truth'. They argue that truth is transparent. There seems to be no difference between saying that 'Snow is white' and saying that 'It is true that snow is white'. If this is the case, then 'truth' has no individual character beyond the statement of which it says something. Deflationists hold that because truth lacks any character, we can get rid of the concept all together.

Of these alternative theories, this thesis shall focus on the coherence theory of truth, as it has historically been seen as the main competitor to the correspondence theory of truth, and is the most likely to present a meaningful alternative to the correspondence theory of truth.

While deflationism might seem like another alternative to the correspondence theory, it suffers from several problems. Deflationism has issues explaining why truth is a norm of inquiry and assertion, cannot use a truth-functional account of meaning, and cannot explain why true beliefs are more successful than false beliefs. Furthermore, one could wonder whether deflationism argues against the concept of truth, or merely the semantic notion '... is true'. If, as the argument goes, asserting 'Snow is white is true' is the same as asserting 'Snow is white', because 'Snow is white is true' if and only if 'Snow is white', then similarly, asserting 'Snow is white' asserts that it is true that snow is white. While the addition of 'is true' might not have a distinct character, we are asserting that something is the case when we assert it.

Deflationism should explain why their theory holds for the concept of truth as a whole, or risk being a purely semantic theory about the sentence-part '... is true'.

So far, the coherence theory of truth has only been explained as stating that what it is for something to be true is for it to cohere with a defined set of beliefs. Before this theory can be defined in more detail, it is first necessary to look at the reasons commonly held for accepting a coherence theory of truth, which the next section will do, and at the relation between truth and the world. The coherence theory will be presented in more detail in chapter 4.

### **2.3 Reasons For a Coherence Theory of Truth**

Different philosophers may be drawn to a coherence theory of truth for different reasons. These reasons can be divided into two categories: ontological reasons, where one accepts a coherence theory of truth because of a particular belief of how the world is, and epistemological reasons, where one accepts a coherence theory of truth because of a particular belief of how knowledge works. The ontological reasons are a prior commitment to ontological idealism combined with the belief that coherence is the most likely shape of this idealism, and the aforementioned idea that reality has no defined properties (Candlish; Young). The epistemological reasons include a belief in verificationism, the idea that radical scepticism is absurd and that the coherence theory can solve the sceptical challenge, and a prior acceptance of the coherence theory of knowledge.

### 2.3.1 **Ontological Reasons**

Early versions of the coherence theory of truth were primarily set forth by idealists. According to Walker, coherentism was held by, among others, Spinoza, Fichte and Hegel (ix-x). Coherence theories of truth were also adopted by many British idealists around the end of the 19th and the start of the 20th century, among others by F.H. Bradley. Idealism, as an ontological position, holds that there is no ontological distinction between a belief and the objective conditions that make this belief true (Young). Because of this, idealism is naturally opposed to the correspondence theory of truth. We cannot view mind-independent reality as the basis of truth if there is no mind-independent reality. If, as idealism holds, reality is mind-dependent, there is no ontological distinction between beliefs and reality. If there is no such distinction, the truth of a belief cannot be a result of something which is not a belief. Instead, it is other beliefs that make a belief true. This can be seen as a form of the coherence theory of truth: the truth of a belief is determined by whether a belief is supported by other true beliefs. In recent years, arguments for the coherence theory of truth on the basis of ontological idealism have become rare. This is mostly owing to the fact that realism has become the dominant ontological position in philosophy in recent years, and few people are inclined to accept idealism. The relation between idealism and the coherence theory of truth will be worked out in more detail in later chapters.

The belief that reality has no objective characteristics also leads to the coherence theory of truth. As stated above, the absence of objective characteristics of reality poses a problem for the correspondence theory of truth. If there are no objective characteristics then the characteristics and concepts upon which we depend for statements about the world do not share a privileged

similarity with reality independent of this context. Because of this, we cannot depend on this similarity for the truth of our statements. Walker writes of this that:

*The truth of our statements cannot depend upon the character of independent reality. For independent reality has no particular character; nothing is more, or less, like anything else independently of the concepts we apply; features, properties, and hence things themselves are introduced into the world only by our classification – for things can be identified and individuated only by their properties. (16)*

If not for an independent reality, it seems that the truth of our statements is based on another set of beliefs – the concepts that we use. From this, a coherence theory arises in which the truth of a statement depends on other accepted statements. Wittgenstein, according to Walker, holds such an opinion, in which truth becomes a social matter (1989, p. 17). True statements are those that cohere with the social practise, and if individual use of a concept differs, it is wrong.

### **2.3.2 Epistemological Reasons**

It is also possible to hold a coherence theory of truth on epistemological grounds. One prominent argument for the coherence theory of truth derives it from the coherence theory of knowledge. This view was, among others, held by prominent coherentists and idealists such as Bradley, Blanshard and Neurath (Walker, 167).

The coherence theory of knowledge, rather than being about the nature of truth, is a theory about justification. It holds that every belief, to be validly

held, requires justification, which can only come in the form of other beliefs. This belief requires a justification in turn, and can also only be justified by reference to other beliefs, which once again need to be justified, and so on. According to the coherence theory of knowledge, it is absurd to presuppose that such a chain of justification requires an infinite amount of distinct beliefs, and as such it must turn back upon itself, which means that beliefs can be used to justify beliefs used in their justification. Thus, the justification of a belief is found in its fitting into a network of beliefs.

An alternative to the coherence theory of knowledge is the suggestion of epistemologically basic beliefs such as Russellian knowledge by acquaintance or beliefs that justify themselves, however, this goes against the core belief of the coherence theory of knowledge that every belief needs to be justified by another belief, and as such cannot be accepted by proponents of this theory.

The coherence theory of knowledge leads to problems if it is held in combination with a correspondence theory of truth. This opens up the possibility that all our beliefs, no matter how well justified they are, could be false. It seems that no argument against this can be given under a correspondence theory of truth. While some might not see this as an important worry, it cannot be refuted, for any argument against it would merely add to the feeling of certainty and the justification of the held beliefs. This new argument could also be wrong, and the world might still be completely different than we believe. Walker writes of this that:

*However convincing, however coherent, however elaborate the arguments by which we support our beliefs, and however strongly we may hold them, there*

*yet remains a possibility that reality may fail to match them, for it is not obvious that 'this little agitation of the brain which we call thought' must work in such a way as to give us the truth of the world. (8)*

Those that hold a coherence theory of knowledge and the belief that the possibility of radical scepticism is absurd have a reason to reject the correspondence theory of truth. As an alternative, the coherence theory of truth seems a good match to a coherence theory of knowledge, as in this combination, it is impossible for a justified belief to be untrue, as the truth of a belief lies exactly in its coherence with other beliefs, just like its justification.

The connection between the coherence theory of knowledge and the coherence theory of truth can also be direct. Verificationism holds that while it is possible for any belief to be false, it is, at least in principle, possible for us to find out that they are, using the means we have for assessing and evaluating claims. For verificationists, it is impossible that a claim is false yet impossible to falsify. Because of this, verificationism leads to an identification of the coherence theory of knowledge and the coherence theory of truth. If a belief is justifiable, then it is true. The claim that there is a possibility that all our justified beliefs are false is seen as empty or nonsensical: truth is the fitting into a coherent system, and nothing more. For verificationists, it is not even necessary to accept the coherence theory of knowledge to accept the coherence theory of truth, verificationism alone provides a good reason. Even without the coherence theory of knowledge, it is difficult to see how we could reliably check the truth of beliefs against the world. To provide an alternative to the coherence theory, some statements have to be given a position of being either evident or in no need of justification so that they can provide justification for other beliefs. However, such beliefs might very well be false without a possibility of finding out that this is the case. We may have to treat these beliefs

as beyond question, but when accepting the correspondence theory of truth, there will always remain a gap between belief and reality, no matter how obvious certain things seem. The coherence theory of truth allows us to explain why doubts about deeply held beliefs are not only pointless, but also wrong.

Opponents of coherence theories of truth state that the coherence theory leads to idealism, confuses truth with the criterion of truth, and that it must by its very nature be circular. Furthermore, many feel that it is a radical theory of truth, in which truth becomes completely separated from the world. In the fourth chapter, the coherence theory of truth will be explained in a more detailed fashion, and we shall see that these objections fall short: while truth is indeed circular in a certain sense, this is not a problem for coherence theorists. Furthermore, one can hold a coherence theory of truth that does not confuse truth with the criterion of truth. Finally, while it is possible that a coherence theory of truth may lead to idealism, this does not necessarily have to be the case. The relation between truth and reality will be discussed more in chapter 3.

## 2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has given an outline of the different theories of truth. The correspondence theory of truth defines truth as the correspondence between a judgement and a state of affairs. However, there are problems both if correspondence is taken as a criterion and as a definition of truth. Correspondence cannot serve as a criterion of truth as we do not have direct access to the facts. When the correspondence theory is taken as a definition of truth, this introduces the risk of radical scepticism, which some feel is absurd. Furthermore, it can be doubted whether facts exist, and whether there is a privileged way

of categorising these facts. Alternative theories of truth are either substantial, like the correspondence theory, in that they say something about what 'Truth' is, or deflationary, in which case they reject the term 'Truth' as a meaningless notion. Deflationism suffers from problems, in that they seem to argue against the truth of the predicate '...is true' rather than the notion of the truth or correctness of a judgement. Of the alternative theories, the coherence theory of truth, which argues that what it is for something to be true is for it to cohere with a specific set of beliefs, is the most likely alternative.



## Chapter 3

# Realism and Idealism

In the previous chapter, the different theories of truth were discussed. From this discussion, it is obvious that not all theories hold the same view of what the world is and how our judgements relate to it. To clarify how different theories view the world, it is necessary to define the terms involved. To this end, this chapter aims to clarify the different views that go by the names of realism and idealism, particularly the frameworks in which they function and the manner in which they interact. Firstly, this chapter will aim to give a short definition of ontological realism and idealism. Secondly, it will differentiate these ontological theories from the epistemological theories of realism and idealism. Thirdly, it will look at the interactions between these categories.

### 3.1 Ontological Realism and Idealism

Ontological realism will be taken as the view that the world as it is exists independently of how any mind takes it to be. While realism is *prima facie* possible for a rich variety of topics, such as ethics, causation, or mathematics, not every ontological realist accepts mind-independent existence of each of these areas. A theory can reject the existence of many of these things and still be distinctly realist (for example, logical positivism presents a particularly scarce image of what exists, whilst still being realist.) It seems, then, that what determines whether someone is a realist is not what is stated to

exist, but rather the importance given to mind-independent existence.

Ontological realism consists of two central claims, a claim of existence and a claim of independence. According to the claim of existence, certain things exist. In the case of realism of macroscopic objects, this entails that things like trees and chairs exist, just as facts about these objects, like trees being round and chairs being wooden. The claim of independence states that these objects and facts exist independently of any thoughts or thinking mind. Following this division into two central claims, an attack on realism can take two routes, attacking either the claim of existence or the claim of independence. While many critics of the realism of specific things like platonic numbers or ethics seem to focus on the claim of existence, critics of ontological realism primarily focus on the claim of independence.

Ontological idealism rejects ontological realism by rejecting the claim of independence. Ontological idealism asserts that reality is fundamentally mental, mentally constructed, or immaterial. This does not mean that at one point a mind created the world, as theist philosophies are usually not considered idealist, but rather that a mind plays a definitive part in the existence of the world. Ewing states that "They [idealist philosophers] have in common that there can be no physical objects existing apart from some experience" (3). This rejection of a real world independent of us can be done for many reasons, but according to Ewing three reasons are most common:

(1) A general theory of knowledge implies that no object can exist apart from a knowing mind

(2) The view that the particular characteristics of matter logically imply an experiencing or thinking mind.

(3) The view that physical objects, while not implying a mind on which they depend, are themselves of the nature of experience or are physical entities or some kind. (5)

## 3.2 Epistemological Realism and Idealism

Realism can and should be divided into two distinct notions, ontological and epistemological realism. Ontological realism, as we have previously seen, is the view that there is a world that exists independent from our minds and our beliefs about it. Epistemological realism, on the other hand, is an epistemological notion that holds that ontology provides the basis for epistemology. The epistemological norms of rightness are derived from the way the world is. Epistemological realism affirms that the correctness of our judgements is based on, and determined by, the world.

This division can also be made in the case of idealism. Ontological idealism affirms that the ultimate foundation of reality is something mental. Epistemological idealism on the other hand makes no statements about the world as it is, but limits itself to making statements about our minds. According to epistemological idealism, everything that we can know and say about mind-independent entities is influenced to such a degree by the formative or constructive activities of the mind that no knowledge can be considered as mind-independent. This is exemplified most clearly in the works of Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer, who hold that although something mind-independent exists (*das Ding an Sich*), our perception is entirely a result of our own minds (Kant; Schopenhauer). Instead of viewing experience and knowledge as based on a real world independent from us, we should view

it as being of a mental nature. Because of this, the correctness of our judgments should not be taken to be based on the world as it exists independent of us, but as being based on something mental.

While epistemological idealism and ontological idealism have historically been treated as two separate (although related) concepts, this largely has been absent in the case of the two realist theories. It seems that there is confusion between ontological and epistemological realism, and that the distinction is not often addressed. For example, Putnam (49) and Wright (142) maintain that ontological realism is not just a theory about the existence of mind-independent objects, but is also committed to a realist conception of truth. Others go even further and claim that ontological realism is merely a thesis about the nature of truth, specifically that truth exists even in cases that go beyond verification (Miller). Thus, ontological realism is constructed as an epistemological notion that affirms the law of bivalence (Dummett). This conflation of epistemological realism and ontological realism has advanced to such a far point that epistemological realism is often seen as a truism. Thus, Alexander Miller states that

*Independent of the issue of the relationship between metaphysics and the theory of meaning, the well-known disquotational properties of the truth-predicate allow claims about objects, properties, and facts to be framed as claims about the truth of sentences. Since:*

*(1) The moon is spherical is true if and only if the moon is spherical*

*the claim that the moon exists and is spherical independently of anyone's beliefs, linguistic practices and conceptual schemes, can be framed as the claim*

*that the sentences 'The moon exists' and 'The moon is spherical' are true independently of anyone's beliefs, linguistic practices, conceptual schemes and so on.*

This states that ontological realism can be paraphrased as epistemological realism. Similarly, many of the critics of this undistinguished version of realism actually seem to target epistemological realism. For example, the language acquisition argument argues against realism on the basis that if a link between the mind and the world existed, language learning would be impossible. This argues against epistemological realism, but presents itself as also arguing against ontological realism. Similarly, the Brain-In-A-Vat argument purports to show that realism is false by stating that it holds that it is possible that we could have no knowledge at all of the real world, including the knowledge that we have no knowledge. This is, it is argued, an absurd possibility, and because of this realism should be rejected (Khrentzos). However, this rejection of undistinguished realism bases itself on the assumption that an ontological realist also subscribes to epistemological realism and thus affirms that an ideal theory of the world could be completely false. The argument does not show that ontological realism is false, but merely that the combination of epistemological and ontological realism might have unwanted consequences.

### **3.3 Conclusion**

As shown in the previous section, what is commonly called realism should be separated into ontological and epistemological realism. Ontological and epistemological idealism should also be distinguished. There seems to be no *prima facie* inconsistency with any of the combinations of epistemological and ontological theories. Berkeley is likely the most well-known ontological

idealists, as he believes that the world is mind-dependent, but he also holds that the truth of statements depend on that mind-dependent world. Kant is a well-known epistemological idealist, but is an ontological realist: he believes in a world independent of the mind, *das Ding an Sich*, which causes our perceptions. As discussed previously, epistemological realism is often combined with ontological realism without obvious problems. Finally, epistemological idealism and ontological idealism also seem like a possible combination. While it is probably the least common combination of these concepts, it is not impossible to believe that there is a world that exists only in the mind of God, whilst also believing that the truth of our judgements depends on other judgements.

To avoid confusion, it is necessary that the notions of epistemological realism/idealism on the one side and ontological realism/idealism on the other side are not conflated, and are seen as distinct notions that do not necessarily relate to one another in any fixed way.

## Chapter 4

# Truth, Epistemology and Metaphysics

As discussed in the previous chapter, when analysing different theories of truth, it is important to distinguish the ontological question of the foundation of reality and the epistemological question of the foundation of the correctness of judgements. This chapter will look at how the correspondence theory and the coherence theory stand with respect to these two fields.

### 4.1 Correspondence and Ontology

As previously stated, the notion central to the correspondence theory of truth is the idea that what it means for a judgement to be true is for this judgement to correspond to the facts. It holds that the foundation of knowledge can be found in a certain relation to the world, and is thus epistemologically realist.

Historically, most correspondence theorists have been ontologically realist, but this is not necessary. It is possible to hold that the truth of a proposition is determined by its correspondence to the facts, and simultaneously hold that these facts are mind-dependent.

From the combination of epistemic realism and either ontological realism or idealism, we can draw the following picture for the correspondence theory of truth. The correctness of a judgement is determined by the truth of the content which it expresses. The truth of this content, in turn, is determined by whether it corresponds to facts or a state of affairs in the world. The world can either be taken to be mind-dependent or not, depending on the exact type of correspondence theory and an adherence to either ontological realism or idealism.

## 4.2 Coherence and Ontology

We have seen that the correspondence theory is essentially epistemologically realist. How then, should we view the coherence theory of truth?

### 4.2.1 Coherence and Epistemological Realism

Nicholas Rescher, in *The Coherence Theory of Truth* states that we should not view the coherence theory of truth as giving the meaning of the word 'true' (23). Rather, he argues, the coherence theory of truth aims to give us a criterion of truth. The definitional meaning of truth still consists of a relation to reality:

*Yet even if one utterly rejects the core thesis of the correspondence theory that truth means 'correspondence to the fact' (adaequatio ad rem in the old formula), one is still left – in any event – with the impregnable thesis that a true proposition is one that states what is in fact the case. The link from truth to factuality is not to be broken, regardless of one's preferred conception of the definitional nature of truth. Even the most ardent coherence theorist must grant, certainly not the premise of the coherence theory that truth means*



*correspondence to the facts, but merely its consequence, that truths must correspond to the facts. (Rescher, 28)*

Rescher states here that even if the coherence theory of truth tries to replace the correspondence theory, it will have to do so while accepting epistemological realism.

According to this interpretation of the coherence theory of truth, the truth of a judgement is still determined by its correspondence to the facts. Coherence is given the role of providing a criterion of truth: Rescher holds that while the definition of truth lies in correspondence, this does not help in determining which statements actually are true, and he sees coherence as a possible means to that end. The coherence theory of truth thus becomes a tool in the search for truth.

Rescher at this point has not yet made it clear in what way coherence would function as a criterion. He distinguishes between guaranteeing and authorizing criteria. The difference between the two lies in the relation between *passing-the-criterion-of-being-an-X* and *actually-being-an-X* (Rescher, 4). When criterion-satisfaction makes failure impossible, we can speak of a guaranteeing criterion. If the criterion only offers us a reason to accept something, it is an authorizing criterion. Depending on what kind of criterion coherence is, the theory should be seen and treated differently.

Rescher uses reasoning of Blanshard, which argues accordingly:

(1) A coherence theory of truth has to take coherence as the prime test of truth

(2) If the definition of truth is not coherence but something that is not logically tantamount to it, this definition can potentially diverge from coherence: thus, coherence cannot be a guaranteeing criterion.

(3) Since premise 1, it must see coherence as a guaranteeing criterion.

This argument offers us the following problem: a coherence theory of truth, to be successful, has to give a sufficiently important role to the notion of coherence. To do this, it seems that coherence has to provide a guaranteeing criterion. However, for coherence to be a guaranteeing criterion means that we also have to view it as the definition of truth. However, as already discussed in section 2.1, when the definition of truth is taken to be correspondence with the world, a logical gap opens up between justification and truth. If coherence is to be a guaranteeing criterion of truth, it also has to be the nature of truth.

Blanshard concludes this as well and states that any proper coherence theory should not see coherence as a guaranteeing criterion, but rather as a definition. Blanshard presents a theory in which coherence is a guaranteeing criterion by accepting a position of epistemological realism but ontological idealism. Blanshard thus erodes the gap between belief and reality by equating the world to our beliefs. For coherence to be a guaranteeing criterion, it needs to play a determining role in how the world is. The world cannot exist independently, but instead must depend on our beliefs.

Rescher objects to Blanshard's reasoning. While he does accept that the conclusion follows from the three premises, he disagrees with Blanshard on whether the third premise should be accepted. Rescher holds that it is possible to have a coherence theory of truth that takes coherence as the prime test

and does not take coherence to provide a guaranteeing criterion. To avoid ontological idealism, he argues, we have to view coherence as being an authorizing criterion. Rescher justifies a criterial coherence theory in the following manner:

*A critic might object: 'You are not really grappling with the core issue of what it is to be true but with the merely peripheral question of what is thought or taken to be true.' To this we reply: Our concern is not simply with the factual question of what 'is thought or taken' to be true, but with the logico-epistemological question of what is reasonably and warrantably to be thought or taken so. (3)*

This might seem like a decent point: a theory that finds true statements can be useful even if it does not strictly define truth. However, while this might defend the utility of a criterial coherence theory, it does not establish its position as being the prime test of truth.

By stating that coherence serves as an authorizing criterion, and not a guaranteeing criterion, Rescher admits that it is possible that the coherence theory of truth can provide us, independently of how likely that may be, with false positives and false negatives. This means that there is something beyond coherence which determines truth and has primacy over it. As such, it seems that, at least in an ideal situation, there is a test of truth that functions before and above coherence. If this is the case, we cannot justifiably call coherence the prime test of truth. It seems Rescher could equally well avoid the conclusion in a similar fashion by denying Blanshard's first proposition, and state that a coherence theory of truth could do without having coherence as its prime test of truth. However, it is doubtful whether such a theory can still be called a theory of truth. It neither defines truth nor offers us a preferred

way of finding it, rather it would merely introduce coherence as a possible mechanism of finding out some truths.

Rescher's theory of truth cannot do with just accepting coherence as an authorizing criterion, but should also explain what the definition of truth is, and how the two relate. We would also need to find out in what cases coherence can and cannot serve as a trustworthy criterion: if a statement given by it could turn out to be false, coherence would not solve any of the issues of the correspondence theory of truth.

This criticism of the coherence theory of truth is similar to that presented by Thagard in *Coherence, Truth and the Development of Scientific Knowledge*. He states that:

*If there is a world independent of representations of it, as historical evidence suggests, then the aim of representation should be to describe the world, not just to relate to other representations. My argument does not refute the coherence theory, but shows that it implausibly gives minds too large a place in constituting truth. (29-30)*

Thagard's point can be restated in the following manner: if coherence provides an authorizing criterion, it can be wrong, and we should instead focus our attention on looking at what actually is the case instead. The fundamental nature of truth is then put back to correspondence, and to that we should pay most attention. Coherence can be useful, but only if we determine how coherence exactly relates to the real world and when it is useful. Thus, coherence is turned into a minor tool in the process. This objection can be circumvented by making coherence a guaranteeing criterion, but, according to Thagard, this can only be done by accepting ontological idealism.

As such, regardless of whether we follow Rescher's argumentation or accept the criticisms provided against it, it seems that epistemic realism either leads to the rejection of the coherence theory, or to the acceptance of ontological idealism.

#### 4.2.2 Coherence and Epistemological Idealism

According to Walker, in *The Coherence Theory of Truth* Rescher held that no one could have taken the coherence theory actually to be a theory about the definition of truth. He does that because, according to Walker, he has accepted certain of its stock rejections. Particularly, as discussed above, Rescher holds that while we might deny the correspondence theory of truth by denying that correspondence is what constitutes truth, we would still have to accept that a true judgement states what is in fact the case. Walker, however, argues that it is perfectly possible to accept this while holding coherence as the definition of truth. The coherence theory of truth, for Walker, holds that:

*For a proposition to be true is for it to cohere with a certain system of beliefs. It is not just that it is true if and only if it coheres with that system, it is that the coherence, and nothing else, is what the truth consists in. In particular, truth does not consist in holding of some correspondence between the proposition and some reality which obtains independent of anything that may be believed about it. (2)*

Walker defends this by arguing that statements like 'true judgements correspond with the facts' do not commit one to accept the correspondence theory of truth. It is possible not to take this statement as a definition of truth by denying that 'the facts' refer to a metaphysically independent reality. It

seems to Walker that 'correspondence with the facts' is habitually used as an equivalent to 'is true', and we should question whether it is an informative statement and what exactly 'the facts' are. It is very possible to argue that 'the facts' are not independent of our beliefs at all, but rather a depiction of our beliefs. In the opinion of the coherentist, it will be the coherence with the accepted system of beliefs that determines what 'the facts' are.

We are justified, according to Walker, in rejecting the requirement of epistemological realism. As such, we can view the coherence theory of truth as an epistemologically idealist theory, in which the truth and falsity of a judgement is not based on a relation to the world, but rather on a specific relation to other ideas: coherence. In this version of the coherence theory of truth, the truth of a judgement is determined by its proposition, and the truth of the proposition is determined by the coherence of the proposition with other propositions or judgements.

While the direct relation between judgements and truth on the basis of coherence is certainly a radical thesis, fewer structural issues stand in its way than the previous theories of truth. Unlike the theory proposed by Rescher, it does not need to defend the role that is given to coherence: it simply is coherence that determines truth. Similarly, it is easier to define than a correspondence theory of truth. It has no need to define what (the) facts are, what the relation between judgements and facts is, and how judgements can relate to facts. It simply relies on a certain principle of coherence and a previously assumed set of judgements to base this coherence on. The principle of coherence is, once defined, also not a particularly difficult one. As such, the coherence theory of truth, when defined as an epistemologically idealist theory, provides a rather clear and accessible theory.

### 4.3 Comparison of Different Coherence Theories

The coherence theory can take at least three shapes. Under epistemological realism, it can either be an authorizing criterial theory, or an ontologically idealist theory. When accepting epistemological idealism, coherence theory can be taken as a definitional theory. As already stated above, a theory of authorizing criteria gives relatively little importance to coherence, with doubts as to what use coherence has at all. What remains are the ontologically idealist and epistemologically idealist versions of the theories. In the previous chapter we saw four possible reasons for rejecting the correspondence theory of truth and accepting the coherence theory of truth: a position of ontological idealism, verificationism, the desire to refute radical scepticism, and the position that we can make no meaningful statements about facts, either because they do not exist or because they do not have an objective character. If one was led to the coherence theory of truth because of the problems that the correspondence theory is faced with within the metaphysical framework of ontological idealism, it seems quite natural that one would accept a version of the theory that gives coherence a place in determining how the world is.

The position that we can make no meaningful statements about facts quite naturally leads to accepting a coherence theory of truth on the basis of epistemological idealism over one that features ontological idealism. If we cannot make statements about facts, or if there are no facts, then we cannot let facts be the determining factor with respect to truth. Instead we are forced to find something else on which to base truth. The most obvious answer, possibly the only answer, is to give this position to other judgements. This results in a position of epistemological idealism. Furthermore, a position of ontological idealism would go against the claims that facts do not exist or cannot

meaningfully be talked about. If the world depends on our thoughts or beliefs about it, then the world exists in a determined fashion. For these two reasons, the position that denies the sense of speaking about facts lead to epistemologically idealist version of the coherence theory of truth.

It is doubtful whether a coherence theory of truth that accepts ontological idealism will help find an answer to radical scepticism. This version of the theory, as stated above, takes coherence to determine the way the world is. While the concrete technicalities may differ in different versions of such a theory, once we accept reality to be constituted as coherence within the collection of judgements and pick a collection of judgements to start with, other judgements will cohere with those initial judgements. It is now either possible that those judgements are already part of reality by merit of cohering with the chosen beliefs, or that they are not yet part of reality until we accept them. If we assume that reality is not just the set of coherent beliefs that we have, but rather the set of maximally coherent beliefs, we are once again disconnected from reality. It is now, once again, perfectly possible that the world is different from how we think it is. On the other hand, if we hold that the world is determined by a set of coherent beliefs that we currently hold, there is no solidity to reality. With any new experience, it would be possible that our ideas about the world, and thus our set of coherent beliefs could change. This would in turn change the way the world is. While in this situation we have knowledge of how the world is, no argument can be made to give any primacy to the current way we believe the world to be.

Verificationism runs into similar problems. If reality is composed of the maximum set of coherent beliefs, there will be judgements that are deemed 'true' despite the inability to ever gain real information about it. If we take



reality to be composed of the set of coherent beliefs one currently holds, reality once again becomes a very unstable concept.

To conclude, it seems that there are two viable interpretations of the coherence theory of truth: one that takes the coherence notion to play a role in constituting reality, and one that takes coherence to constitute the truth of a judgement, independent of reality. Those that are led to the coherence theory of truth by ontologically idealist reasons will be inclined to accept the ontologically idealist notion, whereas those that are driven to coherence for epistemic reasons will prefer the epistemologically idealist version of the theory.

## **4.4 Responding to the Criticisms of the Coherence Theory**

The previous section established that there are two versions of the coherence theory that seem tenable. We shall now look whether either of these versions can avoid the common criticisms of the coherence theory.

### **4.4.1 The Specification Objection**

First of all, I shall discuss the specification objection, originating from Bertrand Russell. According to this objection, coherence theories cannot identify the specified set of proposition without contradicting the coherence theory of truth. The argument goes as follows: The proposition (1) 'Jane Austen was hanged for murder' coheres with some set of propositions. (2) "Jane Austen died in her bed" coheres with another set of propositions. The specification objection states that no-one supposes that proposition (1) is true, despite its

coherence with a set of propositions, but that coherence theorists have no grounds for saying that (1) is false and (2) is true (Young). According to Russell, proponents cannot claim that one set of propositions should be given preference over another set of propositions. Traditionally, this giving of preference of one set of propositions over another is done with reference to experience. Harold H. Joachim writes that:

*Truth, we said, was the systematic coherence which characterised a significant whole. And we proceeded to identify a significant whole with 'an organised individual experience, self-fulfilling and self-fulfilled.' Now there can be one and only one such experience: or only one significant whole, the significance of which is self-contained in the sense required. For it is absolute self-fulfilment, absolutely self-contained significance, that is postulated; and nothing short of absolute individuality – nothing short of the completely whole experience – can satisfy this postulate. And human knowledge – not merely my knowledge or yours, but the best and fullest knowledge in the world at any stage of its development – is clearly not a significant whole in this ideally complete sense. Hence the truth, which our sketch described, is – from the point of view of human intelligence – an Ideal, and an Ideal which can never, as such, or in its completeness, be actual as human experience. (78)*

To avoid the possibility of multiple possible sets of allowed propositions with which a statement can be coherent, Joachim refers to experience and the ideal nature of the coherence required. According to Russell, both cannot work. Of the reference to experience he writes:

*I am content for the present to point out an ambiguity in the notion of "experience." The proposition "Bishop Stubbs was hanged for murder" consists of parts given in experience, and put together in a manner which, in other cases,*

*is unfortunately also given in experience. And it is possible to apprehend the proposition, so that in one sense the proposition can be experienced... When we apprehend the proposition "Bishop Stubbs was hanged for murder," this proposition is, in a sense, a part of our experience; but in another sense, which is that relevant in constructing the whole of truth, we do not experience this proposition, since we are not led to believe it. This distinction shows that experience, in the sense required by Mr. Joachim, consists of apprehension of truth, and that there is much apprehension which, though experience in one sense, is experience in a sense in which what is false can also be experienced.*

(35)

Russell holds that, seeing how we can experience a proposition which is false, we need to distinguish between the kind of experiences and further define which can be allowed to hold this special position. According to Russell, this can only be done by reference to the experience of truth. This would involve another notion of truth than the one that the coherence theory of truth claims as legitimate.

However, it seems that, upon closer inspection, Russell's criticism is not valid. His point rests on the fact that we experience propositions which are false much like we experience other things which are true. However, this argument rests on a conflation of the experience of a judgement and an experience of the proposition that that judgement expresses. There is a difference between experiencing that today is sunny and experiencing the proposition "today is sunny". While both are experiences, they are not the same experience, and they justify us to believe different things. The experience of a sunny day allows us to believe that the day is sunny, whereas the experience of the proposition 'today is sunny' allows us to believe that we entertained

the proposition "today is sunny". A further clarification of the notion of experience and the difference of a proposition and the event it is about shows that Russell's complaint can easily be resolved, and that experience seems like a perfectly valid special category.

Russell's objection against the 'ideal' nature of Joachim's coherence theory of truth seems to be more fair.

*As for the deus ex machina, the ideal experience in which the whole of truth is actualised, I will merely observe that he is in general somewhat discredited, and that idealists themselves are rather ashamed of him, as appears by the fact that they never mention him when they can help it, and that when they do, they introduce him with apologetic words, such as "what is true in the end" – as though what is true "in the end" were anything different from what is true. (35)*

The introduction of the ideal experience or most coherent set of propositions does appear to solve some immediate problems, for example it solidifies the notion of truth, in that in an ideal version, it is impossible for truth to change with any new experience or decision. However, it also reopens problems whose solution made the coherence theory of truth attractive in the first place. If what is true is not what is coherent, but what is coherent in an ideal situation, the possibility of radical scepticism is once again present. What is ideally coherent could be completely different than anything that we believe. Furthermore, there could be statements that are ideally coherent that we can never verify with our standards of justification. However, this is only a problem in a coherence theory of truth that accepts epistemic realism. When one accepts that the truth of a statement is related to the way the world actually is, independently of our thoughts about it, there cannot be more than one

Truth, as there can only be one way that reality ultimately is, independently of us. However, it is not obvious that there can only be one truth if one severs the link between the truth of beliefs and the world as it is independently of us. When one adopts a coherence theory of truth that accepts epistemic idealism, one accepts that the truth of a belief is based on its coherence with other beliefs, but until this point we have not yet defined the scale of the beliefs that we are taking into account. The coherent system of beliefs when only taking into account one's personal experience will plausibly, and even likely, be different from the coherent system of beliefs that develops when accepting the personal experiences of a whole community or humanity as a whole. It is at this point not clear which of those forms of the coherence theory we should prefer. This will be discussed more in-depth in the next chapter. At this point, I shall only note that different inclusions of personal experiences will lead to different truths, and that this is not *per se* problematic.

#### 4.4.2 The Transcendence Objection

The transcendence objection claims that the coherence theory of truth cannot account for the fact that some propositions are true despite cohering with no set of belief (Young). There are statements about things which we will likely never reasonably be able to gain information about. It seems that the statement "Jane Austen wrote ten sentences on November 17th, 1807" and statements with a different number are either true or not true. However, it is unlikely that one such statement will uniquely cohere with a set of beliefs, owing to the absence of further information about the statements. Still, critics claim, one of these sentences must be true. Because the coherence theory of truth cannot accommodate these kind of statements, it must be flawed.

Some versions of the coherence theory of truth can avoid this problem

altogether. In a version of the coherence theory that bases the truth of statements on coherence with an ideal, or perfect, set of beliefs, these statements are completely unproblematic, as there is one and exactly one such statement that coheres with the perfect set of beliefs. However, as previously mentioned, such a version of the theory loses many of the advantages of a coherence theory.

Alternatively, one can deny the first premise of the argument: a coherentist can say that there are no statements that are true without cohering to a set of beliefs, as according to this theory, to be true is to cohere with a set of beliefs. The transcendence objection, then, is a circular argument in which it is said that truth cannot be based on coherence because there is truth that is not coherent. This cannot provide an argument against the coherence theory of truth, as such an argument would need to actually engage the arguments that lead to the position, rather than just reject the theory as a whole.

### **4.4.3 Circularity of Truth**

The third objection is that a coherence theory of truth makes truth circular, and that because of this it cannot be accepted. While it is true that the coherence theory of truth makes truth circular, this is not a problem. The reasons that lead one to accepting the coherence theory of truth already lead one to a circular theory of truth, as we shall see when we look at the reasons again.

The first ontological reason that we encountered was a belief in ontological idealism, in which there is no mind-independent world, and the world is made up from beliefs or exists only in the mind. If this is the case, beliefs about this world can never be independent from the world, nor can the world be independent from the beliefs about it. Regardless of which direction this

dependence takes place in, there is a circularity: the truth of a belief depends on the world which in turn depends on a belief which in turn depends on the world, which repeats *ad infinitum*. If one accepts ontological idealism, and with it a circular account of truth, the correspondence theory of truth can no longer work, as the correspondence notion does not work for a world which is not mind-independent. In such a situation, the correspondence theory of truth cannot say whether things are true, because the truth of the belief influences the world to which the correspondence theory compares it. A coherence theory of truth can be adapted to explain how beliefs, the world, and truth interact without leading to inconsistencies.

The second ontological reason to adopt a coherence theory of truth was the idea that there are no objective characteristics to reality. If our concepts are not representative of anything in reality, then we also cannot test our claims by comparing them against reality. The most obvious alternative is to let the truth of our beliefs be determined by other beliefs. After all, the definitions of concepts play an important, if not fundamental, role in determining whether the use of a concept is correct. With this, a coherence theory of truth is adopted. But that is not all that happens: when one makes the move from letting the truth of a belief depend on other beliefs, one already takes the step towards a circular notion of truth. The truth of statements depends on the truth of other statements, which once again depends on the truth of other statements, and this either leads to infinite regress, unjustifiable statements, or statements that support statements which support it. The circularity of truth is a consequence of accepting this ontological reason, not of adopting the coherence theory of truth.

The same holds for epistemic motivation for the coherence theory. If one is led to the coherence theory of truth by the belief that the notion of radical

scepticism is absurd, this also already includes a circular notion of truth before adopting a coherence theory of truth. As we have seen in chapter one, the correspondence theory of truth opens up a logical gap between belief and reality. This gap, however, is problematic for those that feel that scepticism is absurd. Because of that gap, there will always be the possibility that the world is different from everything we believe, even if actually believing that the world is fundamentally different from everything we ever believe is senseless or impossible. The only solution to radical scepticism is closing this logical gap. This is done, once again, through moving from beliefs dependent on reality to beliefs depending on beliefs. As with the second ontological reason given above, this leads to a circular account of truth. The same holds for verificationism. If one believes that it is impossible that things are true without us ever being able to find out whether they are true, it is impossible to have truth depend on an external, mind-independent reality. Instead it needs to depend on other held beliefs. We see that it is not the case that the coherence theory of truth leads one to a circular notion of truth. Rather, a circular notion of truth leads to a coherence theory of truth. Furthermore, if the coherence theory was accepted on the basis of the notion that truth was circular, it seems that denying it because truth is not circular is not adequate. One should rather respond to the arguments given above that seem to indicate that truth must be circular and argue directly with those arguments, rather than simply deny their conclusion.

#### **4.4.4 Confusion between Criterion and Definition**

Another criticism of the coherence theory of truth was the charge that the coherence theory of truth confuses the criterion and the definition of truth. While coherence with other beliefs might provide an excellent criterion for truth, the charge goes, it is clearly not the definition and should not be treated



as such.

This complaint has been treated in detail above. If we take something as a criterion, it should be a guaranteeing criterion. If it is not, we should abandon it, and aim to find a guaranteeing criterion. However, the only way in which coherence can be a guaranteeing criterion is if it is related to the nature of truth, or else it opens up the same logical gap between belief and reality that was previously mentioned. This is possible through the adoption of ontological idealism.

We are left with two possibilities: either we accept coherence as a guaranteeing criterion and accept a form of ontological idealism, or we do not accept it as a criterion. Coherence cannot be a guaranteeing criterion with a realist framework.

Furthermore, we have seen that coherence can serve as a definition of truth once we accept epistemic idealism. The issues caused by taking coherence to be the definition of truth are solved by abandoning epistemic realism.

#### **4.4.5 Leading to Ontological Idealism**

As discussed in chapter 3, there is a viable version of the coherence theory of truth that indeed leads to ontological idealism, but it appeals primarily to those that were led to the coherence theory by ontologically idealist motivations. Thus, the fact that the theory leads to Idealism can hardly be criticised in this context. As for those that do not want to adopt a position of ontological idealism and are therefore lead to the coherence theory of truth by other reasons, it is possible to accept a version of the coherence theory that is epistemologically idealist, and thus says nothing about the way the world

is, independent of our ideas. In neither of these cases, the coherence theory leads to idealism.

## **4.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has looked at the relations between the different theories of truth and their ontologies. This chapter has shown that there seem to be multiple viable theories of truth, namely a correspondence theory that presupposes epistemological realism and either ontological realism or idealism, a coherence theory that presupposes epistemological realism and ontological idealism determined by coherence, and a coherence theory that presupposes epistemological idealism. While there are many differences between these three theories, there is one thing that they have in common. To be a substantial theory of truth, a theory has to say when a judgement is true and when it is not. It can either do so on the basis of something mind-dependent, or on the basis of something that is not, but in both cases there is something objective that determines whether judgements are true. This position we can call metaphysical realism. Through offering a concrete account of what it is for the content of a judgement to be true, they also offer a concrete account of what it is for an act of judgement to be correct. This seems to be an essential characteristic of a theory of truth. To give a definition of truth is to say when judgements are correct and thus to present a correctness-notion. Similarly, if one gives a correctness-notion, one has to (at least covertly) adopt a certain definition of truth. If one can be wrong, there must be something by virtue of which it is wrong, and that something is a theory of truth.

## Chapter 5

# The Origins of Post-Truth

As stated in the introduction, the phenomenon that we are interested in explaining is that of post-truth in contemporary politics, specifically with regard to its relation to truth. Now that we have established an overview of the different theories of truth, we will look at what exactly post-truth is and the history of post-truth. This will provide more insight into the phenomenon, and allow for a better analysis.

### 5.1 What Is Post-Truth?

The term post-truth gained prominence when the Oxford Dictionary named it the Word of the Year 2016. They defined 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" ("Post-Truth"). They, similarly to Searle, state that the 'post' in post-truth does not refer to being beyond truth in a temporal sense, but that in a sense truth has become irrelevant. The core claim of the idea that we live in a post-truth political era is that in contemporary politics (and contemporary discourse as a whole) it is no longer facts that determine whether beliefs are held, but rather political bias, emotions, and ideology.

The idea that contemporary politics are ‘post-truth’ was the result of the political situation in 2015 and 2016, with both the Brexit vote and the US presidential elections suffering from a general abandonment of evidential standards, fake news, and outright lying of politicians. Among the statements made by these campaigns was the claim that the United Kingdom had to pay the European Union 350 million pounds every week that would be spent on the National Healthcare Service if the UK left the EU, a claim made with little evidence which was retracted and removed from their website soon after the Brexit-referendum, or the claim that e-mails published by Wikileaks show that during her time as U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton approved weapon sales to ISIS, where the published e-mails show no such thing (Lichfield). While both campaigns made plenty statements that were, even at the time, easily falsifiable, it did not seem to negatively impact them, as both campaigns had great success and won their elections.

The post-truth trend continued after the elections, with President Donald Trump claiming that he had had the largest electoral victory since Ronald Reagan, while the official numbers presented a very different picture, or that the US murder rate was at a forty-seven year high, while figures from the FBI showed it to be near an all-time low (Revesz; Wilson). Once again, the inaccuracy of these statements did not seem to affect Donald Trump, nor did the many inconsistencies in his policies and contradictions in his statements.

This combination of both a carelessness about whether the world would support their statements and a seemingly complete lack of negative reaction to these false statements led many to believe that there was an international trend where people in power “feel emboldened to try to bend reality to fit their opinions, rather than the other way around” (McIntyre, 18).

Post-truth describes this quality of contemporary politics. Truth no longer seems to be something people care about, and judgements are accepted not on the basis of whether they can be justified or are true, but rather on the basis of personal preference and ideology. Post-truth politics is the name of the political system in which politicians can make claims without any regard for the world or any fear of potential fallout for these claims. It describes a political situation in which emotion and ideology seem to have taken the place of rationality.

## **5.2 Rise of the Post-Truth Era**

In the previous section we have established what is meant by 'post-truth'. However, while there are certain qualities in contemporary politics that can be called 'post-truth', it is not clear how these qualities appeared in politics. This section will aim to clarify this by presenting an overview of the elements that caused post-truth. The overview presented in this chapter will be heavily based on the work of Lee McIntyre's "Post-Truth".

The qualities of the post-truth era can be traced back to three other processes, namely science denialism, changes in modern media, and post-modernism. This section will for each of these processes explain how they led to the current political situation, and explain their relation to the concept of truth.

### **5.2.1 Science Denialism**

In some aspects, science is going through a golden age. Advances in physics allow for technology that previously was unimaginable. Vaccination eradicated many diseases that were once deadly. Agricultural advances feed millions of people previously suffering from food scarcity. Yet despite these

modern successes of science, there seem to be more people questioning the methods and results of science than ever before. McIntyre writes that “Once respected for the authority of its method, scientific results are now openly questioned by legions of nonexperts who happen to disagree with them” (17). This can be seen in many areas in modern politics, such as the debates surrounding the existence of man-made climate change, the effectiveness of vaccinations, the effects of smoking on the human body, and even whether the Earth is really round.

Science denialism is caused by two things, namely a misunderstanding about science and the result of an intentional effort by people with an economic or ideological interest denying specific scientific results.

McIntyre argues that some of the modern distrust of science is based on confusion concerning the term ‘theory’. He states that “Some of this is based on a straightforward misunderstanding (or cynical exploitation) of how science works, based on the mistaken idea that if scientists would just gather enough evidence they could prove a theory” (19). The idea is that scientific theories are ‘just theories’, interpreted as meaning ‘an unproven conjecture’. If this is the case, why would scientific theories be preferable to other theories? If evolution is a theory, and thus unproven, why should we prefer it over other explanations such as intelligent design? The mistaken assumption here is that a scientific theory is unsupported conjecture that could be proven if enough empirical data was gathered; a scientific theory can never be proven. However, this does not mean that it is not empirically supported.

The other cause for the rise of science denialism is more malicious. In 1953, a paper that had recently been published that linked the tar from cigarettes to cancer in lab mice threatened the profits of the tobacco industry.

Public relations expert John Hill proposed to the heads of all major tobacco companies that:

*Instead of continuing to fight among themselves over whose cigarettes were healthier, they needed a unified approach where they would 'fight the science' by sponsoring additional 'research'. (McIntyre, 23)*

On the basis of this proposal, the Tobacco Industry Research Committee was created. The goal of this 'research institute' was to stop the damage that the studies linking cigarettes to cancer would do to these companies' profits, at any cost. To do that, it was necessary to convince the public that there was no danger.

*They funded alternative research to cast doubts on the tobacco-cancer link ... They distributed pamphlets and booklets to doctors, the media, policy makers, and the general public insisting there was no cause for alarm. The industry's position was that there was 'no proof' that tobacco was bad, and they fostered that position by manufacturing a 'debate', convincing the mass media that responsible journalists had an obligation to present 'both sides' of it. (Oreskes & Conway, 16)*

Through this, they aimed to convince the public that there was no scientific consensus, the media that both sides of the story should be given equal attention, and politicians not to act against the interest of the tobacco industry.

This strategy led to great successes for the tobacco industry, who maintained these practices until 1998, when they finally agreed to close the Tobacco Industry Research Committee as part of a settlement deal of a 200 billion dollar lawsuit. Their success was the start of a widespread phenomenon

of large corporations using their resources to influence public opinion on topics that might affect their profits. “The goal of this stratagem is simple: to halt progress on issues that their clients oppose either for financial or ideological reasons” (Rabin-Havt, 4). The tobacco industry started a trend that is now commonly used in the business and political world, among others by the oil industry, pharmaceutical companies, and the NRA. An entire industry has sprung up around the Tobacco-strategy.

*What we see today is a highly organized industry built around the creation and dissemination of falsehoods supported by a media environment that aids and abets its work. Facts are conjured in purportedly academic studies that have only the thinnest veneer of legitimacy. In 2014, one corporate lobbyist explained to the New York Times, ‘Once you have the study, you can point to it to prove your case – even if you paid to get it written.’ (Rabin-Havt, 5)*

This is done specifically to create a political situation in which there is no consensus on what exactly ‘the facts’ are. If there is no such consensus, it is impossible for people to act on this consensus.

That this process is still working in contemporary politics can most clearly be seen in the climate change debate. While there is a broad scientific consensus that climate change both exists and is man-made, this consensus is not clearly shown in modern media. McIntyre writes that “Although there is virtually no scientific debate over the question of whether the global temperature is rising and humans are the primary cause of it, the public has been hoodwinked into thinking that there is a great scientific controversy over this issue” (21). This is partially, as we shall see in the next section, a result of how modern media functions, but also the result of a specific campaign by those



financially invested in the use of fossil fuels to obscure the scientific consensus.

It is clear that science denialism does not have a specific relation to the concept of truth. Rather than saying something about truth, both sides of the trend of science denialism can be combined with any of the ontological views and theories of truth that we have encountered. The lobbyists and those they work for do not reject the existence of 'truth', they merely attempt to obscure one specific truth, so that the consequences of this particular truth does not interfere with their personal financial or ideological agenda. Similarly, those that believe the claims made by these lobbyists are also not committed to one specific world view. It is not that these people reject the existence of 'facts' or the idea that certain sentences can be either true or not, but rather it is a specific set of beliefs that they reject as true, or at least reject as definitely true. This is perfectly compatible with both the correspondence theory and the coherence theories we have seen. One can hold that for a sentence to be true is for it to correspond to a state of affairs in the world, whether that world is mind-independent or not, and still disagree with someone about whether a specific statement is true or not. One can equally well hold a coherence theory and still disagree with someone else as to whether a specific sentence should be included into our set of accepted beliefs.

### **5.2.2 Modern Media**

The second element in the rise of post-truth are the changes in modern media. These changes can be divided into two parts, namely the changes that happened to old media, and the rise of new media.

Traditional media underwent a large shift with the start of the Rush Limbaugh show in 1984, a radio talk show that was the first of its kind in that it was explicitly partisan. Up until this point, news had been provided by newspapers and TV channels such as CNN, whose intention was to provide the news in a fashion that was as objective as possible. Rush Limbaugh, however, argued that these traditional news sources suffered from a distinctly liberal bias, and view himself "... as a source of truth in opposition to the rest of American media" (Nichols, 146). Limbaugh sought to give a voice to the rest of the American public and had great success with this, especially after his show went over to a national radio station in 1988. Seeing the success of the Rush Limbaugh show, others also became interested in providing partisan coverage of the news, and other partisan media sources such as MSNBC and Fox News were founded. These networks gave a heavily politicised version of the events happening throughout the day. For example, after a school shooting that took the life of twenty elementary school students, Fox News executives sent out a specific directive to their producers not to allow any discussion concerning gun control (McIntyre, 70).

As a reaction to the creation of partisan media and the claims that they themselves were also partisan, traditional media doubled down on their claims to provide objective coverage of the news. As a result of this, the new partisan networks not only influenced the way in which news was brought to the American public directly, but also indirectly through the changes this caused in traditional media. In an effort not to be seen as yet another partisan news channel, traditional news media emphasised their impartiality. To show that they were objective, they made it an explicit goal to cover both sides of every important issue. However, this had unintended side-effects. McIntyre writes that:

*Far from increasing objectivity, this had the ironic effect of lowering their commitment to providing accurate news coverage ... The mantra of objectivity was reflected in a resolve to provide 'equal time' and a reflex to 'tell both sides of the story' even on factual matters ... By allowing 'equal time', the media only succeeded in creating 'false equivalence' between two sides of an issue even when there were not really two credible sides. (77)*

In an attempt to appear objective and unbiased traditional media led people to believe that many questions were still open for debate, and that there was no scientific consensus on these topics.

These changes in traditional media led to the current 'post-truth' political situation in two ways. First of all, partisan news allowed certain political groups to manipulate the news by only airing that what they wanted to be seen. Because many people only watch the channel that best matches their personal political preference, this leads to information-discrepancies and different perceptions of the world between different political groups. Secondly, traditional media, through an extreme commitment to 'objectiveness', justified these different perceptions of the world, as a new mantra of unbiasedness and showing both sides of the debate created false equivalences between viewpoints and justified unjustifiable positions.

The problems caused by old media were further aggravated by the rise of social media. This is because of two reasons. First of all, the articles and posts that one shares are primarily shared with one's own contacts. Owing to the fact that most people are primarily connected with those with a similar socio-economic position and world view, this leads to the formation of an online echo-chamber. In this echo-chamber, one only hears the kind of news that reaffirms what one already believes in. If an individual who does not

believe in climate change primarily knows other people who do not believe in climate change, and gets most of his news from social media, the news that he receives will likely reaffirm his belief that climate change is not real. McIntyre writes that "It is no secret that one of the recent facilitators of the 'information silo' - which has fed our built-in predilection for confirmation bias - is the rise of social media" (63).

It is not just that one's worldview is reaffirmed through membership of a group of likeminded people. Even if one aims to step out of this echo-chamber and intentionally follows or subscribes to information outside of one's direct community, the information one receives is likely to be biased in favour of one's pre-conceived worldview. Differing information is likely to be filtered out by the social media providers. As a part of their strategy to provide as enjoyable an experience as possible to the users, companies like Facebook use algorithms to determine what posts appear on one's social media account. This algorithm selects posts that are in line with one's interests ("News Feed Values"). This further reduces the amount of articles one encounters that challenge one's world view, and instead only provides information that is in line with what a person already believes.

As such, new media worsen the effects of the modern old media, in that they give different communities different perspectives on the world and reaffirm their pre-existing beliefs, whether those beliefs are true or not.

Like with science denialism, there seems to be nothing about the problems created by the state of modern media that relates in a specific way to 'truth'. Once again, all parties involved can consistently claim to value and aim at truth. The disagreement between these parties is not about whether we should care if our beliefs are true or not, but rather which beliefs are in

fact true.

### 5.2.3 Post-Modernism

The final element in the rise of post-truth politics is post-modernism. While less obviously and less directly a cause of the post-truth era, there is significant evidence that post-modernism influenced and strengthened the processes that lead to post-truth. To show this, it will first be necessary to discuss what post-modernism is, and secondly to show how it influenced the rise of post-truth.

The discussion on the core concepts of post-modernism will be heavily based on the work of Richard Rorty, as he provides a clear overview of the parts of post-modern thought most closely related to Truth. This part of post-modernism Rorty also calls pragmatism. He states that this change of terminology

*“is not merely out of American chauvinism. I use it because the alternative term, ‘post-modernism’, has been ruined by over-use. I have no idea what the philosophical views of Nietzsche and such post-Nietzschean philosophers as Heidegger, Derrida or Foucault have to do with recent changes in architecture and painting.” (13)*

Pragmatism is used to distinguish between the post-modern conception of truth and the political project that followed from post-modern foundations.

At the core of post-modern thought, Rorty argues, is the rejection of truth

as providing a measure for our beliefs. He writes that “These views are corollaries of the denial that there is any order which exists independently of human languages and human history” (14).

According to Rorty, the root of this view can be traced back at least to Spinoza. He writes that:

*Before Spinoza, it seemed obvious that any two competing descriptions of what is going on could be compared in point of adequacy. The less adequate description could then be deemed a description of appearance, and the more adequate a description of reality. But as soon as one deploys the idea of equally adequate descriptions, one will begin to wonder whether it matters whether one is talking about the same reality under two adequate descriptions, or about two different appearances of the same reality. As soon as one begins to raise that question, one begins to slide from Spinoza’s utterly knowable substance to Kant’s utterly unknowable thing-in-itself. For as soon as one admits that two irreconcilable descriptions can describe the same thing equally well, one has to ask whether there is any reason to believe that either description has anything to do with things as they are in themselves – things as undescribed. (16)*

For Rorty, the idea of truth as correspondence to reality should be rejected, as we have to wonder whether we can really say that any of our descriptions have anything to do with the world as it is. “Pragmatism”, Rorty writes, “raises the possibility that to have an order is simply to be described in a language, and that no language is any more natural – any closer to the way things really are – than any other” (17).

Rorty adopts a view similar to epistemological idealism, but does not accept that this leads to something like a coherence theory. While a coherence theory of truth aims to give a best explanation of the world through a coherent view of our beliefs, Rorty rejects the notion that our beliefs should be judged on the basis of anything in the world. Rather than wondering whether things really are as we say they are, pragmatism holds that we should adopt beliefs on the basis of how useful they are to us. Fundamentally, however, there is nothing that makes a belief 'true' or not. Rorty thus rejects the entire notion of metaphysical realism. For post-modernism, there is no standard by which to judge our beliefs. "For the so-called 'post-modernists', the adjective 'true' is a perfectly useful tool, but the use of the noun 'Truth' as the name of an object of desire is a relic of an earlier time: the time in which we believed that there was a natural order to be grasped" (23).

Post-modernism influenced many aspects of science denialism. This can most clearly be seen in the debate surrounding Intelligent Design Creationism (IDC). Robert Pennock argues in his work *The Postmodern Sin of Intelligent Design Creationism* that "post-modernism [is] the mother of IDC" (766) and provides statements of Philip Johnson, one of the founders of ID theory, who has stated that

*The great problem from the Christian viewpoint is that the whole controversy over evolution has traditionally been phrased as a Bible vs. Science issue, and the question becomes how do you defend the Bible? . . . Now, the problem with approaching it this way is that in our culture it is understood that science is some objective fact-finding proceeding. And if you are arguing the Bible vs. Science, then people think that you are arguing for blind faith against objectively determined knowledge. (Pennock, 759, qtd. in McIntyre, 137-138)*

To avoid this, Philip Johnson argued for a post-modern perspective. This post-modern perspective could be used to promote intelligent design, because it argues that correspondence to the world is not a quality that should determine whether we accept a certain belief.

*On the radical postmodern view, science has no special privilege over any other views of the world even with regard to matters of empirical fact; every tribe may take its own story as the starting point for its other beliefs. ID creationists are equally justified in taking God's creation and will for man as their starting assumption. (Pennock, 762, qtd. in McIntyre 139)*

A similar approach is also taken by some in the Trump campaign, for example Mike Cernovich, of whom McIntyre says that he is a 'pro-Trump', 'American Nationalist', 'conspiracy-theory-loving blogger with 250,000 twitter followers'. Cernovich was responsible for among others claims that Hillary Clinton was suffering from heart problems and claims that she was involved in a child paedophilia scandal at a Washington pizza restaurant (McIntyre, 149). Cernovich stated that "Look, I read postmodernist theory in college. If everything is a narrative, then we need alternatives to the dominant narrative. I don't look like a guy who reads Lacan, do I?" (McIntyre, 150).

Post-modernism strengthens the position of those that disagree with certain scientific results.

*If there is no truth, and it is all just perspective, how can we ever really know anything? Why not doubt the mainstream news or embrace a conspiracy theory? Indeed, if news is just political expression, why not make it up? Whose facts should be dominant? Whose perspective is the right one? Thus is postmodernism the godfather of post-truth. (McIntyre, 150)*



If there is no preferred way of describing the world, then there is nothing that we can point to as evidence to prefer a certain point of view over another. Why then should we prefer the view of scientists over those with ideological motivations?

Of the processes described so far, post-modernism is the first that can properly be said to be post-truth, in the philosophical sense discussed earlier. It explicitly rejects the use of truth, and denies that correspondence to the world, coherence with other beliefs, or anything else can provide an objective tool to judge beliefs by.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

This section has outlined the multiple factors that led to the current 'post-truth' climate. First of all, powerful companies and individuals learned to effectively use their resources to obscure findings that threaten to harm them financially or ideologically from properly being received by the public. Secondly, modern media causes different political groups to hold different worldviews and accept different authorities, by providing specific information to specific groups, reaffirming the individual's world view through echo-chambers, and justifying certain ideas by presenting them as equal alternatives to scientifically supported beliefs. Finally, post-modernism provided people with a philosophical justification for the worldview that they present. As a whole, this lead to a situation in which groups hold beliefs that seem completely insane and incoherent to other groups, and it is (close to) impossible for different groups to agree on what really is the case. To every group, it seems that every other group bases their opinions on feelings rather than

fact. From each of these viewpoints, every other position seems to be post-truth.

## Chapter 6

# Is the Post-Truth Era Post Truth?

In the first chapters we have seen the different substantial theories on Truth, more specifically the correspondence theory of truth and the coherence theory of truth, and the things they have in common, specifically metaphysical realism, the claim of the existence of a correctness-notion. In the previous chapter we have seen how certain processes, namely science denialism, changes in the modern media landscape, and the theory of post-modernism, together led to an era in which those with financial or ideological motivations learned to spread the message that they want to get out and in which different groups hold entirely different views of what is going on in the world. This chapter will analyse whether the claims that opinion has surpassed reality in importance in the process of forming beliefs and whether the modern political era is 'post-truth' in a philosophical sense are correct. Do facts and truth really not matter in the formation of belief in contemporary politics?

### 6.1 Post-Truth for Whom?

In the previous chapter we saw that many of the divisions in contemporary politics are the result of a powerful lobby industry that has learned how best to manipulate the media and the public, which is strengthened by media that is either partisan or overly committed to being seen as objective by presenting 'both sides of the story', and by the philosophical justification provided

by post-modernism. This political situation thus clearly has two different groups involved, namely those who are in charge of shaping the flow of information and those who merely consume this information. It is by no means necessary that both these groups have the same attitude towards truth. It is important, then, not to look at post-truth as one specific quality that all of modern politics does or does not have, but rather as a quality that different parts of the political process might have.

Because of this, this thesis will analyse whether contemporary politics can be called 'post-truth' by looking at the relationship of two different groups to truth. These groups we shall call 'the general public', those that primarily consume news about specific topics, and 'the informational elite', those that are in charge of shaping the news and presenting their worldview to others. It is important to note that this is not a strict distinction. First of all, the divide is very topical, for example, a scientist that studies climate change would be considered part of the informational elite on the topic of climate change, but is likely part of the general public when it comes to claims about the effects of smoking. Secondly, it is possible to be part of both groups on one topic. Especially with the rise of new media, it is possible to consume information while at the same time spread information for others to consume.

### **6.1.1 The General Public**

When one looks at the contemporary political landscape, it is undeniable that there are divides in belief based on ideological and political factors. This might give credence to the claim of post-truth that statements are accepted not on the basis of the facts but on emotional and ideological arguments, but this is not necessarily the case. We have seen that the post-truth era was caused by a divide in who is accepted as a trustworthy authority and what

information was provided. This divide runs primarily along political and ideological lines. For example, while many republicans watch Fox News, few non-republicans do. As a result, the information that is provided to each group is very different. Thus, while in contemporary politics it is ideology and opinion determine what one believes in, this is not owing to a contemporary trend in which people do away with the notion of truth. Rather, it is the consequence of a thoroughly divided society in which different groups accept very different methods of reasoning and different sources of information.

Different groups are drawn to different types of media, and accept different people as authority figures. Furthermore, problems with modern media ensure that people no longer have access to a neutral view that mediates between different groups. Because of this, different groups reach different conclusions about what the facts are, to the point that to someone outside of that group it seems like these beliefs are based purely on ideology. Any member of such a group, however, will say that their beliefs are based on facts, and that the other group ignores the facts and bases their beliefs on ideology. The disagreement does not concern the role of facts in the formation of beliefs: both sides can perfectly maintain that facts are important and should be the primary reason to accept beliefs. The disagreement lies in what 'the facts' are.

To accept a judgement is to accept that what that judgement says is true. It is impossible to accept a judgement whilst believing that what it says it not the case. This leads to situations similar to Moore's paradox, which is the sentence 'It is raining, but I do not believe it is'. This is paradoxical because the assertion of the sentence 'It is raining' in itself contains the belief that it is raining, which is denied by the second part of the sentence. Similarly, the sentence 'I believe it is raining, but it is not the case' is a sentence that we are

at no point justified to assert. To assert that it is not the case that it is raining is to assert that you do not believe that it is the case.

This links back to an issue that we originally encountered when discussing the correspondence theory of truth. While it might seem obvious, even tautological, that what is true is all that is the case, we can question to what extent this statement helps us determine what to believe. We hold to be the case that what is said by our accepted judgements. It is impossible to step out of this first-person framework and actually compare our beliefs to the world, as the world is not something we have direct access to.

The coherence theory of truth offers a clear explanation of this problem. As seen, the coherence theory, when taken as a guaranteeing criterion of truth, holds that reality is not something that we can access beyond our sensations of it, and that 'truth' is the quality assigned to a set of beliefs that is consistent. If a set of beliefs is not coherent, then at least one of the beliefs has to be false and has to be rejected. The choice of which belief to reject, however, is not determined by anything specific about the beliefs in question, but rather by other considerations such as simplicity, communal support, or figures of authority. Because of this, there can be different people who both have a coherent system of belief, while the two systems of belief can still clash. Different groups of people value different things and accept different people as authorities, and because of this end up with different views of how the world is, even if they are given the exact same information to work with.

There is one clear point of evidence for the idea that the general public still values the ideas of truth and factuality, namely their use of correctness-notions. We saw in the first part of this chapter that the one shared characteristic of the substantial theories of truth was that of a correctness-notion. If

one wants to be able to judge things as incorrect, then one has to hold some notion of truth. This correctness-notion is very clearly present in contemporary politics. For example, those that believe that climate change does not exist do not only hold their belief, they also hold that the group that does believe that climate change exists is wrong. If one completely rejects the notion of truth, as we have seen in the part about post-modernism, one cannot say that any description of the world is more accurate than another. If people in contemporary politics say that one description of the world is more accurate than another, they must hold at least some substantial theory of truth.

### **6.1.2 The Informational Elite**

It seems that the general public has not shifted beyond the concept of truth, and that the divisiveness in the post-truth era is in fact a result of partisan media that promotes and reinforces pre-existing biases in groups, which in turn leads to vastly different world views in different political groups. The question then remains, are those that are in charge of promoting specific world-views also still attached to the concept of truth?

One of the instances that is often stated as the most clear expression of the post-truth era is the use of the term 'alternative facts' by a white house spokesperson. As we have seen before, John Searle characterises this event as one in which she "did not refer to the trivially true claim that there are facts beyond the facts currently discussed, but rather that there might be one acknowledged fact, and another equally valid fact that is inconsistent with the first" (88). Does her statement necessarily mean that she holds that there are mutually inconsistent facts that can both be equally true or valid? The most charitable interpretation would be that she meant that one person has one set of beliefs that they call facts, and the spokesperson believes in other

things, and thus has alternative facts. Nor would a less charitable interpretation necessarily pin her down to a position in which she forms beliefs on the basis of opinion, without any reference to the way the world is. As a spokesperson for the Trump administration, it is perfectly plausible that she herself did not believe in the statements that she was defending, and that her defence of them was merely a part of her job as press secretary of the Trump administration.

Similar explanations can be given for the behaviour of those that take part in the spread of partisan or biased information. While it is possible that their behaviour is based on a post-modern notion of truth, it is equally possible that their behaviour is merely the result of self-interest or genuine belief.

It seems that the informational elite itself can also be divided into three groups, namely into those people that genuinely believe in the claims that they spread, those that do not believe in the claims they spread, and those that adopt a post-modern position and merely present a claim because it is useful.

In the case of the people that genuinely believe in the claims that they are spreading the situation is very similar to that of the general public. To believe a judgement is to believe that what this judgement says is actually the case, which entails a belief in facts. Similarly, a genuine belief in the truth of a judgement is accompanied by a belief that inconsistent judgements are false, which necessitates a theory of truth.

As for the people that do not believe the claims they are spreading, it is perfectly possible to believe in truth and still lie to further one's own interest. The previous chapter has shown that much of the spread of misinformation



concerning topics like climate change and the effects of tobacco was the result of a specific belief that the acknowledgement of the scientific consensus would result in loss of profits. This shows that while lobbyists might present claims that they do not hold to be true, their behaviour is still based on a belief that they accept as true. From this we can, as in the previous cases, conclude that they hold a theory of truth.

It is possible that there are people that neither believe the claims they spread are true nor that they are not true, through a post-modern rejection of the concept of 'truth'. However, it seems likely that the majority holds a classical view of truth. While post-modernism is used by those in the lobby industry to support their points of view, this does not necessarily show an actual belief in the views expressed by post-modernism. It is equally possible that this is to provide a philosophical justification for the views they propose out of self-interest, rather than a true interest and belief in these arguments. There seem to be no arguments beyond the use of post-modernist rhetoric used to justify certain position to indicate that there is an especially large amount of post-modernists in modern politics, nor that the amount of post-modernists in politics has undergone a large change in the past years.

## **6.2 Conclusion**

Rather than a rejection of truth and facts as formative and important concepts for the correctness of judgements, post-truth politics is the result of a deeply divided society that makes extensive use of partisan media, which is used by powerful people wishing to further their self-interest. However, even if everyone were to accept the arguments provided here, this would not solve the problems in contemporary politics. This is the result of the same issues that plagued the correspondence theory of truth. To a liberal, it might seem

obvious that, for example, Fox News and the Arms lobby have misled part of the American public on the topic of gun safety, and that post-truth can be resolved by showing this part of the public what really is the case. However, this other part of the American public will feel equally strongly that it is this liberal that is misguided and needs to be shown what really is the case. Even if everyone accepts that it is necessary to only believe what is true, there is no objective way to determine what exactly that is. If we adopt a correspondence theory, we have to accept that all our experiences are biased, and even our most deeply-held beliefs could fail to correspond to the facts. If we adopt a coherence theory, it is possible that different people have equally coherent sets of belief, both based on their own experiences. In neither case does the notion of truth help us establish what is true, merely what it is for something to be true.

The problem that contemporary politics faces is that the shared basis of accepted beliefs has shrunk. This cannot be resolved by stating what is true, as stating that something is true does little more than reaffirming the original statement. If a consensus needs to be reached, this needs to happen through dialogue and a communal agreement on standards of reasoning and accepted authorities. This can only happen through a long process in which all sides accept at least some of the same sources of information, and enter into discussions with one another in which they are willing to change their mind.

# Conclusion

This thesis set out to analyse the notion of post-truth. Its goal was to find out whether it was actually the case that in contemporary politics beliefs are formed on the basis of ideology and opinion rather than on the basis of fact, and whether the notion of truth has become unimportant in contemporary politics. It did this by first determining what truth can be taken to mean, and secondly, through looking at the origins of post-truth, analysing the relation between post-truth politics and truth.

This thesis looked at the most commonly held theory of truth, the correspondence theory of truth, and showed that it was fundamentally epistemologically realist. This epistemological realism opened up the possibility of radical scepticism, which causes some to reject the theory. As an alternative, this thesis presented the coherence theory of truth and the deflationary theory of truth. Deflationism was rejected because it seemed to be primarily focused on the semantic predicate 'is true', rather than the notion of the truth of a judgement. There are two possible coherence theories, one that is epistemologically realist and ontologically idealist and takes coherence to be a determining element of reality, and one that is epistemologically idealist. The one characteristic that is shared by the theories presented is the acceptance of metaphysical realism: for something to be a theory of truth, it has to present a correctness-notion. Similarly, if someone uses a correctness-notion, a theory of truth has to be present.

This analysis has shown that there is no significant difference in the role that truth and the facts play in contemporary politics compared to past politics. While there is no consensus about what the facts are for a lot of topics, the discussions surrounding these topics are still made up of statements that are taken to be true or false. From this we can conclude that correctness-notions, and thus theories of truth, are present in contemporary politics. Rather than being caused by an absence of care for truth, the post-truth situation is the result of communities within one political system that are possibly more divided than ever before. These communities have vastly different views of how the world is. This is a result of specific lobbying by those with certain ideological or financial interests, media that reinforces pre-existing beliefs and gives validity to beliefs that originally had none, and a philosophical justification of these beliefs through post-modernism. However, while the philosophical threat of a political situation completely uninterested in truth seems to be absent, one cannot deny the difficulties of politics in the 'post-truth' era.

If we wish to stop this post-truth era, it will be necessary to undertake steps to stop these processes from happening. To do this, it would first of all be necessary to strongly increase regulations of lobbying corporations to ensure that they no longer have the capability to influence politicians, take out advertisements with misinformation, and fund false researches. Secondly, changes have to be made with regard to modern media. Non-partisan media should rethink what it means to provide objective news, and tell the stories of what happened to the best of their ability, rather than presenting any topic as a discussion between equally valid views. The role of social media on everyday life should also be rethought, either by changing the algorithms used to prevent the occurrence of information bubbles, or by changing the importance that it is given in our everyday lives. Finally, if we think that truth is

an important notion, it is necessary to academically engage with the theory of post-modernism, and provide counterarguments to their points. These solutions are neither quick nor easy. However, if we want to create a situation in which there is at least some consensus about how the world is, these steps need to be taken.



## Works Cited

Berkeley, George, and Howard Robinson. *Principles of Human Knowledge and, Three Dialogues*. Oxford University Press, 1999.

Blanshard, Brand. *The Nature of Thought*. MacMillan, 1941.

Bradley, Francis H. *Essays on Truth and Reality*. The Clarendon Press, 1914.

Brandt, Allan M. "Inventing Conflicts of Interest: a History of Tobacco Industry Tactics." *The American Journal of Public Health*, vol. 102, no. 1, 2012, pp. 63–71.

Candlish, Stewart. "Francis Herbert Bradley." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Winter 2016 Edition)

Dummett, Michael. *Truth and Other Enigmas*. Duckworth, 1978.

Ewing, Alfred Cyril. *Idealism : a Critical Survey*. Methuen, 1934.

Goodman, Nelson. *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*. 3rd ed., Bobbs-Merrill, 1973.

Holan, Angie Drobnic. "2017 Lie of the Year: Russian Election Interference Is a 'Made-up Story'." *Politifact*, 12 Dec. 2017. <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2017/dec/12/2017-lie-year-russian-election-interference>

-made-s/. Accessed 6 June 2018.

Joachim, Harold H. *The Nature of Truth : an Essay*. Clarendon Press, 1906.

Kant, Immanuel. *Kritik Der Reinen Vernunft*. Anaconda, 1781/2014.

Khleutzos, Drew. "Challenges to Metaphysical Realism" *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Winter 2016 Edition).

Kripke, Saul A. *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language : an Elementary Exposition*. Blackwell, 1982.

Lichfield, John. "Boris Johnson's £350m claim is devious and bogus. Here's why." *The Guardian*, 18 Sep. 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/sep/18/boris-johnson-350-million-claim-bogus-foreign-secretary>. Accessed 6 June 2018.

McIntyre, Lee C. *Post-Truth*. MIT Press, 2018.

Miller, Alex. "Realism." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Winter 2016 Edition).

"News Feed Values." Facebook, [newsfeed.fb.com/values/](https://newsfeed.fb.com/values/).

Nichols, Thomas M. *The Death of Expertise: the Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

Oreskes, Naomi, and Erik M. Conway. *Merchants of Doubt : How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*.



Bloomsbury, 2012.

Pennock, Robert T. "The Postmodern Sin of Intelligent Design Creationism." *Science & Education*, vol. 19, 2010, pp. 757–8

Plato, trans. by Christopher J. Rowe. *Theaetetus and Sophist*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.

"Post-Truth." Oxford Dictionary. *Oxford Dictionaries*.

<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/post-truth>. Accessed 6 June 2018.

Putnam, Hilary. *Reason, Truth and History*. Cambridge University Press, 1981.

Quine, W.V. *Quiddities: an Intermittently Philosophical Dictionary*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987.

Rabin-Havt, Ari. *Lies incorporated*. Anchor, 2016.

Rescher, Nicholas. *The Coherence Theory of Truth*. The Clarendon Press, 1973.

Revesz, Racheal. "Donald Trump falsely claims he had 'biggest electoral college win since Ronald Reagan." *Independent*. 16 Feb. 2017.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/donald-trump-news-electoral-college-ronald-reagan-biggest-win-claim-a7584481.html>.

Accessed 6 June 2018.

Rorty, Richard. *Truth, Politics and 'Post-Modernism'*. Van Gorcum, 1997.

Russell, Bertrand. "On the Nature of Truth." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 7, 1907, p. 28.

Searle, John. "Do We Live In An Era That Is 'Post-Truth'?" *Journal of Political Theory & Philosophy*, vol 1. 2017, p. 87-96.

Sherman, Amy. "No Proof of Trump's Conspiracy Theory That Millions Voted Many Times." *Politifact*, 6 Apr. 2018. [www.politifact.com/truthometer/statements/2018/apr/06/donald-trump/no-proof-trumps-claim-millions-voted-many-times/](http://www.politifact.com/truthometer/statements/2018/apr/06/donald-trump/no-proof-trumps-claim-millions-voted-many-times/). Accessed 6 June 2018.

Sedley, D. N. and Mary Margaret. McCabe. *Plato's Cratylus*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Schopenhauer, Arthur. *Die Welt Als Wille Und Vorstellung*. Grinverl., 1819/2009.

Thagard, Paul. "Coherence, Truth, and the Development of Scientific Knowledge\*." *Philosophy of Science*, vol. 74, no. 1, 2007, pp. 28-47.

Walker, Ralph C.S. *The Coherence Theory of Truth : Realism, Anti-Realism, Idealism*. Routledge, 1989.

Warrington, John. *Aristotle's Metaphysics*. Dent Dutton, 1956.

Wilson, Reid. "Crime rates lower, despite Trump's warnings." *The Hill*, 20 Dec. 2017. <http://thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/365782-crime-rates-lower-despite-trumps-warnings>. Accessed 6 June 2018.

Wright, Crispin. "Critical Study." *Synthese*, vol. 103, no. 2, 1995, pp. 279–302.

Wright, Crispin. *Truth and Objectivity*. Harvard University Press, 1992.

Young, James. "The Coherence Theory of Truth." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Winter 2016 Edition).