

## DO WE LIVE IN AN ERA THAT IS ‘POST-TRUTH’?

- *John R. Searle\**

### I. INTRODUCTION

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A typically suggests more than just that A and B are in a temporal sequence but that somehow phenomena A has been superseded or surpassed by phenomenon B and even on occasion that A has now become obsolete. Obvious examples are the way in which Keynes<sup>1</sup> thought his “General Theory” superseded the “Classical Theory” of traditional economists. Keynes's work is in that sense postclassical. Current economists frequently describe attempts to create a new paradigm as “Post Keynesian” Another obvious example might be the way in which Einsteinian physics is post Newtonian. Are we in that sense in an era which is "post-truth"? That is, has the very idea of truth become superceded, obsolete or at least confined to a special and limited realm? I do not think we are, and given the nature of linguistic representation there is no way we could be. As long as there is anything like a human language no era could be "post-truth." That claim will take some explaining and I will now attempt to do that.

### II. THE POSTIES

In the later decades of the last century there were a series of intellectual fashions with the prefix “post” in front of the name/term. Thus there was most famously postmodernism. My favorite was “post contemporary” but this may have been an ironic neologism because I can’t name anybody who described themselves as post-contemporary. I think the general idea, as I suggested above, was supposed to be that the pre-fix “post” marked the fact that the named phenomenon was now obsolete. Modernism for

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\*Willis S. & Marion Slusser Professor Emeritus of the Philosophy of Mind & Language, University of California, Berkeley. He can be reached at [searle@berkeley.edu](mailto:searle@berkeley.edu).

<sup>1</sup> J.M. KEYNES, THE GENERAL THEORY OF EMPLOYMENT, INTEREST AND MONEY (MacMillan and Co., London, 1947).

example had come and gone according to the postmodernists. Jürgen Habermas, called people who identified “post” phenomena the “posties”.<sup>2</sup> One ironic description of the present era might be that it is ‘post post’ or perhaps even ‘post postie’. For the most part these movements were silly but fairly harmless. They may have for a time dominated some humanities departments of certain universities but my guess is that they have now gone out of fashion as quickly as they came in (I could be wrong about that. Perhaps the deconstruction still survives in some universities).

But the idea that the present era is post truth is much more sinister because it has political implications at the national and perhaps international level. This emerged when a White House spokesperson told us that there were “alternative facts”.<sup>3</sup> In one sense this is trivially true. It is a fact about my present condition that I have on running shoes, but is also a fact that I am wearing a blue shirt. These are alternative true descriptions of me and hence alternative facts about the state of my existence. But the aim of the idea of alternative facts view was much more sinister. The idea that there might be one acknowledged fact, but there might be another equally valid but different fact that was *inconsistent* with the first. Thus it might be a fact that the size of the crowd for Trump’s inauguration was much smaller than recent inaugurations but an alternative fact might be that Trump’s inauguration had the biggest crowd in history. Alternative facts in this sense allow that inconsistent propositions can both state “facts”, and you can choose which of the “alternative facts” you will accept. The mainstream media, "enemies of the people" in Trump's words<sup>4</sup>, choose one fact, the Trump administration chooses another.

On one interpretation the idea that we might live in an era which is "post-truth" in this sense is the idea that some version of relativism is true that what I think is true is true for me and what you think is true is true for you. One person's truth is just as good as anybody else's truth and nobody's has priority. This is traditional relativism and I think it is easily answered. The simplest way to rebut it is to show that the arguments for it are not good. The strongest argument is perspectivalism: all statements are made from a perspective or point of view. Hence the truth of the statement is true only relative to the point of view. But this is invalid because the conclusion does not follow from the premise. All statements are indeed made from a point of view but it does not follow that the truth is relative to the point of view. For example the

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Rorty, *Posties*, 9 LONDON REVIEW OF BOOKS, 15(1987).

<sup>3</sup> Conway: Press Secretary gave ‘Alternative Facts’, NBC NEWS (Jan. 22, 2017), <https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/video/conway-press-secretary-gave-alternative-facts-860142147643>.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Grynbaum, *Trump calls the news media the ‘Enemy of the American People’*, New York Times (Feb. 17, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/17/business/trump-calls-the-news-media-the-enemy-of-the-people.html>.

claim that Barack Obama was the first black president of the United States is made within a set of assumptions about what constitutes the United States and its history, what constitutes being president, and more controversially, what constitutes being black. Obama was at least 50% Caucasian ancestry, maybe more. The point however is that once you sorted out all of these relativities there is still a truth about his ancestry that remains.

But there is a way of thinking of post truth view which is not a version of relativism. On this view the idea is not that the concept of truth is a concealed relative term but that the whole notion of truth has become obsolete. Along with phlogiston and celestial spheres the concept is obsolete because we can now see that it does not name anything. This is the view I will attempt to answer.

### III. TRUTH AS A PROBLEM IN PHILOSOPHY

Before exploring the notion of "post truth" I need to say something about the traditional philosophical problem of truth. Lots of different kinds of things can be said to be true or false: sentences, statements, propositions, in theories, conceptions, and lots of others. Is there any one of these that is the basic entity which can be true or false in the sense that the others depend on it. For reasons I won't go into I think the notion of a proposition is the basic entity to which truth and falsity is ascribed. A true sentence for example is a sentence that expresses a true proposition. On the traditional notion a proposition is true because or in virtue of something that exists typically independent of the proposition itself. So if it is true that grass is green and that snow is white and that hydrogen atoms each have one electron, in each case there must be something independent of the statement in virtue of which are because of which the statement is true. David Armstrong famously baptized these things as "truth-makers".<sup>5</sup> We have to allow for apparent exceptions to this view because sometime a statement which is true is true in virtue of a features of itself. Thus if I say I am now writing in English that statement is true not in virtue of an independent phenomenon but in virtue of features of the statement itself. But these exceptions do not raise any difficulties for the general view. If a statement is true, it is true in virtue of something or because of something. Various names have arisen for these "somethings" but I think a natural word is "facts". A statement is true if and only if it stands in some relation to a fact or to the facts. We need a verb to describe that relation and again various verbs have grown up we can say that statement is true if it *states* the facts or if it *corresponds* to the facts, or if it *fits* the facts. All three of these ways of stating the relationship

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<sup>5</sup> DAVID ARMSTRONG, TRUTH AND TRUTHMAKERS, (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

can be misleading, but I think the underlying idea is clear enough: when the statement is true there is typically something not itself a part of the statement that makes it true. If I say "I live in Berkeley California" that statement is true because independent of the statement is a relationship between me and the city of Berkeley whereby the former lives in the latter.

This is the standard, traditional conception of truth. It is sometimes misleadingly called the 'correspondence theory' or the 'correspondence conception' because the idea is that a proposition is true if it corresponds to something independent of itself and typically this is thought to be a fact.

Another feature of truth that is sometimes supposed to be at odds with the correspondence theory is called disquotation. Tarski<sup>6</sup> called it Convention T. If you consider the sentence "snow is white" that sentence is true if and only if snow is white. To state the truth conditions of the original sentence you simply drop the quotation marks, hence the label "disquotation". Disquotation sometimes is supposed to show that truth is really redundant because for any statement to the effect that a statement is true you can simply state the statement. This gives us at least two theories of truth, the 'correspondence theory' that says a proposition is true if it corresponds to the fact and the redundancy theory that says the notion of truth is redundant altogether and does not describe in a relation, correspondence or otherwise.

I think that disquotation does not show that truth is redundant and that disquotation is perfectly consistent with the correspondence theory. Indeed you can derive the 'correspondence theory' from the statement of disquotation by simply adding two natural considerations to disquotation. So you get:

The principle of disquotation:

*For any sentence "S", "S" is true if and only if S*

Philosophers typically misunderstand the distinction between 'use' and 'mention' so they can't see that this is the right way to state disquotation. I will come back to this point in a moment. You need a general term name to the features in the world corresponding to the right-hand side and a natural term is "fact". So you get:

*For any sentence "S", "S" is true if and only if it \_\_\_\_\_ a fact or the facts.*

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<sup>2</sup> Alfred Tarski, *The Semantic conception of Truth and The Foundations of Semantics*, 4 PHILOSOPHY AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH 141-375(1944).

But you need a verb to fill in the blank and a natural verb here is "corresponds". So from disquotation you get:

*For any sentence "S," "S" is true if and only if it corresponds to a fact or to the facts.*

The philosophy of truth, correctly stated, is a series of tautologies and I hope that is obvious from this brief discussion. There is however in the tradition a major mistake about 'use' and 'mention' that needs further clarification.

#### IV. THE CORRECT DISTINCTION BETWEEN 'USE' AND 'MENTION'

Most philosophers that I know, brought up as they are on the standard logic textbooks, have a muddled view of the distinction between 'use' and 'mention'. (They get this mistaken view, as they get most things in modern logic, from the great work of Gottlob Frege<sup>7</sup>.) They could not state the principle that I have stated because they think that by putting quotes around an expression you create a completely new expression, the proper name of the original. If you see the sentence "Snow is white" printed on this page you did not ever see an English sentence about snow you saw. The proper name of that sentence and according to the standard view the word "snow" does not occur in what you saw, in more than the word "cat" occurs in "catastrophe". This view is so muddled and confused that it is difficult to state it coherently, but it immediately has an absurd consequence than that you could not use an expression as a variable ranging over linguistic expressions by putting quotation marks around the expression, because in so doing you have created a completely new expression, the proper name of the expression quoted. The fact that you cannot make variables is a *reductio ad absurdum* of the traditional doctrine of use and mention. Quine, who accepted the traditional view, saw this absurd result but he did not see the absurdity so he invented the notion of "quasi-quotes"<sup>8</sup> to do what expressions can already do. These are sometimes called "Quine quotes" but in fact they are just the ordinary use of quotation. So let me state what I think is the correct view. If we want to say in the predicate calculus "all dogs bark" we can say:

$$(Ax) (x \text{ dog} \rightarrow \text{barks } x).$$

In ordinary English: *For all x, if x is a dog, then x barks.*

<sup>7</sup>GOTTLLOB FREGE: COLLECTED PAPERS ON MATHEMATICS, LOGIC, AND PHILOSOPHY, trans. Black, Dudman, Geach, Kaal, Kluge, McGuinness, and Stoothoff, ed. B. McGuinness (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1984).

<sup>8</sup>WILLARD VAN ORMAN QUINE, MATHEMATICAL LOGIC, 33-37 (Harvard University Press).

And analogously if we want write the principle of this disquotation we can say

$$(A \text{ "S"}) \quad (\text{True" S"} \leftrightarrow S).$$

In ordinary English:

*For any sentence "S", "S" is true if and only if S.*

On the traditional doctrine of use and mention this cannot even be stated because by some absurd magic the placing of quotation marks around any expression destroys the original expression and creates a completely new expression the proper name of the original. This view is so implausible on its face that it seems hard to understand how anybody could take it seriously. I could, for example, get out of the opprobrium, of using obscenities if I just put quotation marks around the obscenities, thus eliminating the original obscene expression. Elizabeth Anscombe saw an absurd consequence of the view but I am not sure that she saw its absurdity: on the standard view you could not be told anybody's name because if you are told his name is "Smith" you never actually hear his name but only the name of his name.

So far we have first identified the connection between 'disquotation' and the 'correspondence theory'. They are not rival theories, and indeed the 'correspondence theory' can be derived from disquotation by the addition of two natural assumptions. Second, we have corrected some common mistakes about 'use' and 'mention'. We now need to turn to the issue of the reasons why truth is necessary, why we do not live and could not live in an era that is post-truth.

## V. THE INDISPENSABILITY OF THE NOTION OF TRUTH

There are several reasons why the notion of truth is indispensable. The first is that we need to be able to describe achieving success or failure in representations that have the word-to-world direction of fit. In fact we need an extensive vocabulary. At present in English it includes not just "true" and "false" but a whole lot of others: *misleading, penetrating, superficial, profound, irrelevant, exaggerated, inadequately supported, proven beyond a doubt, idiotic* and lots of others. And at a deeper level we can make the same point by saying we need a vocabulary for describing our relations with the world that exists independently of us and one of the most fundamental ways that we have of coping with the world is by representing it in thought and language . If we're going to be able to think and talk about the world we have to think about the variety of ways we have of succeeding and failing in our thoughts and talk about the world. Truth is just one concept among a

various large number of others but it is essential as a fixed point that many of our thoughts and utterances are aiming at.

A second and more important reason that we need a concept of truth is that there are the actual phenomena of truth (and falsity etc.) and these need to be recognized. It is just a plain fact that some propositions are true and others false. As long as there is a language even remotely like ours, these facts will remain. The fact of truth cannot be ignored. Just as the statement that “snow is white” is true because it corresponds to the fact that snow is white, so the statement that “statements are true when they correspond to the facts” is true because it corresponds to the fact that statements are true when they correspond to the facts.

Various animals besides us have languages of varying degrees of complexity. One of the most interesting is the language that bees use to communicate with each other about the location and distance of potential sources of nectar. In the few works that I have read there is nothing to suggest that the bees have or need a second order meta-vocabulary for describing success or failure in representing reality with their first-order vocabulary. Apparently the need for a meta-linguistic semantic vocabulary of truth, falsity etc., arises only when you have cognitive capacities of certain level of complexity and power. As far as we currently know humans are the only species that has these capacities.

To have a language of a human type is to have a device for creating commitments such as commitments to how things are. But a commitment to how things are is already a commitment to truth. But why can't there be alternative truths and more importantly, why can't there be alternative facts? It is in the nature of language that if it is a fact that Trump had the largest inaugural crowds in history then it cannot also be the case that he did not have the largest in inaugural crowds in history.

## VI. DISQUOTATION AND THE CONNECTION BETWEEN TRUTH AND REALITY

In addition to the considerations I have already mentioned that the principle of disquotation has important consequences. As I pointed out earlier, it is usually misstated because of confusions about the distinction between ‘use’ and ‘mention’ but the simplest way to state it correctly is as follows:

*For any sentence "S", "S" is true if and only if S.*

Notice that the letter "S" is used as a bound variable ranging over sentences and the principle of disquotation is that if you remove the quotes then the resulting sentence gives the exact truth conditions of the one originally quoted. Thus "snow is white" is true if and only if snow is white and "grass is green" is true if and only if grass is green. We have to make exceptions for indexical sentences such as "I am hungry." But they do not pose a real difficulty because instead of saying "I am hungry" is true if and only if I am hungry we should say rather "I am hungry" said by a person P at time T is true if and only if P is hungry at T. With such modifications, the principle of disquotation remains. "S" is true if and only if S.

This makes it seem to many philosophers that truth is redundant and indeed as I have stated earlier, there is something called the "redundancy theory of truth". Disquotation makes it seem as if you could say that a statement is true by just saying the statement. There is something right about this, but something deeply wrong at the same time and I will get to that in a moment. In general, the fact that two expressions have the same truth conditions does not imply that they are the same in meaning or that one is redundant. In American football the field-goal attempt is good if and only if the ball passes between the uprights above the crossbar. But when the umpire signals "good" he is not just summarizing the truth conditions, he is making an evaluation, which has important consequences for the rest of the game. Similarly, saying "S is true" is not just a way of saying "S" even though "S" is true' and "S" have the same truth conditions.

The most important reason why the present era is not "post-truth" and why indeed no era could be post-truth can now be stated. One of the most important functions of language is to represent reality. As we have seen, there are alternative ways of stating this point: we can represent how things are, represent the facts, represent states of affairs, etc. but a representation of an independently existing reality is absolutely essential to the functioning of language as we construe it is not the only function of language but the other functions are in many important ways, dependent on this function. For example, if you tried to have a language consisting only of commands you would still need to be able to describe the distinction between an obeyed command and a disobeyed command. And that distinction requires the notion of truth.

The principle of disquotation has the result that the 'notion of reality' and the 'notion of truth' are not independent. For every statement, to the effect that some statement is a true statement, there is a disquotational version which simply describes facts in the world. If truth has become obsolete then so has everything. For a being that has a language at all for something stated in language to be interesting, anything at all necessarily implies an interest in truth. So truth could not become superceded or obsolete



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unless absolutely everything in the universe becomes superceded or obsolete. Since this is the most important claim I will make in this essay, I will now attempt to explain it.

Suppose you are interested in the most recent presidential election and you are struck by the fact that Trump won several Mid-Eastern states which were won by the Democrats in the previous election. These electoral shifts were sufficient to give Trump the victory. If those states had gone to Hillary Clinton she would have won the overall election. Notice that I have said all that without any meta-linguistic claims. I just talked about states, votes and the victory, but the principle of disquotation has the consequence that all of these are equivalent to claims about truth. The true statement that Trump won certain Mid-Western states, given certain true statements about the number of electoral votes in each of these states and true statements about the constitutional requirement, that to be elected president a candidate must win more electoral votes than any other candidate, together implies the true statement that if Clinton had won these state she would have won the election.

### CONCLUSION

The point is that for people in possession of a language rich enough to make meta-linguistic statements about truth, there are not two sets of interests: one in truth and one in reality for true statements are by definition about reality.

And that is precisely my point. I am not saying that anyone who could be interested in reality must have the possibility of making true statements. That is obviously false. My dog has all sorts of interests in the real world, but he has no language in which to make true statements. It is possible to be interested in reality and not have the possibility of making true statements. But for a creature that does have a language capable of representing reality and thus capable of true or false statements, an interest in reality implies an interest in truth. Thus, for such a creature we could never live in an era that was post truth because such an era would be post reality. If as an adult human you are interested in anything at all then you have a deep commitment to truth. For that reason truth can never become obsolete.

There is one important idea in this article and I want to conclude by trying to state it clearly. "Truth" is a formal notion, not restricted in subject matter. It applies to propositions but propositions can be about

anything and everything. Because of disquotatation, and with certain specifiable but limited exceptions, for every truth there is a feature of non-linguistic reality that is identified by that truth. Truth and reality are internally related: It could not be that truth if it did not identify that piece of the real world and it could not be that piece of the real world if it were not described by that truth. If truth is obsolete then anything and everything are obsolete. It might be possible to believe that everything is obsolete, but that is not what the current post-truth advocates are aiming at. They are really upset by a certain conception of rationality, but if that conception goes, everything goes with it.