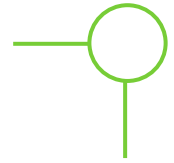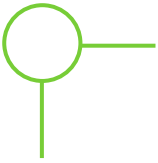# Manchester Lit&Phil

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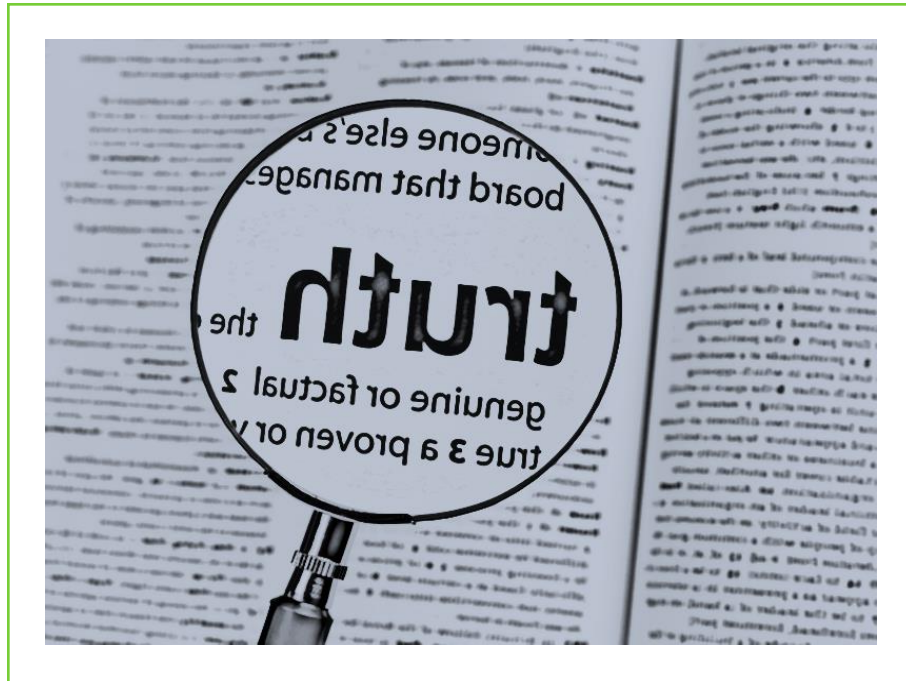
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The sad truth about truth

Christopher Burke

March 2024

One of the consequences of the information revolution we are living through is that truth is more widely and deeply threatened than it ever has been before. The tools and opportunities for disinformation are everywhere to see. Ideas such as post-truth, deep fake and alternative facts point to the dangers of mass dissemblance. Truth as a hot topic. So it is the perfect time to consider what is the nature of truth … such an innocent and simple concept … until, that is, you try to grasp it! It is then we become aware just how slippery truth is. Welcome to the branch of philosophy called epistemology.

Is the truth out there? We shall see.

1   Preamble

1.1   I am telling you the truth when my statement corresponds with what is or was actually happening. That seems simple enough. In our everyday lives, that's our working definition: "Your coffee's on your desk."; "I sent you an email."; "It's raining." But these apparently so simple examples hide the complex and contested nature of truth. Philosophical exploration is a bit like looking at an interactive map: the features of the land get more and more complicated the more you zoom in. In the vast domain of epistemology – terms like belief, fact, meaning, verification, truth-value, real, authentic, etc, are increasingly contested the closer you look at them. Philosophers don't carve out careers by agreeing with one other! Here, for brevity's sake, I sketch a philosophically aerial overview of truth so as to grasp the key issues, zooming in only occasionally on the details of the terrain.

> **Epistemology [n]**
>
> The branch of philosophy that examines the nature of knowledge, its presuppositions and foundations, and its extent and validity. It is often counterposed to **ontology**, the philosophical examination of the nature of reality itself.

1.2   For those with a particular philosophical interest, let me put my metaphysical cards on the table – the epistemological model I am using here is:

- For any individual (human or a suitably sophisticated animal), the reality can be usefully partitioned into an intramental self and an extramental everything else other than that. So reality consists of both mind-*dependent* and mind-*independent* aspects.
- Via their exterosenses – eg vision, sound, smell, etc – an individual gains intramental information about the extramental reality around them, enabling them to form an intramental representation of that extramental reality.
- Via their interosenses – ie pains, pleasures, drives and emotions (collectively known as 'affect') plus proprioception (awareness of bodily posture, movement, etc) – the individual gains intramental information about their body, which is their extramental self under motor control.

Please note that I am not ontologically claiming that this is the way reality is, merely positing it as a convenient meta-representation of representation itself.

> **Representation [n]**
>
> An intramental or extramental bit of reality which refers to, stands in for and contains information about another bit of reality, its representatum. Thoughts, speech, text, images, computer models are all representations.
>
> **Intramental [adj]**
>
> Referring to thought and feelings 'within' the mind/brain.
>
> **Extramental [adj]**
>
> Existing independently of the mind/brain.

1.3   Before going any further, let's clear the decks and dismiss some common notions about truth. First notion: a rather romantic idea from at least as far back as Plato: 'truth is beauty and beauty is truth'. Yeah right! A beautiful portrait is no guarantee of it being a true likeness. And everyone knows that the truth can be ugly. Second notion: logic ensures truth. Umm. 'All birds can fly; an ostrich is a bird; so an ostrich can

fly.' This is perfectly logical, but (excluding planes chartered by zoos) the conclusion is not true because the premise is wrong. Logic only guarantees validity, not truth. It's necessary ... but not sufficient. So what is truth? We need to look back at where the notion of truth originates.

> *"The truth is rarely pure and never simple."*
>
> Oscar Wilde (1895) *The Importance of Being Earnest*

2   The origin of truth

2.1   If I said that the relationship between an ordinary rock and a tree is 'true', it would be nonsensical. Truth is a special relationship that only originated when one bit of reality purported to represent another bit of reality. And obviously an ordinary rock doesn't represent a tree. A visual image however can represent a tree. A verbal witness statement can represent an event. A computer model can represent a country's economy. If the image, statement or computer model don't represent what they claim to, they are not true. Philosophical enquiry almost always restricts itself to the truth or falsity of linguistic statements, but this is an arbitrary constraint. In this paper, 'representation' has a wide meaning as defined in the side panel.

2.2   You may be wondering about an obvious omission so far: what about belief? I am going to park belief by simply treating it as a disposition to regard a representation as true or false. If one judges a representation as true or false, then that is automatically a belief. And a belief is automatically a judgment about whether a representation is true or false. Some epistemologists may legitimately consider this rather simplistic, but it will do for our purposes.

2.3   There are five major types of theory of truth we shall look at: correspondence, coherence, deflationary, pragmatic and postmodernist. These are often presented as being in conflict with each other but I think that reveals the overwhelming tendency of philosophy to fission rather than fusion!

3   Correspondence theory

3.1   We can observe the correspondence between extramental representations and what they represent: eg how the bits of a photograph match the bits of the scene it depicts.

But correspondence between our thoughts and the world is a different matter alto-gether. Yet such correspondence is our undeclared default mode in everyday life. We conveniently presuppose that the elements and relations of our perceptions and ideas – our intramental representations of the world – accurately correspond with the ele-ments and relations of the mind-independent world outside of us. The truth is out there! An obvious working assumption. However, there are huge problems with this theory, including two main ones: biological efficiency and verification.

3.2   The first problem is that no animal's evolution could possibly select for a sensory and/or cognitive system which attempted to represent *all* the information about any relevant extramental object or event such as sustenance or a mate. It would not only be grossly inefficient but also strictly intractable due to the high energy requirements: the information processing would exceed any possible energy supply via food intake. Brains are very energy-hungry organs. So our intramental representation of the world is, from the start, derived from data which are highly edited biologically. Is not truth therefore biologically constrained?

3.3   The second problem is philosophical: how could we possibly know that our intramental representation corresponds with the extramen-tal? We can't sneak outside ourselves to check. And if there were somehow an angel who could magically look at our intramental representa-tion and check the correspondences with the extramental event represented, who is going to check the angel's own representation? A super angel? But who is going to check the super an-gel's … you can see where this is headed. An in-finite regress. So if we can't verify our thoughts about the world by checking correspondence, what can we do? How do we know if they are true or false?
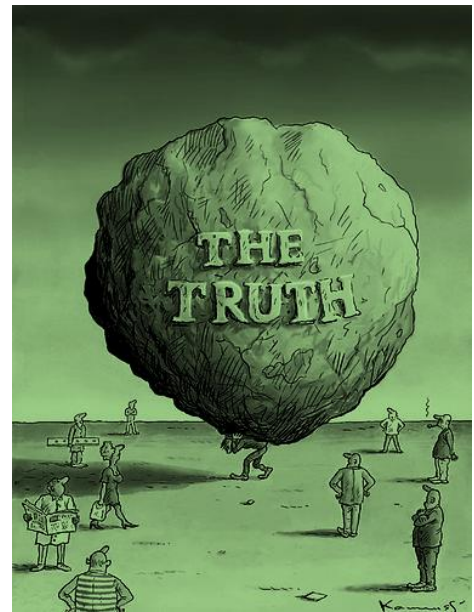
Marian Kamensky toonpool.com

4   Coherence theory

4.1   Many philosophers and cognitive scientists believe that the truth of our representation of the world is assured by its coherence, ie that it doesn't contain any contradictions. All our beliefs should be consistent with all our other beliefs. So for instance the colour of the text you are now reading can't be black and simultaneously another colour. This and other rules which ensure consistency form systems of logic, the basis for reason-ing. It is worth noting however that some beliefs show more coherence than others and that some people tolerate high levels of cognitive dissonance!

> **"Most people don't really want the truth, they just want a constant reassurance that their beliefs are true."**
>
> Unknown source

4.2   But how does intramental coherence possibly guarantee we get to the truth about the separate extramental world? Well it can't absolutely. But remember that we do have what we plausibly assume is information about the extramental via our senses. Our representations must be consistent with incoming sense data and the practical testing of our ideas through active physical interaction between our bodies and the environment.

4.3   There are aeons of philosophical controversy conveniently hidden by the above passages: interminable debates about whether our understanding of the world – the representations we hold to be true – are determined intramentally (Idealism) or determined extramentally (Empiricism). To me this is a rather futile debate. If we assume that there is a mind-independent world, our senses wouldn't be much good for survival if they didn't give us information about it (ie an empirical process). And raw sense data wouldn't be much use if they weren't extensively intramentally processed into meaningfulness (ie an idealist process). So a more useful stance is that representation building is not either Empiricism or Idealism, but a synthesis of both.

> **"The world is the totality of facts, not of things."**
>
> Ludwig Wittgenstein (1921, Eng trans1922)
>
> *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*
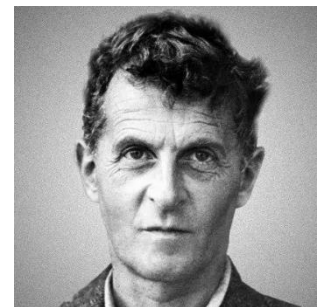
4.4   Some philosophers have taken the impossibility of directly verifying correspondence between intramental representation and the extramental world to mean that such correspondence doesn't exist. But this is a non sequitur. If one accepts that there is a mind-independent world (which admittedly is an act of faith but surely the most plausible one?) then the very efficacy of our representations in our everyday interactions must be accounted for. They work. They allow us to successfully do stuff. To me that overwhelmingly implies that there must be some form of correspondence between representation and representatum. Note this is not saying that our thoughts about the world are 'like' the world actually is. Efficient representations don't need to be 'like' their representata.

4.5   In summary, correspondence and coherence theories are often presented as philosophical opposites. However that seems too binary. Isn't it more credible to think that, yes, truth must be achieved via coherence, but that coherence must include being consistent with sense data, so there actually *is* some type of workable correspondence

between our thoughts and the world, albeit fallible? And surely our successful navigation and manipulation of our world testifies to that correspondence? Furthermore I believe this merged theoretical stance is itself both coherent and corresponds well enough to reality! Could it thereby be the truth about truth … or as near as we'll ever get to it?

4.6   But we have to admit one rather unfortunate consequence of coherence theory: even with putative correspondence, it reveals factuality to be problematic. A fact is conventionally considered as a cast-iron statement of the way things actually are in the world. But if we only have our *subjective* representations, how can we ever make such a claim about the *objective* world? Protesting that our factual statement is backed by our sense data doesn't get us off this hook because, although we assume sense data are generated by the objective world around us, they are still nevertheless subjective. This conundrum about the nature of facts is acknowledged and addressed by Pragmatic and Postmodernist theories of truth, described below. But before that we take a little excursive dip into some philosophical logic about whether saying something is true has any meaning at all!

> "The opposite of a fact is falsehood, but the opposite of one profound truth may very well be another profound truth."
>
> Niels Bohr (1885–1962) physicist
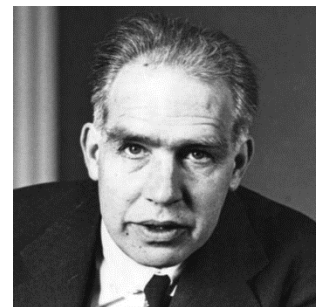
5   Deflationary theory

5.1   Deflationary theory about truth is a rather rarefied epistemological pursuit. What it basically says is that declaring a representation, usually a proposition, to be true is redundant, because a representation must be true – otherwise it simply wouldn't, by definition, be a representation! For instance, if you utter the sentence 'This apple is round' in front of a round apple, nothing of value is gained by adding the predicate 'is true' on the end of it: ''This apple is round' is true'.

5.2   A deflationist would also point out that, if the 'is true' addition were necessary in the simple sentence, then a similar affirmation would have to apply to this new longer sentence as well: So we would now need to say: '''This apple is round' is true' is true'. And you know what comes next. You would of course never get to the end of your sentence affirming truth!

5.3   There is a large literature on this sort of philosophical logic for those with a taste for the abstruse. The concept of truth may be unnecessary in epistemologists' seminar

rooms but what about beyond them? In everyday life, how could we denounce a lie or point out an error without declaring it false in some way? But how could we define 'false' without the concept 'true'?
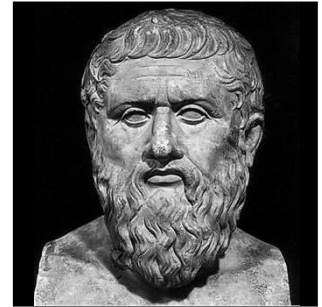
6   Pragmatic theory

6.1   Much of the above discussion on correspondence and coherence can seem rather academic and rather too conveniently restricted to simple perceptual cases like apples and trees. But truth is not always attainable by the immediate observation of concrete objects or events. Life is more complex than that. Truth-seeking often requires a process of sustained enquiry and experimentation hopefully concluding with a hypothesis that works: ie it predicts/retrodicts events accurately and facilitates the attainment of our goals. This criterion of efficacy is the kernel of the pragmatic theory of truth, which emerged in the 19th century.

6.2   Such epistemic pragmatism defines the modern scientific notion that truth is only provisionally assigned to the current best hypothesis – the one that most successfully withstands evidential challenge.   This is a much more tentative version of truth. Whereas historically, truth values were binary – a statement was either true or false – now we must lose such clarity and accept likelihood: ie fractional truth values on a probability scale between zero (complete certainty of falsity) and one (complete certainty of truth). An empirical statement (ie based on observation or measurement) can never reach a truth value of one, because there's always the possibility of unknown counter-evidence in the future and because complex evidential data are always messy. So scientific claims to the truth come with statistical caveats like significance and confidence intervals, which inform you on how likely the claim is to be true.

6.3   Whereas previous types of theory considered truth from a transcendental 'Archimedean point' – an angel's perspective on the relationship of thoughts to what they represent – pragmatic theory gets down and dirty in the messy world. Thus pragmatic theory can be neutral about claims of correspondence and coherence. Put very crudely: never mind the metaphysical reasons ... if it works, it is regarded as true!

6.4   Facts therefore become the product of an empirico-rational process: logic applied to gathered evidence. Factuality is more tentative, being attained by the accumulation of as much relevant evidence as possible and proposing the optimal hypothesis fitting with that evidence. This is actually the long established basis of truth in jurisprudence when a verdict – etymological meaning: ver (true) + dict (saying) – is deemed 'beyond reasonable doubt', implying that no rational consideration of the evidence could come to another conclusion.

> ## "Comment is free … but facts are sacred!"
>
> C P Scott (1846-1932)
> editor the Manchester Guardian newspaper
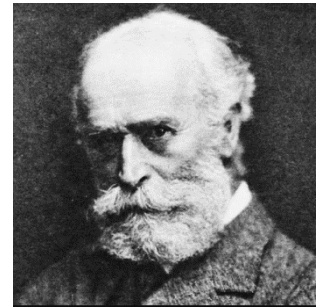
6.5   You may think that this 'optimal hypothesis' version of factuality only applies to complex theorisation in scientific, historical, judicial and academic contexts. However this less certain version of truth applies to simple concrete facts as well. If we look at a tree, our senses do not directly reveal that it is a tree: sensations consist merely of shapes, colours, textures, etc. Sense data have to be interpreted by the perceptual process which 'optimally hypothesises' the most likely concept to link them to, thereby allowing us to recognise something.   This is largely a fast subconscious process – we just *see* a tree – but we can catch it out sometimes. For example, all of us at some time have thought we recognised a familiar face only for that 'hypothesis' to be rejected when further detailed sensory evidence reveals a stranger.

7   Postmodernist theory

7.1   A major 20th century philosophical development accepting that there is no metaphysical guarantee of truth was Postmodernism. If truth-seeking were inevitably subjective, there could be no claim to objective truth or any authority to assign truth. Therefore all we can hope for is intersubjective agreement as the basis for factuality. Furthermore, because our individual thoughts are so culturally influenced, truth is declared as a cultural construct.

7.2   This makes the notion of truth even more fuzzy, indeed potentially pluralistic. Inevitably Postmodernism's 'de-authorising' of truth has been widely misused to justify all sorts of dubious assertions. 'It's my truth' uttered in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. 'It's just a theory' said to dismiss a well-founded scientific conclusion. 'These are alternative facts' trumpeted to defend blatantly false political claims. So

much so that our age is often denounced as 'post-truth'. But need truth assignment be so idiosyncratic, amorphous and anarchic?

> ## "Truth is what your contemporaries let you get away with saying!"
> Richard Rorty (1931–2007) philosopher
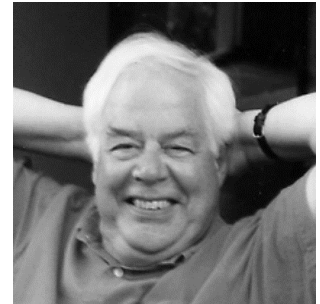
7.3   Some truths can indeed be only a matter of personal judgment. If you tell me you are feeling sad, I have no legitimate way of gainsaying that because sadness itself is not observable and not necessarily accompanied by the normal observable gestures associated with it. However when it comes to representations about publicly observable events, can more rigour be applied to truth assignment?

7.4   Even with publicly observable events, there is no infallible process which can determine the absolutely true description of those events. Individuals can observe the same event yet disagree in their descriptions of it or theories about it. Any detective will be resigned to variety within the narratives of those who witness the very same event. Why? Because in the construction of any theory, even agreed facts can be differently valued emotionally and morally by different people. Evidential facts are weighted by affect – the emotions they evoke. The more complex

"I'd prefer the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. But if 'tellin' it like it is' is the best we can get..."

Mark Anderson, andertoons

and abstract a theory, usually the greater is the likelihood of divergence of opinion.

7.5   You might understandably protest that a particular event E really happened so it must be true. But events in reality are not true or false, they just are. The only way of knowing them is by representing them: an immediate first-hand perception of E or a post-facto second-hand representation such as spoken or written testimony, an image or a theory about E. It is representations not reality to which truth or falsity is assigned … because they are all we experience! Even if two people agreed on the fundamental facts of E, they could disagree on their interpretation. Their emotional and moral dispositions will lead them to accord lesser or greater importance to those facts. Try as we might, we can never be absolutely sure of truth … especially in situations which evoke deep passions.

7.6   Enmeshed in all this plurality, what makes a representation more credible? How do we separate the wheat from the chaff? Postmodernist thought favoured intersubjectivity: society's truths were those theories most widely shared. This sounds very democratic and some postmodernist thinkers took this to mean that anything goes! One person's subjective theory is as good as another's. However, the wise are selective about their intersubjectivity, giving greater weight to those theories which are better evidenced, disinterestedly and dispassionately advocated, most coherent, and espoused by those who have intensively studied the relevant field.

7.7   This discernment of course assumes the wise live in a relatively free society. Even then, people with wealth and power have the ability to promulgate their theories much more widely, often accompanied by the threat of unfortunate consequences for those with the temerity to disagree. Postmodernism highlighted how in any society power dynamics dominate the attribution of truth, which of course is assigned to those theories most favourable to the powerful. Alternative perspectives are condemned as being false, deemed illegitimate, then marginalised or suppressed. In societies with relatively free speech, they are simply ignored.

7.8   How extensively power determines truth is a very contested point. For instance, does it extend to the physical sciences? Some would say yes. However the universality of belief in many established natural scientific theories across very different societies – the overwhelming intersubjective acceptance they attract – could suggest they are at least less affected by power dynamics than socio-economic theories.

7.9   If one accepts that truth is ultimately a subjective decision – and that is a hard case to argue against – then intersubjective agreement would seem to be the only possible process to assign truth to a complex description or theory dealing with publicly observable events.

8   Post-truth?

8.1   An employee based in Hong Kong very recently received an email from his international company's UK-based chief financial officer (CFO) instructing him to make a transfer of $25 million. Understandably cautious, he requested a video link confirmation, so an online conference was set up with the CFO and several other colleagues in the department. There the transfer instruction was repeated so officially authorised. Reassured, the employee carried out the transaction. Only later was it discovered that the whole video conference – including the chief finance officer and the employee's colleagues – was a deep fake! (Cf [CNN deep fake scam](#))

8.2   Peer reviewed scientific and medical papers are the mainstay of the reliable development of knowledge. A very few post-publication retractions have always been

necessary if data or statistical methods have been found later to be questionable for some reason. The esteemed journal *Nature* reported these startling retraction figures: just over 1,000 in 2013, 4000 in 2022 and 10000 in 2023! (Cf Nature research retraction figures) What is happening? Academics and researchers in many countries must have a strong record of publication to progress their careers. A whole industry has erupted in the last few years using AI to produce and publish false research papers to bolster CVs … aptly called 'paper mills'. Thus an honest researcher in say, medical research, now finds it difficult to distinguish between true and fake drug trials.

8.3 In January 2022, a widely quoted Facebook post claimed: "Over 65% of the country (USA) believes that (the) 2020 election was fraudulent. That number was around 35% a year ago." This claim of a rise in electoral result denial is not true based on reliable evidence (Cf politifact.com/factchecks/2022). But unfortunately 35% of the US electorate do still believe the election was fraudulent … despite overwhelming evidence and repeated litigative findings to the contrary including testimony from electoral officials, many from the same Republican party as the complainants. (Cf reporting project from the Associated Press: little evidence of voter fraud and BBC Reality Check team: election-us-2020 .)

8.4 If we assume that truth is assigned to mental representations by each person (so forming a belief) on the basis of coherence, that coherence relies more and more on second-hand testimony as the representatum gets more complicated. You can easily check whether your 'theory' about it raining outside is true or false by looking out of a window. Knowing whether a financial instruction, an academic paper or an election result is true or false is much more indirectly reliant on reports from trusted sources; ie the assumption firstly that those sources have the capacity of to be rationally and empirically coherent, and secondly the honesty of their reportage. This could be called 'trusted intersubjectivity' as a tool for truth valuation.

8.5 Of course, this has always been the case. But now the threat to truth is greater because of two recent informational developments:
- AI now produces untrue representations that are strikingly plausible and perhaps indistinguishable from true ones;
- Social media can feed these falsities to an audience vastly greater than the wildest dreams of historic propogandists. And of course 'A lie is halfway round the world before the truth has got its boots on.'

While the threat to truth is obvious, the remedy is alas less so. Perhaps today, instead of the ancient Roman dictum *caveat emptor* (buyer beware), we need *cave fidelis* (believer beware)!
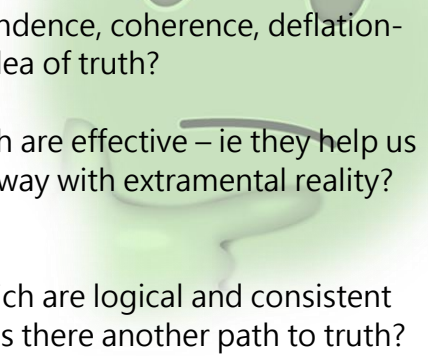
8.6 **So what is the sad truth about truth?** Philosophically – that we can never be *absolutely* certain that something is true. Socially – that reliable assignments of truth in the mass broadcast of facts and ideas are becoming very much harder to distinguish from widespread falsities, ie misinformation and disinformation.

9 Further reliable reading (if you believe me to be coherent!)

- A useful start is
  Crispin Sartwell, 2022, Truth is real, *Aeon*
- A good gateway into this bit of epistemology is
  Truth, entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

10 Questions

Q1 | **Which theory or combination of theories** – correspondence, coherence, deflation-ary, pragmatic or postmodernist – is closest to your idea of truth?

Q2 | **Is the most plausible version of truth** that ideas which are effective – ie they help us understand and control things – correspond in some way with extramental reality? But can we be absolutely sure?

Q3 | **Is rational and empirical coherence** – ie thoughts which are logical and consistent with observations – the only game in truth town? Or is there another path to truth?

Q4 | **Is the deflationary theory of truth** – that it is redundant – workable in everyday life? Can we get away without the concept of truth?

Q5 | **How important is intersubjectivity** – the prevailing collective ideas of a culture – in influencing our individual beliefs?
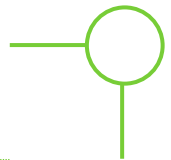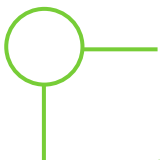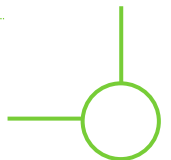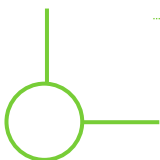
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