

From Plato to Postmodernism: Philosophical Understanding of (Post-)Truth

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Abstract

This study examines historical traces of post-truth, starting from Plato to the contemporary socio-political scenarios. It is a well-accepted notion in the contemporary political and media theories that post-truth is a recent phenomenon that emerged with the political tactics of Donald Trump and Brexiters. This paper subtly debunks this idea while pointing to the genesis of post-truth back in the history. The second part of the paper calls into question a well-documented conception that it is academic postmodernism, particularly the postmodern relativism, that has given birth to post-truth. The present examination delves into the philosophical understanding of the select postmodern theorists and postulates that academic postmodernism does not enable the origination of post-truth condition. Instead, it is postmodernism that enables the understanding of post-truth. Nietzsche's 'perspectivism' is also under scrutiny here. The paper maintains that instead of leading away from reality and objective truths, Nietzschean perspectivism tries to develop a more complete understanding of them.

Key Words: Post-truth; Postmodernism; Relativism; Friedrich Nietzsche; Perspectivism

In 2016, the *Oxford Dictionaries* made post-truth the word of the year. The *Oxford Dictionaries* defines post-truth as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (web). The dictionary also contends that "in this era of post-truth politics, it's easy to cherry-pick data and come to whatever conclusion you desire" (web). In addition, Society for the German Language also declared "'postfaktisch' (post-factual)" the word of the year 2016 (Block 2). Postfaktisch translates into English as post-factual or may also be read as post-truth. After 2016, post-truth started to attract serious academic attention, resulting in the production of a phenomenal number of books, newspaper articles, research papers and public debates. Many proclaimed that we have pushed ourselves into a post-truth world, where the distinction between a truth and lies has been blurred and people form their opinions based on emotional appeals and personal beliefs rather than facts and evidences. The term post-truth was not new in 2016 but had been in use ever since

Steve Tesich coined the term in 1992. But, in 2016, frequency of the term, post-truth, in the English vocabulary increased by 2000% in comparison with the previous year (BBC News 2016), which took the intelligentsia of the world by storm. In this paper, the locus of investigation is not the post-2016 post-truth world per se. Rather, the paper examines the accusation that postmodernism led to post-truth, while also taking into consideration the fact that post-truth has its roots deep into history.

It becomes essential to deliberate upon the philosophical questions about truth and its manipulation before post-truth became the word of the year in 2016. As has been the tradition, tracing the roots of a philosophical tradition is said to be incomplete without referring to Greek philosophers and their indispensable contributions. Surprisingly, Plato emerges to be one the first post-truth critics. The examination of Plato's theory of mimesis reveals, well in advance, "the inner workings of post-truth narratives as well as ... the reasons for their acceptance" (Kalpokas 89). Mimesis refers to imitation, mimicry, or representation. Plato clearly underlines the inadequacy of the mimetic representation, declaring that "mimesis suffers from a *triple* remove from reality" (Kalpokas 90). However, what interests Plato more in his conceptual development of mimesis is that not the poetic representation but also audience's emotional identification with the act of performance (90). To put it simply, Plato unreservedly rejects mimesis since it is inadequate with respect to reality and has a corrupting influence on audience. That also means, mimesis is concerned with "representation and appearance only" than "the thing in itself" (90). This always-already existing gap between the 'thing' and the mimesis allows the emergence of alternative versions of reality, paving path for the narratives that cater to the desires and needs of the audience. Emotional identification of the audience with a narrative gives it a degree of legitimacy, allowing people to form their opinion, to act and realize their collective identity. Likewise, post-truth does not have much to do with facts and tangible reality. Instead, post-truth, mostly, engages with alternative realities which it invents with affective narratives. In this regard, argues Ignas Kalpokas, post-truth takes "a step even further – whereas mimesis strives for representation of reality, however faulty, post-truth is about *presentation* of a form of reality" (90). Post-truth manufactures reality according to the tastes and desires of people. It creates narratives that best suit what people want the reality to be rather than what the reality is. The emotional affiliation of people and their identification with emotional appeal of an alternative reality lend post-truth realities the legitimacy. This leads to the creation of "affiliative truths" (McGranahan 243). Affiliative truths nourish themselves by drawing upon conformation bias, communities of knowledge, and pre-existing notions. That is, shared opinion, beliefs, desires, conceptions of world, and confirmed knowledge system pull these people together, resulting in the polarization of society. People holding on to affiliative truths easily wave aside facts and evidences that they do not like or a reality that is contrary to the one they believe in, further solidifying their association as a community. Political propagandists take benefit of such affiliative nature of communities and construct their narratives, taking into consideration emotional inclinations of people.

The Sophists along with Plato himself also come across as the merchants of post-truth, concerned more with the Machiavellian construction of truth than with the truth as such. Steve Fuller calls them "the local post-truth merchants in fourth-century BCE Athens" (29). In

particular, the Sophists taught people the art of rhetoric, enabling people to construct truth with sly usage of language. Plato accuses Sophists of manipulating truth with their skills to use language to produce strong emotional responses and calls them into question for their sheer disregard for the truth. Sophists stand accused of building narratives without having had to adhere to truth. These emotional narratives, Plato suspects, have the “capacity to blur the audience’s sense of the difference between the actual and the possible” (Fuller 32). For the Republic of Athens, this blurring is politically threatening. Considering a such pressing potentiality of rhetoric, one must delve a little into the characteristics of rhetoric. Leith argues that rhetoric is made up of three fundamental factors: “It is made of repeated phrases. It is made, as often as not, of half-truths and fine-sounding meaninglessness, of false oppositions and abstract nouns and shaky inferences” (6). People who acquire these skills could easily exert influence on others or elicit the desired emotional responses from people, regardless of genuine needs. Plato found this practice dangerous and comes forward with a proposed censorship and a ban on poets.

Plato’s hostility towards the playwrights and the Sophists complicates his positionality in the socio-political spheres. Plato, through Socrates, tends to believe that the art of rhetoric is not bad as such but everyone’s access to these is not healthy for the welfare of the Republic. For him, only the philosopher-king should have an access to such skills. Only those who have the right character should have access to the art of rhetoric. Steve Fuller points out that Plato does not coin the term rhetoric to make a distinction between good and bad philosophy but because he “whish[es] to concentrate the full skill set of philosophy into one source of power and control” (30-31). That also implies that Plato does not want anyone to compete with the philosopher-king. Thus Socrates, the mouthpiece of Plato, clearly objects to the art of writing in *Phaedrus*. Socrates suggests that a society that has literate people is hard for any aspiring Philosopher-king to govern and difficult to manipulate (Fuller 31). This is suggestive of the present day authoritarian political regimes across the world. These regimes deliberately attempt to keep their populace in the dark about truths and realities. People’s access to these truths and realities may endanger their positions as legitimized political powers. In order to maintain, the totalitarian regimes invent realities which best suit their propagandas, reducing the possibilities of populace questioning their legitimacy. Plato appears not better than the present-day political ideologue.

The present investigation will be incomplete without examining Plato and Aristotle’s philosophical understanding of truth. Let us first investigate Plato’s distinction between ‘Doxa’ and ‘Episteme’. Doxa, an ancient Greek word, means common belief or popular opinion. Plato used the concept of Doxa in order to criticize Athenian democracy as he believed that commonly held beliefs and opinions were easily manipulated. Plato, in a way, can be considered an early critic of populism, a sentiment that has found strong footing in the post truth era. Episteme or knowledge on the other hand stands for knowing something or a form of pure knowledge. For Plato, Doxa and Episteme stand in opposition to each other and Doxa is no less than a threat to the purity of knowledge. Aristotle, on the contrary, argued that Doxa was necessary step towards attaining knowledge and he coined the term ‘Endoxa’ to denote received knowledge that has been through the test of time and subjected to critique through dialogues and arguments. In

addition, another form of knowledge that occupied the Greeks refers to a kind of personal knowledge. The term used for this knowledge based on personal experience was 'Gnosis'.

Thereon, philosophical inquiry has incessantly engaged itself with this question: what is the difference between believing something and knowing something? More so, such distinction has become necessary given the contemporary times. Science devised a set of procedures that allowed the distinction with certain degree of confidence. It is to note that in science uncertainty is the ever-present phenomenon and any claim to hold hundred percent certainty is a rarity. Thus, Sophie Lewis and Allie Gallant have rightly put it, "In science, the only certainty is uncertainty" (web. n.pag.). However, this uncertainty in science has been based on Episteme, not Doxa. In other words, science very succinctly has a set of rules and procedures that permits it to differentiate belief (doxa) from knowledge (Episteme). In the post truth era, alternatively, Doxa and Gnosis have displaced Episteme as the dominant form of knowledge. This has led many critics to argue that in the public domain, it is crucial to examine those dominant beliefs and subject them to scrutiny.

The first attempts to define truth go back to Ancient Greek philosophers. Two very prominent theories of truth were the correspondence theory and the coherence theory. The correspondence theory of truth finds its roots in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, in which he defines truth as follows: "To say of what is that 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" (qtd. in Hussain 151). Truth is thus found in a statement's correspondence to reality, while falsehood is found in the lack thereof. Aristotle defined fiction in the similar terms, stating that "the historian could speak only of what has happened, of the particulars of the past; the poets, on the other hand, spoke of what could or might happen and so could deal more with universals" (qtd. in Hutcheon 106). This distinction, as Linda Hutcheon asserts, did not stop the viability of disciplines for each other, for instance poet portraying real persons and events and the historians borrowing fictional devices to write about history (106). Moving beyond Aristotle's black-and-white definition of truth, later correspondence theorists liberated truth to some degree when they argued that truth involves some characteristic relation to reality, thus making it a relational property. This, in other words, means that if a statement X accurately represents some portion of reality, the statement X is true.

On the other hand, the coherence theory of truth finds its roots in philosophers such as Spinoza, Fichte and later Hegel. Donald Davidson explains that coherentists work with the understanding that "there is a presumption in favor of the truth of a belief that coheres with a significant mass of belief" (138-139). The basic assumption is if a statement Y makes sense based on its coherence with the previously held beliefs, then those who hold those beliefs would most certainly accept statement Y as true. In other words, new information and representations are true in terms of their coherence with our previous knowledge and beliefs (Derksen 163-169). Although, this theory of truth, undoubtedly, creates new possibilities for truth, coherent understanding of truth has some serious shortcomings. For instance, when a new information or 'knowledge' does not cohere with our previous beliefs, we hastily reject its premise instead of revising and altering our beliefs. This in psychology is known as 'confirmation bias'. Although it is a natural reaction to cling onto our beliefs, the issue becomes problematic when our

previously held beliefs are lopsided, masked reality, or otherwise meagre. It is this lopsidedness and insufficiencies that philosophers and scholars like Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Roland Barthes (1915-80) question when they respectively proclaim that ‘God is Dead’ and the ‘Death of the Author’. It was not only their disillusionment with metanarratives of religion and fixed meaning but also their disillusionment with the metanarratives and universalism which in the twenty-first century have become felicitous tools in the hands of populist leaders and totalitarian regimes.

Did Postmodernism Give Birth to Post-truth?

Critics like Lee McIntyre and Michiko Kakutani have held Derrida, Nietzsche, Lyotard, Foucault and Postmodern relativism responsible for the post truth condition. First, Jean Francois Lyotard’s disposition as a postmodernist needs a proper understanding. Postmodernism emerged as a seminal intellectual force with Jean Francois Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), where he described postmodern era as disillusionment with the grand claims of meta narratives or more precisely as “incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv). Some of these are metanarratives are religion, the Enlightenment and rationality, or even philosophy itself. Postmodernism does not adhere to “the totalizing master narratives of our culture” (Hutcheon x). By doing so, it allows for ‘interpretations’, contradictions, paradoxes and irresolvability. That is, postmodernism allows for intellectual acceptance that things do not have to make sense in positivist-absolutist sense and alters us when things have dogmatic implications. Hutcheon has explained that postmodernism’s openness to contradiction accentuates the ‘constructivist’ nature of “meaning-making in the production and reception of art, ... how we make historical ‘facts’ out of the brute ‘events’ of the past, or, more generally, how our various sign systems grant meaning to our experience” (x). Thus, by bringing to light the constructivist nature of meaning-making, the postmodernists pointed to some serious flaws in Western thought, namely the doctrine of dogmatism or positivism.

Lee McIntyre, in his book *Post-Truth* (2018), discusses Derrida and his “theory of ‘deconstructing’ literature,” opining that deconstruction effectuated a devaluation of truth altogether (124). This misunderstanding about deconstruction results from the difficulty of defining it and also because Derrida himself did not pin it down. For instance, in one of his rare deliberations, Derrida explained what deconstruction is not:

[D]econstruction is neither an *analysis* nor a *critique* ... Deconstruction is not a method and cannot be transformed into one ... deconstruction is not even an *act* or an *operation*. ... Deconstruction takes place, it is an event that does not await the deliberation, consciousness, or organization of a subject, or even of modernity. *It deconstructs it-self. It can be deconstructed ... It is in deconstruction.* (“Letter” 3-4)

Clearly, deconstruction defies any categorical classification. It so happens because deconstruction for Derrida is not an external agent performing an ‘act’ or ‘operation’ of reading, critiquing, and analyzing. That would have resulted in producing yet another center and giving another centrality to the world. Instead, deconstruction is inherently an ‘always already present’

condition of any discourse. That is, the very process of deconstruction is not set from outside but it lies within. Not only that, Derrida does not even spare the term ‘deconstruction’ when he contends that the it itself is “under erasure” (3). Nevertheless, the term brings together ‘destruction’ and ‘construction’, and the combination of these words provides the best possible explanation of what ‘deconstruction’ entails. It comprises of taking things apart, not to lay them bare and meaningless but to understand their construction and of reconstruct them differently with an awareness that this ‘reconstruction’ would be another signifier or an interpretation in a long chain of signifiers or interpretations.

Derrida points that every discourse works on the assumption that words can convey the exact meanings from a speaker to a listener. Derrida calls it logocentricity. And, it is this logocentricity that Derrida dismantles by arguing that “slippage of meaning is inevitable in the act of communication” (Sim 101). He goes on to argue that there is an “inherent instability to words, which can never achieve full presence in terms of their meaning” (101). Derrida points that in Western culture any discourse assumes a “metaphysics of presence” whereby meaning is always “present” to the listener or reader when they encounter it. But Derrida argues that meaning is being constantly deconstructed instead, loses its so-called full presence or exactness the moment it is voiced (WAD 281). Thus, for him, almost entire Western philosophy is based on false assumption, meaning thereby that “founding concepts” do not themselves need founding (WAD 284). What remains interesting is the fact that any attempt to resolve this “discrepancy” would lead us “into an infinite regress” (Sim 101). In the absence of these founding concepts, locating a starting point would never be possible and Western thought’s obsession with search for the origins will be a pointless activity. Similarly, when Derrida critiques Structuralists, he contends that elements in a text fluid and “continuously unable to cohere around any central meaning, or deep structure” (102). And, no writer is ever in control of what the text is going to be about because that kind of direction is lost the moment a writer writes something down. Thus, Derrida asserts that there is “what we might call the *play* of the structure” and it escapes the control and fixity of central meaning (WAD 278). This allows the free-play of meanings, whereby meaning can never be pinned down or full presence can never occur, because there is no “reassuring foundation to guarantee it” (292). This has set in motion what Steven Connor would call “dangerously loose relativism” (Connor 7). Steven Connor worriedly points to the later developments of postmodernism, arguing that

‘postmodernism’ slowly but inexorably ceased to be the condition of things in the world, whether the world of art, culture, economics, politics, religion, or war, and became a philosophical disposition, an all-too-easily recognizable (and increasingly dismissible) style of thought and talk ... entered popular lexicon to signify loose, sometimes dangerously loose, relativism. (7)

Even this ‘dangerously loose relativism’ will not support the claims of post-truthers that since everything is a narrative, an alternate narrative to the dominant one is needed. ‘Fake-news’ and ‘deliberate falsehood’, getting warped under the ‘point of view’ logic of postmodernism, form the bases of these alternate narratives. Not a single postmodern philosophical as well as theoretical stance invites a call for deliberate falsehood even when they celebrate their

dangerously loose relativism. In addition, Stuart Sim argues that “relativism need not lead to a free-for-all as far as meaning goes. Relativism means that there are various possible interpretations of events in the world, not, as in post-truth that you have invented something that either is not there or never actually happened” (99).

When Derrida writes on the subject of truth itself, he makes it appear like an unrealizable state of affair. Derrida in *The Truth in Painting* (1978) expresses his scepticism about the concept of truth:

‘the truth in painting’ ... could mean and be understood as: truth itself restored, in person, without mediation, makeup, mask, or veil. In other words the true truth or the truth of truth, restituted in its power of restitution, truth looking sufficiently like itself to escape any misprision, any illusion; and even any representation – but sufficiently divided to already to resemble, produce, or engender itself twice over, in accordance with the two genitives: truth of truth and truth of truth. (5)

The understanding that truth is a divided concept suggests that exact truth can never be pointed out with precision. Derrida goes on to argue about the “truth-effects,” which is exactly what post-truthers are trying to produce in order to create pretence of reliability and authenticity. In a way, the appearance of truth is what suffices to “generate the required emotional response” (Sim 104). As long as a deliberate falsehood or fake-news has the effect of truth, it would be sufficient to produce the desired results from a targeted audience such as the supporters of Trump. For the deconstructionists, however, “all that truth-effects do is mask the lack of full presence in meaning; they can never be anything more than a pretence” (Sim 104).

In the light of recent political developments, Nietzsche has also been accused of being the predecessor of post truth and a strong proponent of unscrupulous and exploitative power-politics. Many commentators, while searching for an explanation of the post truth condition, have brought to the fore a supposed tradition of thinkers and philosophers who cast aspersions on truth. In particular, Friedrich Nietzsche is often named prominently amongst those who deny truth. In a *New York Times* article in 2016, Peter Wehner stated that “Trump embodies a Nietzschean morality rather than a Christian one. It is characterized by indifference to objective truth (there are no facts, only interpretations)” (web. n.pag.). Clearly, Wehner’s argument takes for granted the traditional connection between Christianity and objective truth. However, Nietzsche, for Wehner, serves as a good example of outspoken representative of indifference to facts and objectivity. Similarly, Simon Blackburn, making use of the very same quote, calls Nietzsche “the Arch-Debunker” (73). And, Maria Baghramian proclaims that Nietzsche is “possibly the most influential single philosopher of relativism in the recent history” (45). It is with reference to these views that one must ask a question: is Nietzsche a philosopher of relativism or subjectivism? The answer would be that his philosophical disposition does have “a certain version of epistemic relativism or contextualism,” but that must not be confused with subjectivism or absolutism. Preferably, he is a philosopher of ‘perspectivism’ or ‘anthropocentrism.’ In order to understand Nietzsche’s philosophical positioning on ‘perspectivism’, his often-misappropriated quote needs examination. The quote reads as follows:

Against positivism which halts at the phenomenon “there are only facts” I would say: no, precisely facts do not exist, only interpretations. We cannot determine any fact “in itself”: perhaps it is a nonsense to want such a thing. “Everything is subjective,” you say: but that itself is an *interpretation*, the “subject” is not given, but an added-on-fiction, tucked-behind. – Is it at last necessary to posit the interpreter behind the interpretation? Even that is poetry, hypothesis. Inasmuch as the word “knowledge” [“Erkenntnis”] has any meaning at all, the world is knowable: but it is variously *interpretable*; it has no meaning behind it, but countless meanings. “Perspectivism.” [...] (Nietzsche 2003, 139)

Although it was a private jotting (never meant for publication), it clearly states presenting denial of truth as a doctrine would be absolutely a misunderstanding. Instead, it must be presented as an anti-thesis to a positivist or an absolutist assumption that there are obvious, clear and plain facts alone. On a closer examination, it is evident in the text that Nietzsche does not deny the phenomenon of facts, but demands further critical examination. He asserts that there are no facts without interpretation, i.e., “without selection, valuation, adoption, contextualization, simplification, reduction of complexity, etc.” (Heit 46). Also, Nietzsche clearly warns against confusing the significance of interpretation with subjectivism. Subjectivism is a problematic philosophical disposition because it would claim that “The world is knowable to us, in a way according to us, to our capacities and needs” (Heit 46). In other words, subjectivism would take an interpretation for an absolute truth in itself instead of one interpretation among many others on the objective truth. Thus, subjectivism would be same as ‘positivism’ and ‘absolutism’ in its working. Nietzsche’s solution to positivism or absolutism is not subjectivism but a certain kind of anthropocentrism. Human beings form interpretations of the world we inhabit. That is, a specific context provides us with certain ‘value-judgements’ which form the basis of our interpretations. In other words, any “claims on factual truth are charged with value-judgements; they reveal an order of rank of preferences regarding our physiological faculties and needs, our epistemic interests and values, and our cultural tasks and goals” (Heit 47). In order to stop anthropocentrism from drifting into subjectivism, Nietzsche argues that an interpretation could be good or bad depending upon its allegiance to data and evidence, but there would be no claims to ‘absolutism.’

In addition, Nietzsche’s ‘perspectivism’ has also been majorly misunderstood. Most of his critics have suggested that Nietzschean perspectivism tends to lead us away from reality and ‘objective truth’ as such. That, arguably, is a blatant misreading of Nietzsche. Trying to reach truth and objectivity is at the heart of Nietzschean understanding of perspectivism. He asserts:

There is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective “knowing”; and the more affects we allow to speak about one thing, the more eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our “concept” of this thing, our “objectivity,” be. (Nietzsche 1918)

Here, it is conspicuous that far from being destructive, Nietzsche’s perspectivism is constructivist in its approach. He points to the limitations of trusting ‘the given’ or one-sided objectivist view of truth by arguing that more perspectives that we bring to bear on one thing will

engender a clearer understanding of our ‘concept’. It is this idea of perspectivism that allows a fuller picture of ‘truth’ and ‘objectivity’ to emerge as many perspectives would bring to the fore many aspects of the object we are studying whereas dogmatism which substantially functions on prejudices, false assumptions and bounded spirits of intellectualism, subdues this very emergence of perspectives. That is why Jean Marie Guyau argued that the very quest for absolute certainty and the dogmatic pursuit of positivist truths reveals a barbaric and uncivilized state of mind, determined by emotions rather than reason (109). Therefore, Nietzschean perspectivism becomes a significant intellectual practice, rendering rational discourse possible. That is, when we allow the emergence of different perspectives as a necessary condition of any intellectual discourse, our claims on ‘dogmatism’ and absolutely unconditioned knowledge collapse. This collapsing of absolutism and unquestionable truth results in more interpretations, which bolsters our commitment to ‘truth’ and ‘objectivity’. Thus, Nietzsche’s philosophical disposition, instead of causing post truth, provides insights into it, enabling our understanding of the phenomenon – post truth.

Thereupon, the practice of questioning that postmodernism passionately inculcated into us, is to raise doubts regarding things that have generally been taken for granted. This, in no way, sanctions the introduction of alternative or ‘inventions’ of facts because ‘the truth’ has been called into question. Even if we accept that everyone interprets facts, evidences and information differently, according to their own ‘value judgements’, personal interests and concerns, there is no way to interpret a ‘truth’ that was invented, except under the categories of falsehood, fiction, fakery, conspiracy and deception. It is, therefore, critical to acknowledge that postmodernists have unremittingly invited ‘interpretations’ (of something that actually happened) with renewed commitment to truths and reality and discouraged ‘invention’ of things that never took place. It is in the wake of these arguments that Aaron Hanlon wrote an article, fittingly titled “Postmodernism didn’t cause Trump. It explains him.” Hanlon concludes this article with the argument that “it’s a massive categorical error to call Trump’s post-truth politics ‘postmodernist.’ It’s just the say-anything chicanery of the old-fashioned sales pitch” (web).

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