

# Moral Discourse in a Post-Truth World

It is a truth universally acknowledged that the quality of public discourse on moral issues has deteriorated much in recent years, not least with the advent of social media. What is less clear is why, and what should be done about the matter. Some seek to blame the social media platforms and put the onus on them to make improvements. Those politically on the left blame those politically on the right and vice versa. The metropolitan elite blame the uneducated masses for their bigotry and xenophobia and the populists on the other side blame the privileged minority for their hypocrisy and arrogant condescension. None of us are left much enlightened by the exchanges that ensue.

In the midst of this turmoil, the complaint is increasingly heard that we are living in a post-truth world where the distinction between truth and falsehood has been lost, with only the incompatible opinions of hostile groups remaining. This is certainly an overstatement of the situation, but the fact people are saying it is testimony to the existence of a real problem.

In this presentation I would like to offer in the first instance some analysis as to how we got into this situation and then of the scope of the problem, specifically asking to what extent the crisis is epistemic in nature and to what degree axiological. I will then look to open up a discussion about what, if anything, should be done in the light of our understanding of the situation we confront.

First, this situation is often portrayed as a very recent development, manifested in its fullest form in the vote for Brexit and the election of Donald Trump in 2016; possibly also the rise to power of the M5S-Lega coalition in Italy this year. The agency of social media—the echo chambers it creates for its users and its capacity to disintermediate the mainstream media—is often cited as a proximate cause. But the seeds were in my view sown long before through the hegemony established by postmodern ideology from the 1980's onward, although some of the seminal writers were producing their work as far back as the post-World War II period.

“Modernity” is characterised by the elevated status afforded to truth and its co-opted handmaidens science and rationality. Truth is seen through this lens as a concomitant of objective rational pursuit and/or empirical investigation. *Post*-modernism is characterised by a dethroning of this concept of truth. But rather than turning the clock back to a premodern concept of truth based on authority, it rejects any objective notion of truth and asserts its fundamentally subjective nature. As I have argued in “Has the postmodern revolution gone full circle?”, this critique arguably finds its origins in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche. Its route can certainly be traced through the writings of Karl Marx and his many disciples, in particular his epithet that “hitherto philosophers have *interpreted* the world in various ways, whereas the point is to *change* it.” Indeed Jordan Peterson has achieved notoriety by labelling postmodern thinkers as “cultural Marxists.” In the words of Sir Roger Scruton writing recently in *The Spectator*:

*You could blame Nietzsche, whose declaration that ‘there are no truths, only interpretations’ has made him into the highest authority among post-modern academics. But Nietzsche’s aphorism is a mere paradox, on which nothing can be built. Far more important was Marx, whose theory of ideology put power above truth as the motive of political thinking. The result of Marx’s theory was to suggest that my thinking is science, yours ideology: mine is the true voice of history, yours the ‘false consciousness’ of the bourgeoisie. Yet more destructive was Foucault, who rephrased the*

*Marxist theory of bourgeois ideology in terms of the episteme of a culture — the fabric of concepts and arguments that the ruling class lays over society so that every voice speaks with its terms.*

Scruton here gets to the essence of the matter, which is my second point, namely that, in the absence of an objective standard of truth, determination of the validity of an assertion becomes a value judgment. In other words we have transitioned almost imperceptibly from the realm of epistemology and logic to that of axiology. Rather than asking whether someone's assertion is correct or not, we are now enjoined to ask *whose interests* are served by what is asserted: more specifically whether the members of the group(s) who are deemed the beneficiaries are relatively disempowered or disadvantaged by their membership of that group (or groups). As Scruton continues, the received postmodernist wisdom is that

*ideas, beliefs and arguments are not to be judged in terms of their truth, but in terms of the 'class', 'hegemony' or 'power structure' that speaks through them. The question to be asked of every adversary was not 'What are your arguments?' but 'Where are you speaking from?' That, to me, was the beginning of the post-truth culture.*

An associated phenomenon is what is referred to as “political correctness.” Indeed it could be claimed that this is just another name for an earlier manifestation of the same phenomenon. The oxymoronic name reveals the problematic nature of the notion. For, politics is the process where people with incommensurable preferences, values and views about the right ordering of society come together and work out rules which they agree to be bound by; correctness on the other hand implies a single unambiguously valid viewpoint. Seen in those terms the sleight of hand becomes self-evident. The behaviours, pronouncements and opinions which the advocates of political correctness seek to condemn are invariably not so serious or so attributable as to be justiciable in law. So other subjudicial processes are devised such as publicly declaiming, denying speech rights, memberships, access or custom, or even threatening or terminating employment. Such sanctions are necessary precisely because of the ambiguity around whether anyone has actually done anything wrong. When power cannot be explicitly wielded, the edifice is maintained by a process of labelling of critics, usually with one or other “ism” or “phobia.”

But there is a more fundamental dichotomy at the heart of the matter. If the initial premise is the denial of any privileged view of “truth”, how can anyone subsequently be deemed to have behaved inappropriately? Of course what has happened is that a privileged position has been smuggled in, as Scruton highlights in the above passage. The pursuit of equality and social justice are implicitly elevated to the level of a meta-morality and the viewpoint or interests of anyone identified (or identifying) as a member of a group deemed to be oppressed or systematically disadvantaged (perhaps even just historically) trumps the viewpoint or interests of anyone with attributes or connections tying them to a group deemed not to be so oppressed or disadvantaged.

As Nietzsche asserted (with prescience) through the mouth of his fictional prophet Zarathustra:

*Thus do I speak unto you in parable, ye who make the soul giddy, ye preachers of EQUALITY! Tarantulas are ye unto me, and secretly revengeful ones! ...Therefore do I tear at your web, that your rage may lure you out of your den of lies, and that your revenge may leap forth from behind your word “justice.” Because, FOR MAN TO BE REDEEMED FROM REVENGE—that is for me the bridge to the highest hope, and a rainbow after long storms. Otherwise, however, would the tarantulas have it. “Let it be very justice for the world to become full of the storms of our vengeance”—thus do they talk to one another. “Vengeance will we use, and insult, against all who*

*are not like us”—thus do the tarantula-hearts pledge themselves. “And ‘Will to Equality’—that itself shall henceforth be the name of virtue; and against all that hath power will we raise an outcry!” [THUS SPOKE ZARATHUSTRA, Chapter XXIX].*

But although this device has been a powerful one which the liberal left have used most effectively to further their agenda and achieve surreptitious hegemony, it turns out that this approach is a two-edged sword: once you allow of a principle that truth is a function of the identity of the group or individual on behalf of whom it is spoken and deny the existence of any objective standard of determination, the stage is left empty for the worst demagogues to strut across, fomenting hatred and resentment and allocating blame at the feet of the other(s).

Finally, the ordinary people who constitute the majority and find themselves implicitly being held responsible for the claimed injustices of minorities come to recognise that the way things work is that those who express the greatest outrage are deemed to have the most legitimate grievance and on that basis given credence; the facts of the matter are only secondary. The end consequence is that people cease to put forth credible intellectual arguments in support of their view but paint themselves as victims and seek to build a moral case instead. The currency of debate is no longer facts, evidence and logic but virtual signalling and claims of victimhood.

Where will this all end? Is it too late to turn back the tide? Or should we let it take its course?