

**“Lies, Bullshit, False Beliefs, Ignorance, Skepticism:
Some Epistemic Fallout of Our Political Times”**

“Facts and events are infinitely more fragile things than axioms, discoveries, theories...”
Arendt 2006, 227

“There is no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and more necessary to human life,
than that which is derived from the testimony of men...”
Hume 1748

“The reason of man, like man himself, is timid and cautious when left alone, and acquires
firmness and confidence in proportion to the number with which it is associated.”
Federalist Papers, #49

“If you hear a lie once, you don’t believe it. But if you hear it from 10,000 people you start
questioning what you know.”
Representative of trolling services firm associated
with the Duterte administration in the Philippines
(Mahtani and Cabato 2019)

Introduction

American society is increasingly riven by individuals and groups with incompatible beliefs and belief systems. Few readers will require examples, but here are two. The majority of Americans believe the 2020 presidential election was legitimate, but a significant percentage thinks it was stolen. Most people believe vaccines protect against dangerous diseases, but a goodly number think them riskier than the diseases they prevent. Those adhering to one set of beliefs distrust or disparage proponents of others, blaming them for their gullibility and their failure to attend to sources they find credible.

So how can we be good knowers, or at least reasonable believers? And how can we judge others along these dimensions? These are not only epistemological but ethical concerns. The central problem for many purposes, including mine here, is that most of what we know or believe about the world we believe second- (or third- or fourth- or *n*th-) hand, based on the testimony of

others. Certainly when it comes to the events of the wider world—those beyond each person’s immediate perceptions, memories, and powers of reasoning (none of which are exactly infallible either)—almost everything we believe derives from the testimony of other people, many of whose beliefs and claims in turn depend on the testimony of still others, and so on. We might roughly term this collection of beliefs social or even political.

Epistemology plays a role in sorting out these disagreements. Traditionally described as the “theory of knowledge,” it seeks to understand cognitive success and failure (Steup and Neta, 2020), which includes distinguishing reliable from unreliable testimony. Epistemology, then, is an inherently normative discipline, not merely a sociological description of some community’s cognitive practices. The rise of social and virtue epistemology over the last few decades has only made this more clear. As Michael Williams argues, epistemic problems “are not just about what we *do* believe but what (in some sense) we *must, ought, or are entitled to* believe; not just with how we in fact conduct our inquiries but how we *should or may* conduct them” (Williams 2001, 10-12).¹

From the philosophical adage that “‘Ought’ implies ‘can’” it follows that we have some control over what we believe. But this is controversial. The commonsense view is probably that we cannot directly control our beliefs: we can’t simply make ourselves believe something. Even William James, who famously asserted “the will to believe,” limits the realm to that which “cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds” (James 1896).² That excludes empirical questions such as whether someone stole an election or whether a vaccine is safe and effective.

But even if we cannot control our beliefs directly, we can affect them indirectly. We decide which evidence to gather, which media to consume, which people to trust—and these

choices themselves play a crucial role in producing our beliefs (Coady 2012, 12-17). For these reasons we bear some responsibility for them.

Or do we? Some deny even this. Hard determinists, a group that includes some social scientists, deny that a person's behavior reflects genuine choices. They deny not only that people can control their beliefs but also that they can control their actions. To others the nihilistic consequences of this view render it self-refuting. It's probably fair to say that today most philosophers embrace *compatibilism* (a.k.a. soft determinism), which says that although *all* actions are determined (the result of causal processes), nevertheless we can be held responsible for some of them. Explaining this seeming paradox is beyond the scope of this paper. (The literature on this topic is voluminous; for a lucid discussion see Sider 2005.) But it aims to do justice to the commonsense belief that sometimes we make real choices and that we cannot live in the world without believing that we and others do. As Kant argues, "rational beings" must presuppose that they and all other rational beings possess freedom of the will (Kant 1785, 4:448). Compatibilism makes it possible to hold people at least partly morally responsible for their beliefs as well as their actions, while at the same time recognizing the truth of determinism—that the universe is governed by causal laws.

Do those who doubt that our beliefs are within our control deny that choice plays a role in *any* human behavior? If so, they will hold people responsible neither for their beliefs nor their actions, in which case epistemology, understood as a normative discipline concerned with the conditions under which our beliefs are warranted, would be beside the point. If, on the other hand, their doubts concern only control over beliefs, it is incumbent on them to show that our beliefs are entirely beyond our control. I shall assume that we exert control over our beliefs indirectly, via choices we make about whom to trust, what sources to consult, whether and how

to gather evidence. For those reasons it is legitimate to hold people partly responsible for their beliefs.³

Testimony

So most of what we know about the world beyond our immediate experience relies on the testimony of many others. Recent examples of fundamental disputes about “testimonial facts”—with critical practical and moral consequences—abound. Support for starting the Iraq war in 2003 depended decisively for many people on the U.S. government’s assertion that Saddam Hussein was working with Al-Qaeda: if they had not believed this claim they would not have supported the war. The claim is a simple factual one: Saddam either was or was not working with Al-Qaeda.⁴ To what extent is climate change taking place, and are humans largely responsible for it? Was Barack Obama born outside the US? Did Hillary Clinton and her cronies run a child-sex trafficking ring in the basement of a Washington, DC pizza parlor?⁵ Do vaccines cause autism? And—yes—is the world flat?⁶

The reasons we depend so much on testimony to support our beliefs are mostly pretty obvious. Almost all our everyday beliefs—including, e.g., beliefs about what our name is, our birthday, what year it is, which hemisphere we live in, etc. etc.—we learn from other people. As for scientific claims, few people are adequately educated or possess the requisite abilities and skills to evaluate them; almost no one is intellectually equipped to do so for more than a few subjects. It would simply take more time and expertise than many people have to wade through the evidence in order to come to reasonable conclusions; these are full-time jobs at least. So instead we rely on others. For this division of labor to work, however, we need to be able to make reliable judgments about who or what are trustworthy sources of information.⁷ We make

these judgments continually, implicitly and explicitly. Even in making them, we rely on testimony; it's testimony (almost) all the way down.

Realization of our dependence on testimony and the need to evaluate it can lead down several paths: to reliance on “alternative” sources, skepticism about the possibility of attaining true knowledge, or doubt that there are such things as facts and truth. Often these are confused.

This essay begins by describing some of the twentieth-century philosophical roots of contemporary skepticism about the existence of truth, the impossibility of attaining it, and the untrustworthiness of mainstream media. In the same era, journalism adopted the values of objectivity and neutrality (often conflated) in striking ways that also bear on this skepticism. The paper then explores how the current political and media environments differ from previous times, when most people were also in the grip of important falsehoods. It goes on to examine how purveyors of information, the media through which they communicate, and recipients of information each contribute to the existence and spread of lies, bullshit, false beliefs, ignorance, and unwarranted skepticism—ways to go cognitively astray. The paper concludes with some suggestions about how consumers of information, social media companies, and the mainstream media might improve the epistemic climate.

Some postmodern influences

Skepticism about the reliability of the mainstream media as sources of information is not new. In the 1980s this skepticism was in full flower, spurred at least in part by the then-prominence of postmodernism and some strains of the sociology of knowledge, out of which arose the term “the social construction of reality.”⁸ Adherence to these ideas took a variety of forms, but they generally encouraged softness on truth, reality, and objectivity as checks on how

we interpret our experience of the world. Although sharp criticism of the mass media does not require adopting the postmodern stance (Noam Chomsky is a case in point), postmodernism and the sociology of knowledge were powerful influences—not so much on journalists themselves as on those who studied them and their products. For example, in a 1989 book the prominent communications theorist James Carey asserted that reality is “a vast production, a staged creation—something humanly produced and humanly maintained” (Carey 1989, 26). Already in 1972, in a much-cited article sociologist Gaye Tuchman described objectivity as “strategic ritual” (Tuchman 1972).

These critiques were not limited to journalism; they were much broader, applying to all sources of alleged knowledge. In 1998 the postmodernist historian Peter Novick described an earlier consensus among his peers—then disintegrating—that the aim of history was “to discover and record the objective truth about the past” with the ultimate goal of painting “a true and complete picture” of it (Novick 1998, 29).⁹ Novick himself welcomed the breakdown. Describing the newer outlook, he asserted that its proponents (of whom he was unmistakably one) believed the words “true” and “truthful” applied only to “rather narrowly defined ‘brute-factual’ statements,” and that it made “no sense to say of two accounts, assuming neither was filled with egregious misstatements of fact, that one was truer than the other” (Novick 1998, 37).

On its face Novick’s acknowledgment that brute facts exist might seem to reflect a moderate position not threatening to the concept of truth. Yet Novick asserts that history and fiction are barely distinguishable: he finds little reason to separate them except “to save librarians a massive job of recataloguing” (Novick 1998, 40). Ideally, he asserts, historians “would make no greater (but also no lesser) truth claims than poets or painters” (Novick 1998, 39).

How does Novick reconcile his acknowledgment of brute facts—such as that “The cat is on the mat” and “On 7 December 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor”—with his view that historians’ enterprise is akin to poetry or fiction? He does it by pointing to two features of being accurate about such facts. First, he says, “it’s not hard to do”; and second, “it’s not at all inconvenient: with minimal ingenuity you can construct a narrative of almost any imaginable shape, drawing whatever moral you wish, without getting facts wrong” (Novick 1998, 39). So factual accuracy, he thinks, is “inconsequential.” Still, he concedes, it’s generally wise to be accurate if only to avoid embarrassment or loss of credibility (Novick 1998, 40).

Both of Novick’s claims are wildly implausible. Some facts are easy to discover, and others are not. The idea that virtually any facts are compatible with any narrative explaining them flies in the face of the pervasive human desire to know the facts, to “get to the bottom of things”—which presupposes that facts are anything but inconsequential for how we should proceed to act and live our lives.

I am hardly the first to blame postmodernism for some of our current troubles with facts and truth. Occasionally postmodernists do it themselves. In 2003, Bruno Latour, described in a 2018 *New York Times Magazine* article as “the post-truth philosopher,” agonized over the possible role his work might have played in our current crisis of skepticism about truth (Kofman 2018).¹⁰ One writer describes Latour’s 1979 book (with Steve Woolgar) *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* as “inaugurating the Science Wars, a pitched battle between scientists and cultural theorists over the objectivity of science” (Salmon 2018).” In a 2004 article in *Critical Inquiry* Latour considers the role he may have played in the rise of climate change skeptics, 9/11 deniers, and the like:

While we spent years trying to detect the real prejudices hidden behind the appearance

of objective statements, do we now have to reveal the real objective and incontrovertible facts hidden behind the illusion of prejudices? And yet entire Ph.D. programs are still running to make sure that good American kids are learning the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth, that we are always prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particular standpoint, and so on, while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives. Was I wrong to participate in the invention of this field known as science studies? . . . What has become of critique when my neighbor in the little Bourbonnais village where I live looks down on me as someone hopelessly naïve because I believe that the United States had been attacked by terrorists (Latour 2004, 227-8).

Latour insinuates that his earlier project was misunderstood all along: “The question was never to get away from facts but closer to them, not fighting empiricism but, on the contrary, renewing empiricism” (Latour 2004, 231). If so, a lot of people were misled.

Arendt on truth and politics

Hannah Arendt’s 1967 essay “Truth and Politics” sheds light on these questions. Arendt argues that “Even in Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia it was more dangerous to talk about concentration and extermination camps, whose existence was no secret, than to hold and to utter ‘heretical’ views on anti-Semitism, racism, and Communism” (Arendt 1967, 232). That only makes sense on the view that no respectable theories could explain or justify such facts. Arendt goes on: “Unwelcome opinion can be argued with, rejected, or compromised upon, but unwelcome facts possess an infuriating stubbornness that nothing can move except plain lies”

(Arendt 1967, 236). It's for that reason that "Facts and events are infinitely more fragile things than axioms, discoveries, theories..." (Arendt 1967, 227).

In support of this point, Arendt quotes Clemenceau, who, when asked about guilt for the outbreak of World War I, replied: "This I don't know. But I know for certain that they will not say Belgium invaded Germany" (Arendt 1967, 234). Clemenceau ironically hints that he does know *something* about guilt for the war. Facts underdetermine theories, and perhaps they are never dispositive—their contributions to normative or practical conclusions can be outweighed or countered by other facts or arguments—but they are highly relevant and in many cases point sharply to a particular conclusion. So it is that, as Arendt asserts, "it may be in the nature of the political realm to be at war with truth in all its forms..." (Arendt 1967, 235).

Arendt points to two characteristics of facts that seem almost contradictory. First, she thinks that although "rational truth" (such as the truths of mathematics) and "factual truth" are very different, once agreed upon they are beyond dispute. "Truth carries within itself an element of coercion; as Grotius insisted, "even God cannot cause two times two not to make four" (Arendt 1967, 235, 236).¹¹

Lies may be most effective in countering facts, but censorship can also do the job, as Hobbes notes:

I doubt not, but if it had been a thing contrary to any man's right of dominion, or to the interest of men that have dominion, that the three angles of a triangle should be equal to two angles of a square, that doctrine should have been, if not disputed, yet by the burning of all books of geometry suppressed, as far as he whom it concerned was able (Hobbes 1651, I.XI.21).

Yet despite Arendt's view that facts are indisputable, she also asserts that from a logical point of view "...facts have no conclusive reason whatever for being what they are; they could always have been otherwise" (Arendt 1967, 238). And that can make them easy to reject. God cannot make two times two equal five, but He could, it seems, change the course of a storm if He chose.¹² Even if climate change is taking place, we do not defy *logic* by denying that it is.

What's different now?

The term "post-truth era" is unfortunate. Although coined, it seems, by those sympathetic to the concept of truth, the term may suggest that truth isn't important anymore, that we've gotten beyond the naïve preoccupation with it, or even that somehow truth no longer exists. There's another reason too that "post-truth era" is misleading. It implies that truth was more plentiful in times past. But is that so? Large numbers of people have always believed many falsehoods. They believed that the earth is flat, that the sun revolves around the earth, that human health is governed by black bile, yellow bile, blood, and phlegm (the four humors). In some cases these false beliefs were the best the science of the day had to offer, in which case it was reasonable for people to hold them. In other instances not so much.

In any case, a concern with truth grew deep roots in journalism in the twentieth century, when notions like fairness, balance, objectivity, and neutrality—thought to promote truth—became preeminent.¹³ Under this regimen, reporters generally did not make even factual claims without attributing them to sources, and to be fair such claims had to be balanced by claims on the other side (there was rarely more than one), whether or not it was credible. Consumers of news might be left to think that both sides were equally legitimate.¹⁴ That kind of thinking seems to be what overcame a Florida high school principal who recently refused to say the Holocaust

happened because he thought he had to remain politically neutral (Mervosh 2019). (He lost his job.)

In the U.S., the values of journalistic fairness, balance, and objectivity were enshrined in the “Fairness Doctrine,” established by the Federal Communications Commission in 1949. It required that those granted broadcast licenses cover some issues of public importance, and that they do so *fairly*. “Fairness” meant that they were required to air opposing views. The Fairness Doctrine was abolished in 1987 on the grounds that the growing diversity of mass media made it no longer necessary (Ruane 2011; Villasenor 2020).¹⁵ Its demise helped propel right-wing talk radio to the forefront, since programs were no longer required to air opposing points of view.

So are things any worse today than they’ve ever been, truth-wise? One reason we might think so, ironically, is that the number and proportion of people who take truth, evidence, and reason seriously is probably higher than in the past, and they are more vocal than in earlier times. If so, falsehoods might be more often challenged publicly than they used to be, at least in democracies where free speech is protected. If so, our expectations that truth will win out might also be elevated.

Yet even in democratic countries, the extent of bluster, bullying, and lying has recently become especially shameless. This results at least in part from what most distinguishes our present situation from earlier ones: the rise of the internet and social media, where the transmission of ideas, facts, and fantasies ramify faster and farther, making it easier than ever to spread falsehoods, whether deliberately or not. “Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President”—a lie originating in Macedonia—was the most popular “news” story of the whole 2016 US election. “Three times as many Americans read and shared it on their social media accounts as they did the top-performing article from the *New York Times*” (Singer and

Brooking 2018, 120, 323).¹⁶ A study by MIT data scientists of 126,000 Twitter “rumor cascades” found that “falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information” (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018).¹⁷ It took true stories about six times as long to reach 1500 people as it did false stories; “falsehoods were 70% more likely to be retweeted than the truth.” The authors found that humans, not bots, were primarily responsible for these results. They speculate that the relative novelty of false rumors explains their greater spread: “When information is novel, it is not only surprising, but also more valuable, both from an information theoretic perspective [in that it provides the greatest aid to decision-making] and from a social perspective [in that it conveys social status on one that is ‘in the know’]” (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018).

But social media do not bear sole responsibility for these problems. In keeping with the conception of objective journalism noted earlier, the most respected mainstream media outlets in the U.S. are sensitive to charges that they have a “liberal bias,” and so may engage in “false equivalence,” bending over backwards to make sure they give the “other side” equal time, no matter how outlandish its claims (Fallows 2019). This hypothesis is confirmed by a new study finding that the disinformation campaign to discredit the legitimacy of mail-in voting was driven in part by the mainstream media’s commitment to “balance, neutrality, or the avoidance of the appearance of taking a side.” The report also cites two other core journalistic practices that produce these outcomes. One is “If the President says it, it’s news.” The other is headline-seeking (“If it bleeds, it leads”). The authors believe that disinformation effects result from an “elite-driven, mass media process” in which “social media played only a secondary and supportive role” (Benkler et al. 2020).

Misinformation, disinformation, and ignorance

To think about the various ways false beliefs can come about we should distinguish *purveyors* of information, the *medium* through which they purvey it, and *recipients* of that information, whom I'll call *citizens* to mark their supposed special role in a democratic society. Purveyors can be individuals or collective bodies like clubs, churches, corporations, or governments. Media include conversation, word of mouth, newspapers, magazines, radio, TV, documentaries, Facebook, Twitter, etc. Citizens are individual human beings. Of course purveyors can be citizens and vice versa.

When purveyors convey false information, they can do so intentionally or unintentionally.¹⁸ There are also intermediate states: e.g., recklessness and negligence, which themselves come in degrees. We might distinguish deliberate from unintentional communication of falsehood with the terms *disinformation* and *misinformation* respectively.

C. Thi Nguyen identifies misinformation with *epistemic bubbles* and disinformation with *echo chambers* (Nguyen 2020, 142). An epistemic bubble can emerge “with no ill intent, through ordinary processes of social selection and community formation.”¹⁹ It can come about quite naturally. Your friends on Facebook are people you know and share interests and values with, so what comes across your newsfeed will most likely reinforce your point of view and omit alternative perspectives. And, as Regina Rini argues, despite risks, it is not unreasonable to “attribute greater credibility to co-partisan testifiers than to others, given that shared partisan affiliation points to shared normative values” (Rini 2017). In an echo chamber, on the other

hand, “other relevant voices have been actively discredited. . . .They work by systematically isolating their members from all outside epistemic sources” (Nguyen 2020, 142).²⁰

Recipients of information will not distinguish between misinformation and disinformation. (It is hard to think how they could do so in real time.) They will simply come to hold a false belief.

Holding false beliefs is different from being ignorant. Ignorance is a common charge lodged against citizens, often thought to undermine their alleged role in democracies. But, as Etienne Brown observes, ignorance is mainly a problem when citizens don’t know they are ignorant (Brown 2018, 208-9).²¹ If instead they are socratically ignorant—if they know they don’t know—they may be able to perform their roles intelligently nonetheless, and may at the very least be humble, not claiming more knowledge or expertise than they have. Most people are ignorant of many important matters relevant to good government—the intricacies of climate change, nuclear disarmament, health care policy, to name just a few—and can hardly be faulted for this ignorance. But if they know they don’t know they may still be able to identify others who do know—or at least keep mum. That may be all we need, or at least can hope for, to avoid falsehood cascades.

It is not, Nguyen believes, that contemporary citizens no longer care about truth and evidence (what he calls the “total irrationality” explanation for the “post-truth era”), but that some of them put their trust in others who deliberately cut them off from competing sources and voices. So those inside echo chambers will be more likely to think they know when they don’t. Nguyen believes that inhabitants of epistemic bubbles are at less risk, because they have not affirmatively rejected listening to alternative sources; they just fail to come across them regularly. Still, what those in epistemic bubbles hear makes it easy for them to tune out other

points of view on one ground or another, or perhaps on none at all. If so, epistemic bubbles are less different from echo chambers than Nguyen believes, and might be nearly as dangerous.

Why are people prone to false beliefs? Brown helpfully describes some of the important reasons and the psychological literature supporting them. He presents five phenomena discovered by experimentalists, summarized here.

First, “when people know little about a source, they treat information from that source as credible” (Brown 2018, 284; quoting Rapp 2016).²²

Second, when people encounter the same information multiples times, they are more likely to believe it. Psychologists label this the “truth effect” (Brown 2018, 203; citing Dechêne et al. 2010.).

Third, people are influenced by stories they know are fiction, even when the stories contain “information” that contradicts well-known facts (Brown 2018, 203; citing Marsh and Fazio 2006).

Fourth, people don’t always recall the source of their information (Brown 2018, 204; citing Marsh, Cantor, and Brashier 2016 and Rapp 2016).

Fifth, as we saw earlier, fake news arouses more “surprise and disgust” than true information, causing it to be more widely shared (Brown 2016, 204; citing Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018).

Lies and bullshit

One reason people acquire false beliefs is that some purveyors engage in lies and bullshit. Politicians and others who speak publicly sometimes intentionally deceive their hearers, aiming for them to believe false propositions. It’s natural to think that politicians also sometimes

bullshit. In *On Bullshit*, Harry Frankfurt asserts that while “the liar is essentially someone who deliberately promulgates a falsehood,” the bullshitter is indifferent about whether her statements are true or false (Frankfurt 2005, 46). You can’t lie unless you know the truth, he says, but “Producing bullshit requires no such conviction.” He concludes that “bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are” (Frankfurt 2005, 55, 61).²³

Bullshitting is common in the private realm. It happens most often when insecure people want to look like they know what they’re talking about even if they don’t. Bullshitters don’t care much about what their hearers believe, and mainly aim to sound smart or interesting. So in my view bullshitting aims to produce in hearers a certain impression of the speaker, more than it aims to produce in them false beliefs. In this sense, it’s not obvious whether politicians are often bullshitters, because when they speak in the public realm, they are rarely indifferent to what beliefs they create in hearers. It would seem, then, that in public discourse bullshitting plays a lesser role than outright lying, and is therefore less threatening. Donald Trump might seem to be the exception: the paradigm case of the bullshitter. Does he care what his hearers come to believe about the facts, or does he care only about what they think of *him*—that, for example, he sticks to his guns and never backs down?²⁴ Insofar as it is the latter he is a bullshitter. But he also lies frequently.

We care when people lie partly because of what it demonstrates about their characters. Even though we know that everyone lies sometimes²⁵ and that politicians in particular probably cannot avoid it if they hope to keep their jobs, these excuses, if that is what they are, must be weighed against the need for trust, which must play a critical role in the relationship between politicians and the people they represent—and among people generally. Of course, whether lying is significant depends on how much of it there is and what its content is. Much of what people lie

about is trivial, meant to please others or to prop up oneself. (According to Feldman, Forrest, and Happ 2002, women do more of the first and men more of the second.) But the lies of politicians, public officials, and public figures often concern issues of wider significance.

When we learn that someone has lied about some matter we have reason not to trust other things they say. As Kant might have put it (and as we have lately been reminded), lying undermines the “institution” of communication: when you cease to trust someone because you learn they have lied you may start to doubt almost anything of any significance they say. The effects can be corrosive, producing a kind of destructive skepticism I discuss in the next section. Even if Trump was sincere (which is doubtful) when he said he underplayed the significance of the coronavirus in February 2020 so as not to alarm the American people, that strategy was doomed to backfire as long as the real threat of the disease would eventually emerge. Leaving aside its moral defects, this approach was not smart.

In light of our inevitable reliance on others’ testimony to acquire true beliefs and avoid false ones, trust in people’s overall veracity is essential. It’s also important because of what untrustworthiness in matters of truthfulness tells us about a person’s character across the board. Because having the truth is important for us to make our way in the world, those who would deliberately lead us away from it do not have our interests at heart. We cannot entrust them with our trust.

This statement is in need of qualification. It’s only some truths and the avoidance of some false beliefs that are relevant to our making our way in the world, so the class of such beliefs needs to be specified further. Some argue that certain illusions (e.g. about one’s own abilities, or the existence of a just god) are useful for having a happy and successful life, and they may be right. Moreover, trust has both a moral and cognitive meaning. Our focus has been on people

who are untrustworthy because they intentionally—often maliciously—deceive others. But people can be perfectly well-meaning yet unreliable. Loss of trust in these cases may have similar consequences, but there may be important differences.

Skepticism and its consequences

One consequence of false information is false beliefs. Another is skepticism—the withholding of belief. I do not mean skepticism as *a* or even *the* central problem of epistemology, but rather the stance originally personified by Socrates and John Stuart Mill that teachers often try to instill in their students: to be critical, slow to judge the veracity of a claim, to question its source, analyze its meaning, be open to changing one’s mind, etc. This is what we might call “constructive skepticism,” which results not in believing nothing but in believing carefully.

The danger is that in a culture of lies and other degraded discourse people may move from doubting the truth of a particular account of things to altogether rejecting the concept, that is the possibility, of truth. In *Merchants of Doubt*, Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway describe the strategy employed by corporations in the fossil fuel and tobacco industries (among others) to discredit science: “‘Doubt is our product,’ read an infamous memo written by a tobacco industry executive in 1969, ‘since it is the best means of competing with the ‘body of fact’ that exists in the minds of the general public’” (Oreskes and Conway 2010, 34). The result may be to instill the belief that no one, no alleged facts, can be trusted. The real danger of fake news is that “their very existence creates a world in which almost everything can be dismissed as false” (Wardel 2019).

Here skepticism becomes nihilism. Arendt reaches a similar conclusion, although she posits a world (one it is hoped we do not yet inhabit) in which factual truth has been consistently and totally substituted by lies: "...the result...is not that the lies will now be accepted as truth, and the truth be defamed as lies, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world—and the category of truth vs. falsehood is among the mental means to this end—is being destroyed" (Arendt 2006, 252-3).

But in fact it is impossible to navigate the world without beliefs about what is and is not the case: we never do become genuine skeptics about everything. As Hume argues in describing the destructive power of skepticism that results from philosophical reflection,

Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours' amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strained, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther (Hume 1739, I.IV.VII).

But the analogy is imperfect. Like Hume, the contemporary consumer of mass and social media cannot sustain skepticism. But in contested cases it is not "nature" that fills the void. Instead, self-interest, convenience, prejudice, prior beliefs, the loudest voice, the nearest voice, the charismatic leader, and the largest crowd determine the "truths" that many people accept.

Some possible fixes

What can be done to counteract the effects of fake news, false beliefs, and destructive skepticism? There are, I believe, four possible foci of activity: consumers of media; social media companies like Facebook and Twitter; mainstream media organizations; and governments. This is much too large a subject to tackle here, and I will simply mention a few efforts and proposals regarding the first three.

First, consumers of media must improve their skills at detecting untruth. This is advice some people might be able to take on their own, but most need help. Media literacy must be taught seriously in schools and colleges; it's time for "critical thinking" courses to take center stage in every curriculum, and to devote substantial attention to social and mass media. The News Literacy Project is a nonprofit organization with resources to help people learn to be "smart, active consumers of news and information" (newslit.org). Mike Caulfield at Washington State University Vancouver runs the Digital Polarization Initiative, which develops "web literacy skills in college undergraduates" (Caulfield, n.d.). Facebook publishes "Tips to Spot False News" (Facebook Tips). A recent study from the National Academy of Sciences confirmed the effectiveness of such tips; it found that "exposure to variants of the Facebook media literacy intervention reduces people's belief in false headlines" (Guess et al. 2020).²⁶

Second, social media companies must take more steps than they have so far to separate truth from falsehood and lies. As Kaveh Waddell notes, their weapons fall into three categories: promoting good information, demoting bad information, and preventing misinformation from appearing at all. Facebook employs independent and certified fact-checkers and moderators who work to identify and review false news; stories identified as false appear lower in users' news feeds (Facebook n.d.; Waddell 2020, March 11). But fact-checkers may be overwhelmed, and it

has been argued that “Facebook and its peers simply do not wish to pay for armies of humans to engage in what amounts to a non-revenue-generating cost” (Leetaru 2018). Rini suggests that Facebook calculate a reputation score for users based on how often they share disputed stories. Every proposal has limitations and drawbacks (Rini 2017).²⁷

Finally, mainstream media outlets need to work to avoid problems such as those mentioned earlier: false equivalence, headline-seeking, and “If Important Person says it, it’s news.” In the hyper-competitive environment that media organizations inhabit, it’s hard to be optimistic about the prospects of success; the most respectable and respected news sources engage in these questionable activities every day. Nonetheless, in 2016 the *New York Times* decided to call some of Trump’s assertions lies rather than mere falsehoods, despite the difficulty, implicit in calling something a lie, of knowing what is in a person’s mind (National Public Radio 2016; Borchers 2016). Sometimes it’s just not that difficult.

ENDNOTES

¹ The ancient Greeks always understood the connection. For discussion see, e.g., Williams 2001, 7-10.

² “Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for

to say, under such circumstances, "Do not decide, but leave the question open," is itself a passionate decision,—just like deciding yes or no,—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.”

³ *Doxastic voluntarism*—the idea that we can control our beliefs—has been the subject of debate for centuries, dating at least as far back as Hume (Coady 2012, 12). To the extent that the term fails to distinguish direct from indirect control, the dispute may be a red herring. For a good discussion of epistemic responsibility see Cassam 2019, especially chapter 6.

⁴ See Kull, Ramsay, and Lewis 2003, who show that a large majority who supported the 2003 Iraq war believed that Saddam was working with Al-Qaeda and/or possessed WMD. “The presence of misperceptions was the most powerful factor predicting support for the war” (597). Questions about the presence of WMD were equally important, but in this case more than one fact was at stake. Central was not only whether Saddam had WMD but whether he planned to use them and had delivery systems for them. As Coady argues, most of the debates about the legitimacy of the Iraq war focused on epistemic issues (Coady 2012, 3).

⁵ For detailed accounts see Singer and Brooking 2018, 127-37, and Rossi 2020.

⁶ The last has, according to Singer and Brooking (123), made a “dramatic comeback” thanks to the internet.

⁷ In some languages, such as Wanano, spoken in the Brazilian northwest Amazon, speakers indicate how the information they are conveying was obtained through “terminal morphemes” known as “evidentials.” “A speaker must indicate how she received her information by applying an evidentiary affix to every verb” (Chernela 2011, 201). This conveys how the speaker knows what she is saying (or thinks she knows), helping the listener to “evaluate the reliability of the statement” (205).

⁸ This term was coined by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their book *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Berger and Luckmann 1967).

⁹ Novick, who died in 2012, was the author of the excellent book *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (1988). See also Lichtenberg 1998. In what follows I assume an analogy between the problems facing reporters and journalists and those facing historians, despite significant differences between them.

¹⁰ Some deny that postmodernism played any causal role in the decline of truth; see, e.g., Hanlon 2018.

¹¹ She cites Grotius 1625, Book I, Chapter 1. "...although the power of God is infinite, yet there are some things, to which it does not extend....Thus two and two must make four, nor is it possible to be otherwise..." In his 2017 State of the State speech California Governor Jerry Brown quoted this passage from Grotius as a counter to Donald Trump's denial of human-caused climate change (Gajanan 2017).

¹² Or could He? Clearly many other scientific and material facts, and the theories that support them, would have to be different too. Consider in this connection Trump's insistence during Hurricane Dorian in 2019 that Alabama was at risk, which contradicted the National Weather Service's position and was buttressed by a doctored map. According to a *New York Times* story, the Secretary of Commerce threatened to fire top employees at the agency overseeing the NWS after the agency repudiated the President's statement (Flavelle, Friedman, and Baker 2019).

¹³ For a history and analysis of the rise of objectivity as an ideal in journalism see Schudson 1978 and Lichtenberg 2000.

¹⁴ James Fallows recently wrote about the problem, which he calls false equivalence (Fallows 2019). Alexander Cockburn already savaged this understanding of objectivity back in 1982 in

when he imagined a segment of the MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour in which two talking heads debate the pros and cons of one person owning another (Cockburn 1982).

¹⁵ The Fairness Doctrine never applied to print media; doing so was thought to violate the First Amendment.

¹⁶ Pope Francis's reaction: "No one has a right to do this. It is a sin and it is hurtful."

¹⁷ "A rumor cascade begins on Twitter when a user makes an assertion about a topic in a tweet, which could include written text, photos, or links to articles online. Others then propagate the rumor by retweeting it" (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018, 1146). Another study finds that corrections do not always correct misperceptions, and can even increase them (Nyhan and Reifler 2010).

¹⁸ We should also distinguish between two kinds of purveyors: authors/originators of falsehoods and fake news, and redistributors (re-tweeters, gossips, etc.). It's plausible that the former always act intentionally, while the latter may run the gamut: they may act negligently or recklessly (presumably without knowing the information is false, but culpably ignorant), or intentionally, in full knowledge that it's false.

¹⁹ The labels might be misleading; I believe some use the term "echo chamber" in a broader sense that includes epistemic bubbles. But the distinction is useful in any case, and I'll stick with these labels.

²⁰ Nguyen credits this analysis to Jamieson and Cappella 2008. They liken the process to that used to indoctrinate cult members, teaching them to mistrust outside sources.

²¹ Thus the ubiquitous line attributed (perhaps inaccurately) to Mark Twain: "It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so."

²² For a chilling investigation of the hold over us of social media see Orłowski 2020.

²³ It seems there are a few suppressed premises here that need to be made explicit.

²⁴ His hearers may also be indifferent to truth. Reporter Mark Leibovich describes the “unshakable allegiance” of Trump’s supporters as falling “somewhere between true belief and being in on the joke” (Leibovich 2020).

²⁵ A much-cited study finds that 60 percent of people lied at least once during a ten-minute conversation. See Feldman, Forrest, and Happ 2002.

²⁶ The study unfortunately uses the term “mainstream news” to mean true news. There are various significant caveats. For a good discussion of the study see Waddell 2020, June 22.

²⁷ Rini is well aware of the drawbacks. See also Frost-Arnold 2014. Karen Frost-Arnold believes the costs of abandoning internet anonymity greatly outweigh the benefits, and suggests focusing instead on influencing the mindsets of users. She cites evidence for the conclusion that “making the harms of internet untrustworthiness more salient to users” might reduce their motivation to engage in such activities (77). I am pessimistic about the extent to which this approach could make a significant difference.

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