

## Philosophy of Post-Truth

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**In 2016, the Oxford Dictionaries selected “post-truth” as the “Word of the Year” and defined it as “a term relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” This definition is the starting point of this article, which will conclude with a proposed new definition for the term. The proposed definition derives from philosophical observation of the new concept “post-truth,” which relies on principal theories relating to the old and familiar concept of “truth,” and on their basis, an analysis of the characteristics of the post-truth phenomenon. This philosophical observation should help researchers to respond to two questions: What phenomenon does “post-truth” denote, and why is it emerging or gaining prominence precisely at this time?**

*“It is difficult to speak the truth, for although there is only one truth, it is alive and therefore has a live and changing face.”*

*Franz Kafka*

### **Introduction**

The first person to use the term “post-truth” in its contemporary context was the Serbian American playwright Steve Tesich. In his 1992 article “A Government of Lies,”<sup>1</sup> Tesich criticized the American public for submissively accepting the lies of the Bush (Sr.) administration and of consciously deciding to live in a post-truth world, i.e., in a world in which the truth is no longer important or relevant. The term resurfaced in 2004, in the title of a book by Ralph Keyes, *The Post-Truth Era*.<sup>2</sup>

Only in 2016, against the backdrop of the United States presidential elections and the United Kingdom referendum about withdrawal from the European Union (Brexit), did the new and rather obscure term become prevalent, and its use in the political context skyrocketed by thousands of percentage points. It was for this reason that Oxford Dictionaries selected it as the “Word of the Year” in 2016 and defined it as “a term relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”<sup>3</sup> This definition is the starting point of this article, which will close with a proposed new definition that reflects the article’s conclusions.

One of the questions raised by the concept “post-truth” is whether at issue is a new phenomenon or an existing phenomenon that gained prominence as a result of particular circumstances, and therefore, also a new name. If at issue is a new phenomenon, then it is important to understand what innovation it represents relative to what preceded it and why it has emerged at this time. If this is not a new phenomenon, then it is important to understand why it gained prominence and was renamed specifically in contemporary times. Thus there are two principal questions: What phenomenon does the concept “post-truth” denote? And regardless of whether or not it is new, why has it emerged or gained prominence specifically at the present time?

Philosophy engages mainly in the study of concepts with the aim of clarifying their objects and understanding them. In the case at hand, an analysis of the concept “post-truth” may help us understand the post-truth phenomenon that the term denotes. Therefore, the philosophical review presented below will mainly attempt to provide an answer to the first question – what is the phenomenon called “post-truth”? Since there are numerous reasons relating to diverse disciplines – including technology, communications, political science, sociology, psychology, and decision making – as to why the phenomenon has emerged at this time, therefore philosophy in general, and this article in particular, can only partially contribute to discussion of the second question about the origins of the phenomenon and the reasons for its current appearance.

This article is part of a research study whose objective is to develop tools and methods for clarifying and understanding reality and for making decisions relating to national security and democracy during an era that is very much influenced by the phenomena of post-truth and fake news. The research first engages in understanding the phenomena – their uniqueness, origins, and characteristics – as an essential preliminary stage to discussion of their implications for national security and the democratic process and the development of operative strategies to contend with them. The purpose of this article is to contribute to an understanding of the phenomena through philosophical observation of the concept “post-truth” and the phenomenon that it denotes.

### **Philosophers and Researchers of the Post-Truth Phenomenon**

Many people quote George Orwell, who already during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, said that politicians along the entire political spectrum lie and make their lies sound truthful:

Political language – and, with variations, this is true of all political parties, from conservatives to anarchists – is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.<sup>4</sup>

Philosopher Hannah Arendt asserted in her 1967 article “Truth and Politics”<sup>5</sup> that truthfulness and honesty have never been counted among the virtues of a politician, and that lies have always been regarded as necessary and justifiable tools of politicians and statesmen. However, in today’s world, factual truth that goes against the interests of a particular political group will be received with greater hostility than ever before. According to Arendt, the greatest antagonist of factual truth is an opinion, rather than a lie, particularly in light of the current predilection of blurring between fact and opinion. When a liar deliberately and expressly wants to conceal a falsehood, he says that the lie is merely his opinion and, like any person in a liberal democratic country, he enjoys freedom of expression and the right to express his opinion. Arendt added that although it is true that our factual truth is never completely free of interpretation or personal perspective, this situation cannot serve as an argument against the existence of reality and facts, nor can it justify blurring the dividing lines between fact, opinion, and interpretation. The outcome of such blurring is a confused public that cannot differentiate between fact, fabrication, and opinion. This confusion, said Arendt, is empowered by the mass media. Yet while in the past lies were usually directed against individuals, and mainly outwardly against enemies, today lies are primarily channeled domestically through the mass media to deceive everyone. A consequence of this is that domestic tellers of factual truth are sometimes perceived by the public as more dangerous and hostile than foreign enemies.

Since Hannah Arendt wrote these statements more than fifty years ago, we may be able to deduce from this that the term “post-truth” does not denote a new phenomenon that emerged only in recent years. On the other hand, one can argue, as did British journalist Matthew d’Ancona,<sup>6</sup> that Hannah Arendt and George Orwell were prominent among those who already in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century identified the harbingers of the post-truth phenomenon and used them to predict what is underway today in full force.

What is the post-truth phenomenon and what is new about it? A look at the responses by researchers from various fields is highly instructive, Prof. Yuval Noah Harari<sup>7</sup> said that the first point we need to know about fake news is that it is old news, and that at the outset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, truth isn’t in worse shape than it was in previous periods.<sup>8</sup> In essence, he said, the post-truth phenomenon typifies homo sapiens, and our power is rooted in our ability to create stories and fabrications and then believe them – like myths, religions, and ideologies, which enable the creation of cooperation and ties between complete strangers. According to Harari, a historian, homo sapiens have always preferred power over truth and have invested more time and effort in ruling the world than in trying to understand it. What still makes the current trend of fake news different, said Harari, is technology, which enables us to tailor propaganda on an individual basis, and match the lies to the individual prejudices.<sup>9</sup> Trolls and hackers use big data algorithms to identify

each person's unique weaknesses and tendencies and then fabricate stories consistent with them. They use these stories to reinforce the prejudices of those believing in them, to exacerbate the rifts in society, and to puncture the democratic system from within.<sup>10</sup> Like Yuval Noah Harari, philosopher Lee McIntyre<sup>11</sup> argues that the innovation in the post-truth phenomenon is not a denial of the existence of truth and facts, but rather is the subjugation of facts to personal preconceptions and a subjective perspective. According to McIntyre, in the post-truth era, some facts are more important than others, and the criterion that a person uses to prefer one fact over another is the extent that the fact concurs with his opinion and his personal perspective.

American philosopher Daniel Dennett<sup>12</sup> said during an interview with British journalist Carole Cadwalladr that humankind is entering a period of epistemological murk and uncertainty, such that we have not experienced since the Middle Ages. According to Dennett, the real danger before us is that we have lost respect for truth and facts, and have lost the desire to understand the world on the basis of facts.

Michael Marmot, a British public health professor, argues that lies have always been a part of politics, although this does not mitigate the shock of those who face the lies of the Brexit supporters and US President Trump and his administration.<sup>13</sup> According to Marmot, debate is at the very core of science, but after one debater shows the factual evidence supporting his arguments, the opposing debater must admit his error. Yet while facts are the foundation of truth, today factual evidence has lost its validity: Donald Trump can claim that the murder rate is rising because of immigrants, and even after evidence is presented to him that refutes this, he does not back down from his claim.

In his book *On Bullshit*,<sup>14</sup> American philosopher Harry Frankfurt differentiates between a liar and a "bullshitter." Both the liar and the bullshitter want to convince their audiences that they are telling the truth, and both try to conceal something from their audiences. The difference between them is that the liar accepts the differentiation between truth and falsehood and is deliberately lying to conceal the truth from his audience; the bullshitter, on the other hand, does not recognize and even rejects any differentiation between truth and falsehood, and essentially does not care whether his statements have any value of truth and tries to conceal his indifference to the truth from his audience. Using Frankfurt's distinction, Michael Marmot argued that Trump is a bullshitter – he could not care less whether what he is saying is true or not, and therefore, he remains steadfast in his position even in the face of facts refuting his statements.

Matthew d'Ancona argued that even though mendacity has been an integral component of politics since the beginning of human history, 2016 will be remembered as the year that launched the post-truth era. In his opinion, what is new in this era is not the familiar

dishonesty of politicians, but rather, the public's response to it – lying is regarded as the norm. According to d'Ancona, in this era, emotions threaten rational thinking, skepticism and scorn threaten science, and the value of truth has plummeted. Experts are perceived as a cartel of villains rather than as sources of reliable information and knowledge, while subjective interpretations and emotional narratives take the place of objective facts.<sup>15</sup>

The variety of interpretations of the post-truth phenomenon reflects one of its most prominent characteristics – the confusion surrounding it and the difficulty in understanding it. But one common denominator within this diversity is the sense that something is happening: whether it's an old phenomenon, a new phenomenon, or the revamping and intensifying of an old phenomenon, people are rallying around the new concept and calling it the post-truth phenomenon. All consider the post-truth phenomenon detrimental, and try to understand it in order to cope with it.

In her article “Understanding and Politics,”<sup>16</sup> Arendt asserts that the recognition of a new phenomenon receives expression in language by the adoption of a new term, which marks the beginning of the process of understanding it. In order to be able to understand a new term, the denotation contains something from the old and familiar. In the case before us, the term “post-truth” contains the concept “truth,” which is ostensibly familiar and understandable. At this stage in the comprehension process, Arendt argues, a sort of preliminary understanding of the new phenomenon is formed, supported by our understanding of what preceded the new phenomenon. In other words, the preliminary understanding of the post-truth phenomenon relies on our understanding of the period when truth was perceived as important and relevant, and during which – if we adapt the definition in the Oxford Dictionary – public opinion was influenced more by objective facts than appeals to emotions and personal beliefs. According to Arendt, without a preliminary understanding of the concept “post-truth,” which is supported by our understanding of the concept “truth” and related concepts, such as “facts” and “reality,” we will not be able to acquire the knowledge needed in order to reach a better understanding of post-truth. Therefore, in order to reach a preliminary understanding of the concept “post-truth,” it is important to survey the main theories regarding the concept of “truth.”

### **Theories of “Truth”**

Reviewed below are four theories about the concept of “truth” – three neoclassic theories that emerged in the West in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the pluralistic theory that emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. All four theories share an assumption that truth exists, but are divided in their answers to the question of what are the criteria of truth, or in other words, what criteria determine the value of the truth in a proposition.

### ***The Correspondence Theory of Truth***

The correspondence theory of truth, whose prominent supporters include Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein, maintains that the key to truth is a relation between a proposition and the world – a proposition is true if and only if it corresponds to a fact in the world (for the purposes of the discussion in this article, “fact” is a state of affairs existing in the world). One can see a close correlation between correspondence theory and metaphysical realism, which maintains that reality and facts are objective, i.e., they exist independent of human consciousness, of our thoughts about or our perceptions of this reality and these facts.

The correspondence theory therefore anchors truth in reality; this is its power, but also its weakness. In order to determine the value of truth in a proposition according to correspondence theory, at least two criteria must be fulfilled: it must be possible in principle to find the relevant fact in the world that corroborates the proposition; and the proposition, or the person asserting the proposition, must stand in a direct relation to this fact in the world.

### ***The Coherence Theory of Truth***

The coherence theory of truth, whose prominent supporters include Harold Joachim and [Brand Blanshard](#), maintains that the key to truth is a relation between propositions – a proposition is true if and only if it is part of a coherent system of propositions. Coherence theory does not anchor truth in reality, and therefore, it is not limited to the criteria referred to above in relation to correspondence theory. Even when the value of truth in a proposition is difficult to anchor in reality – whether because it is hard to find the fact that corresponds to the assertion or because the assertion does not directly correlate to this fact – it is deemed the truth, because it is coherent with our set of beliefs.

Of course, coherence theory has its own problems: if a truth has no ontological foundation in reality, but rather only an epistemological foundation in some knowledge system, then what prevents a person who suffers from hallucinations, for example, from asserting that his hallucinations are true? After all, his system of hallucinations is, for him, wonderfully coherent. Likewise, what prevents an intelligence officer from continuing to adhere to his conception of the enemy, merely because it is coherent within itself? This was also Bertrand Russell’s criticism of coherence theory: two contradicting propositions can be simultaneously true, because each of them is part of some other coherent system in which the proposition is a truism.

Most of the advocates of coherence theory are proponents of metaphysical idealism, whereby facts and reality are, first and foremost, abstract ideas that exist in human consciousness, and only through them it is possible, if at all, to talk about physical objects

that exist in reality outside human consciousness. Idealism does not necessarily deny the very existence of reality and facts, but rather, rejects the idea that they are independent of human perception.

### ***The Pragmatic Theory of Truth***

The pragmatic theory of truth, whose prominent supporters include Charles Peirce, William James, and Richard Rorty, maintains that the key to truth is utility – the value of the truth in a proposition is determined according to its practical outcomes and the utility that it provides. The pragmatists are usually proponents of metaphysical realism and, similar to correspondence theory, do not deny the factual truth, but rather, are more tentative than the proponents of correspondence theory with regard to the ability to know the truth about reality, both because of the above-mentioned difficulty in clarifying reality and due to the human tendency to make mistakes.

According to the pragmatists, we never know for certain whether a scientific theory is true or not. All that we can know is that it meets the scientific community's accepted standards and that it helps to explain and predict reality. Similarly, an intelligence assessment will be considered true if it meets the intelligence community's accepted criteria and standards, and particularly if it helps decision makers achieve their objectives. One of the main criticisms raised against the pragmatic theory of truth is that it generates a relativistic approach to truth – what is utilitarian to one person is not necessarily utilitarian to another person, and consequently something that is considered the truth because of its utility to one person is not the truth for the other person.

### ***The Pluralistic Approach to Truth***

The pluralistic approach to truth, which emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, whose prominent supporters include Crispin Wright and Michael Lynch, maintains that there is no one key to the truth – truth is a function<sup>17</sup> that may be manifested in several ways. For every manifestation of truth there is a different definition of the criteria of truth, and different criteria of truth may be adopted for different topics of discourse. According to this approach, “truth” is an ambiguous concept, or, in other words, there are multitude concepts of “truth.” The conceptual diversity of “truth” may be divided according to the diversity in the topics of discourse, such as scientific truth, national security truth, moral truth, judicial truth, artistic truth, and political truth, or according to the variety of ways used to determine the value of truth, such as factual truth, coherent truth, and pragmatic truth. Although the second division is seemingly dichotomous, the various truths within this division are juxtaposed and complement each other in the various topics of discourse. Scientific truth and national security truth will apparently rely largely on factual truth, and this is how it should be, but not absolutely. Both of these fields rely, in addition to the facts, also on amassed organizational

knowledge, professional experience, politics and agendas, opinions, and personal beliefs. In other words, in both science and national security, one can also find coherent truth and pragmatic truth in addition to objective, factual truth. These truths bridge the gaps in factual truth, serve the objectives that the decision makers want to achieve, and influence the way by which they convey factual truths.

### **The Information Explosion, Disruptive Technology, and the Dwindling of Faith in Institutions: Correspondence Theory in the Post-Truth Era**

The review of the main theories about “truth” found that both the Oxford Dictionary’s definition of the term “post-truth” and the various interpretations of the phenomenon that it denotes comprehend the concept of “truth” as defined by the correspondence theory of truth – correspondence between a proposition and a fact in the world. This is the starting point for understanding the post-truth phenomenon. Therefore, the dictionary definition and the various interpretations emphasize – each in its own way – that the most prominent characteristic of the phenomenon is the loss of the fact-based objective truth, or at least a decline in its value: Arendt points to a blurring of the differentiation between fact-based truth and opinion; Harari and McIntyre point to a preference for facts that substantiate prejudices over facts that refute them; Dennett holds that respect for truth and facts has been lost; d’Ancona emphasizes the preference for subjective interpretations and narratives over objective facts; and Marmot speaks about the indifference to truth and factual evidence.

This preliminary understanding, which relies on the correspondence theory of truth, is not surprising. In addition to the philosophers who research the concept of “truth” and discuss the various ways to define it, presumably most people will intuitively make a connection between the value of truth in a proposition and the state of affairs in the world and say that the assertion “it is raining,” for example, is true if it is indeed raining; it is that simple. The problem is that it is not simple at all.

When we presented the correspondence theory of truth, we said that it anchors truth in reality and that this is both its strength and its weakness. Its weakness was intimated when we presented the two essential criteria that must be fulfilled: it must be possible in principle to find the fact in the world that corresponds to the proposition and determines its truth value; and the proposition, or the person asserting the proposition, must stand in a direct relation to this fact in the world. The fulfillment of the two criteria has never been a triviality but, in the current era, it is more problematic.

The first criterion is fulfilled when at issue are simple propositions and it is relatively easy to clarify whether a fact in reality corresponds to them, such as: “At 08:00 this morning, three people were observed attempting to breach the fence from the Gaza Strip

into Israel.” However, it is difficult to fulfill this criterion when at issue is a proposition for which it is difficult or impossible to find the corresponding fact, such as: “Sadat does not want to launch a war against Israel without the Syrians.” In an instance such as this, which is very common in rooms where national security matters are discussed, the intelligence assessment and, in the final analysis, also the decision reached by the decision maker, are based not only on the pure facts known to the intelligence community, but also on the coherence of the proposition with all knowledge that the intelligence organization has about Sadat the person and about Egypt prior to the Yom Kippur War; on the objectives the decision makers want to achieve; on the opinions and personal beliefs of those sitting around the decision making table; and also, on political considerations and personal agendas. All this has always been the case and is not new to the post-truth phenomenon.

The second criterion is the one whose fulfillment at the present time is more problematic than ever before, because of two main factors: technology in the information age and the crisis of faith in the “truth tellers.” Even when the first criterion is fulfilled and the truth value of a proposition may in principle be anchored in reality, this possibility is not always available to everyone, and in the current era, it is nearly inaccessible to most of us. Apart from in our own private world, technology is what brokers reality to us today. Information consumers have no way of clarifying the truth value of most of the information disseminated through technology – via the media, the internet, and social networks – because in most cases, information consumers do not stand in direct relation to the relevant facts.

In such instances, which are common in the information explosion era, the correspondence theory of truth is not helpful, and consumers of information for whom truth is important need to find other ways to clarify what is true and what is not. One of the most effective ways to do this is by clarifying the source of the information and whether the source is reliable; in other words, do they trust that the source had suitable contact with the relevant facts before he published the information. In many instances, this source of information also had no direct contact with the facts, and sometimes a long chain of information sources separates between the published information and the relevant fact in reality. Faith in the “truth tellers” – institutions, such as newspapers, the judicial system, academia, intelligence agencies, and experts in the various spheres of knowledge – is very important to anyone who wants to base the truth on facts according to the correspondence theory of truth.

In order to believe that the published information is true, information consumers must trust that at least the source of the information at the top of the chain of information sources (if not the source of information closest to them) was in direct contact with the

relevant facts, and that the information was not twisted or distorted en route to them, or even worse, is fake and never corresponded to any fact in reality. However, the public's faith in institutions that until now were considered "truth tellers" is steadily dwindling, and for two main reasons. The first is the public's growing belief that the elite group leading these institutions serves its own interests without any substantive checks and balances. When Donald Trump promised during his presidential election campaign in 2016 "to drain the swamp" in Washington D.C, this is exactly what he intended. The second reason concerns exposés of incidents of corruption and the exploitation of power, such as those revealed in the Edward Snowden leaks,<sup>18</sup> during the "Panama Papers" affair,<sup>19</sup> and the "Dieselgate scandal."<sup>20</sup> These types of exposés also existed in the past, but in the information age, technology has enabled the public to be exposed to enormous volumes of information about such scandals.

In addition to the information explosion and the dwindling of the faith in the "truth tellers," technology has also enabled and intensified other phenomena, such as fake news (deliberate onslaughts of false information), filter bubbles, and echo chambers – phenomena that have intensified the problem immeasurably. Basically, citizens of a democratic country have no solution to this problem. In order to decide which vote to place in the ballot box, they need to differentiate between truth and opinion, a deliberate lie, and an inadvertent error. Consequently, they cannot base their votes solely on the objective facts, and are required to fill the gaps in their knowledge using a set of beliefs and personal opinions, their sentiments towards this or that politician, their confidence or lack thereof in the various sources of information, and their personal interpretation of the information made public.

This issue is ostensibly less problematic for national security decision makers, because most of the factual information – information whose authenticity is easy to verify against reality – reaches them from a first-hand source whom they usually trust; i.e., from the intelligence agencies. But even people who have spent many years in national security rooms say that in the post-truth era it is evident that decision makers are losing faith in experts and professionals, and consequently, national security decision makers are also adopting pragmatic truths or interpretative truths, alongside factual truth.

Thus, the very intuitive connection that correspondence theory makes between truth and facts has never been without problems, but in the post-truth era, which is characterized by the information explosion, disruptive technology, and the dwindling of faith in the "truth tellers," these problems are steadily intensifying.

### **Undermining Ideas: Postmodernism and the Post-Truth Phenomenon**

Many of those who engage in the post-truth phenomenon tend to link it to postmodernist ideas and particularly tend to claim that the post-truth phenomenon could not have

emerged were it not for postmodernism. For example, in an interview with *The Guardian*,<sup>21</sup> Daniel Dennett said that what the postmodernists did was truly evil and that they are responsible for the intellectual fad that made it respectable to be cynical about truth and facts. McIntyre<sup>22</sup> asserted that postmodernist thought is the harbinger of the post-truth phenomenon, and d'Ancona reasoned that the foundations and deep roots of the post-truth era lie in postmodernist philosophy.<sup>23</sup>

Postmodernism emerged during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after World War II and the end of the Cold War, against the backdrop of the opposition of philosophers and academic scholars to major ideologies, meta-narratives, and the establishment's control over science, knowledge, and truth. Postmodernism is elusive and difficult, if not impossible to define.<sup>24</sup> It denotes a period, or the sentiments of a period, and more than one idea or one theory.

There are a variety of postmodernist philosophers (including Jean-François Lyotard,<sup>25</sup> Michel Foucault,<sup>26</sup> Jacques Derrida,<sup>27</sup> Jean Baudrillard,<sup>28</sup> Gilles Deleuze, and [Félix Guattari](#)<sup>29</sup>), as well as a variety of theories and schools of thought that identify with the postmodern movement (including post-structuralism, deconstruction, social constructivism) and a variety of types of postmodernist discourse in many spheres of knowledge, such as architecture, literature, music, language, and philosophy. A discussion of all aspects of postmodernism is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, the prevailing tendency to attribute to postmodernist ideas considerable impact on the post-truth phenomenon<sup>30</sup> justifies a discussion of the postmodern movement's approach to the concept of "truth," assuming that there is one.

It is customary to attribute to postmodernism the rejection of a single objective truth in favor of a multitude of subjective and relative truths, and the argument that there is no single true scientific theory and no single meta-narrative, but rather a multitude of theories and narratives that are created from a variety of perspectives, none of which take precedence over the other. Postmodernist thought began in art, and particularly in literary criticism. According to the deconstructionist theory of French philosopher Jacques Derrida, no text has a single meaning or interpretation, and these are not determined, as was argued in the modern era, by the author's intent or critics' opinions. That same text may be interpreted in a variety of ways, none of which take precedence over the other, and the meanings deriving from these differing interpretations are subjective and depend upon the reader's perspective. The number of interpretations and meanings is the same as the number of perspectives.

This idea was also quickly adopted by sociologists and other researchers, who applied it to any human behavior, such as war, economics, politics, and sexuality. They saw a

“text” in every human behavior that can receive a myriad of interpretations from the variety of subjective perspectives. If there is no single meaning to a “text” or if one interpretation is not more correct than others, then the conclusion is that there is no one single objective truth, since each person incorporates his own values, history, beliefs, and personal opinions into his subjective interpretation, and any profession of truth is nothing more than a reflection of the political ideology of the author.<sup>31</sup>

The road from human behavior to natural behavior was not a long one, and social constructivism theory, from the school of thought of French philosopher Bruno Latour, asserted that science also has no single meta-narrative and that even scientific truth depends on a subjective perspective, and basically is not a product of the objective facts alone, but rather, of the scientific enterprise as a social enterprise, which is financed and guided by political ideologies and motives.<sup>32</sup>

If the postmodern approach to truth is interpreted in this way, then it does not reject the facts or the factual truths per se, but rather, rejects the existence of a single, objective meta-narrative that can explain the facts. At issue is the understanding that the objective factual truth is not always enough to decide between the various theories and narratives, and that other, more subjective types of truth are applied too, such as the coherent truth and the pragmatic truth, even in the fields of science and national security (albeit less so than in the fields of culture and art). After discussing the problems with the correspondence theory of truth, which intensify in the era of the information explosion, it is easier to understand, if not accept, the postmodern approach to truth.

As opposed to those who blame postmodernism for the post-truth phenomenon, there are those who assert that the blame should not be cast on the postmodernist ideas themselves, but rather on those who abuse them in order to incite abandonment of the objective, fact-based truth in favor of a subjective truth that is based on personal opinions and beliefs. The pluralistic philosopher Michael Lynch, who identifies himself with the postmodern movement that came out against meta-narratives and against the idea of an objective truth devoid of subjective perspective, vehemently protested the post-truth phenomenon, which, in his opinion, threatens scientific enterprise, critical thought, and the fundamental idea that our opinions and beliefs should be based on factual evidence. Commenting on the impact of postmodernism on the post-truth phenomenon, he wrote:

The postmodernist generation of humanists (and I am one of them) grew up in the 80s and 90s distrusting metanarratives and the very idea of objectivity. But while these movements rightly made us aware of how the implicit lines of institutional, gendered, and racial power affect what passes for truth in a society, they were sometimes taken further

to encourage a complete – and often incoherent – rejection of the idea that anything is true.<sup>33</sup>

Already in 2004, philosopher Bruno Latour mounted a defense of science and its institutions against the postmodernist discourse about art and culture seeping into scientific discourse.<sup>34</sup> In an article by Ava Kofman,<sup>35</sup> which addressed his approach to the post-truth phenomenon, she wrote that Latour, who is identified with the postmodern movement due to his constructivist approach toward science and facts, was concerned that the approaches that he and his associates advocated – or at least those simplified and distorted in grotesque caricatures – gave license to an “anything goes” relativism that cynical conservatives were only too happy to adopt in order to attack science and its institutions, to sow doubt about accepted scientific theories, such as evolution, and to raise competing theories, such as the intelligent design theory. According to Kofman, this statement by Latour should not be taken to mean that he “stopped believing” and retracted his traditional positions; on the contrary. According to Latour’s constructivism, facts are not objective, not because there is no reality and there are no facts, but rather, that facts are contingent upon consciousness and human activities and are created or “constructed” during human scientific research processes. According to Latour, therefore, the post-truth phenomenon is not the product of his ideas and those of his associates; rather, the phenomenon validates them: when people relate to a fact as if it were a product of the structure of scientific research, which is supported by a “network” of research institutions and methodologies, it becomes easier to understand that when this “network’s” standing is undermined, the facts that it “constructed” and supported are undermined along with it.

McIntyre, who also points an accusing finger at postmodernism, slightly qualifies his statements and says that he is confident that further study of postmodernist texts will help undercut the legitimacy of misusing postmodernist ideas in order to promote rightwing ideology – an ideology that offers alternative narratives to the left wing’s liberal meta-narrative. According to McIntyre, right wingers do not seem very interested in delving very deeply into the ideas that they borrow and use as tools to hammer at the left wing.<sup>36</sup>

In “Truth and Politics,” Arendt concurred with the postmodernist claim that facts cannot be known without some degree of interpretation and without allowing for perspective. However, according to Arendt, even if we acknowledge every generation’s right to write its own history, it can only rearrange the facts, but cannot alter them.<sup>37</sup>

To sum up, although postmodernism should not be considered a necessary condition for the emergence of the post-truth phenomenon, one can say that postmodernist ideas had an impact on it. Even if the postmodern approach does not reject facts and reality and does

not completely abandon objective factual truth, it does lay the foundation for casting doubt on the objectivity and absoluteness of truth, and legitimizes the populist, pseudo-postmodernist discourse of the “anything goes” and “this is my truth” variety. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that this substandard discourse does not derive from an in-depth understanding of postmodernist ideas, but rather, derives from a distortion and reduction of them. Conservative right wingers use these distorted ideas as tools to attack the liberal left wing and to provide greater weight to subjective interpretation and to different types of truths, such as coherent truth or pragmatic truth, in fields like science and national security, where the primary weight should be given to factual truth.

### **Political Battles over the Criteria of Truth: Willard Quine’s Thesis of Underdetermination**

Even those who are wary of the postmodern philosophers and completely reject the postmodern approach to truth, and insist on pointing an accusing finger at it, cannot take this approach toward one of the greatest logicians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – Willard Van Orman Quine (1908–2000) – and toward his thesis about the underdetermination of scientific theory by empirical evidence.<sup>38</sup> The underdetermination thesis maintains that the same set of empirical data can support different and even contradicting scientific theories, or, in other words – the same empirical data can be explained using different theories, even theories that contradict each other.<sup>39</sup>

Science recognizes the various interpretations of quantum physics, such as the “hidden variable” theory and the “many-worlds interpretation” of quantum mechanics, which offer valid explanations and precise predictions of the same empirical facts, even though the ontologies that they offer, i.e., the narratives they tell about the structure of the world, are entirely different. Quine’s thesis of underdetermination may also be applied in the field of national security. The empirical fact “Iran signed the nuclear agreement, which constrains its ability to develop a nuclear weapon” enables more than one narrative to be told: “Iran signed the agreement because it understands that its economic stability and the stability of its regime are more important than nuclear buildup. It intends to honor the agreement,” as well as “Iran has no intention of honoring the agreement. Iran signed it in order to obtain a reduction in the sanctions imposed on it and in order to ‘lull’ us. It will continue to develop a nuclear weapon, despite the restrictions that the agreement imposes on it.” In this instance, as with most issues placed on the national security decision makers’ table, the factual truth is not enough to decide between the narratives and decide which of them is true. Even if additional facts are added, it is uncertain that they will suffice to enable a definitive choice to be made between the narratives.

If that is the case, then how does one decide which narrative to accept? The decision making criteria will always be external to the narrative. In science, a theory is selected

based on non-theoretical considerations, such as elegance and simplicity and compliance with accepted research standards, but also based on considerations of funding and of alignment with interests of political powers. In politics, political power, economic power, charisma, and the powers of persuasion and sometimes even the instilling of fear will be decisive. So too, in many instances relating to national security, the victorious narrative will not be selected based solely on the pure facts, but also on the prevailing intelligence perception at that time, on the intuition and personal experience of the security echelon decision makers, and on the political outlooks and interests of the political echelon.

None of this is new. Quine's theory of underdetermination has always been and is still valid, and competition between narratives and theories to explain the same facts has always existed. During interviews and lectures presented upon the launch of his new book on the post-truth phenomenon, philosopher Steve Fuller<sup>40</sup> maintained that this phenomenon is not new, and its origins can already be found during the days of Plato. In the Socratic dialogue *The Republic*, Plato maintained that the philosopher-king must hold the knowledge and the truth, and all citizens of Athens should rely on his knowledge and draw the differentiation between truth and falsehood from him. This was Plato's formula for a stable society, and any other method for governing a country would, in his opinion, lead to chaos. As a result, Plato opposed playwrights and poets who challenged the governing position and offered alternatives to their audiences that are mere fabrications. According to Fuller, what is happening in the post-truth era of today is precisely what Plato feared would happen – battles between political powers competing against each other over truth. In Fuller's opinion, the battles waged in the current post-truth era are not battles of the first order about what is true and what is false, but rather, battles of the second order about the criteria of truth and particularly, about who determines what these criteria are. In other words, who will design and decide the rules of the game – the philosopher-king or the playwrights and poets, the scientific establishment and the liberal left wing or the deniers of global warming and the conservative right wing, like Donald Trump and the Brexit supporters? The latter appear on the public stage just as the playwrights and poets of ancient Greece appeared on a theatrical stage and offer alternative narratives for the accepted establishment truth and gain prominence due to their charisma and their powers of persuasion. Borrowing from Machiavelli's metaphor,<sup>41</sup> the post-truth phenomenon is the competition over truth between the lions, which represent the establishment, and the revolutionary foxes, while according to Thomas Kuhn,<sup>42</sup> this is a competition over truth between the scientific community, which holds the governing paradigm in a particular period, and the revolutionaries who are proposing a new paradigm.

According to Fuller, the political battle over the criteria of truth and over the rules of the game is also the battle over who can be players in the field: in the truth era, the players

are the scholars who were educated for this – the philosopher-king, the judges, the scientists, and academic scholars, as well as the professional journalists. All these agree among themselves about the criteria of truth and decide what is true and what is false. In the post-truth era, the power to decide between the narratives is no longer held by the customary sources of authority, but rather, is held by anyone who positions himself opposite these sources of authority (the “Trumps” and the “Brexiters”) and asserts alternative narratives that were previously considered to be false or impossible but today are accepted at least as something that appears truthful (truthiness), or as something that may be considered a plausible truth.

### **The Post-Truth Phenomenon: What is New, and Why Now?**

What is new about the post-truth phenomenon of our day is the convergence of the four prominent characteristics of the phenomenon, which have intensified the inherent problems in the correspondence theory of truth and undermined the standing of factual truth: the information explosion and disruptive technology; the dwindling of faith in institutions and in the “truth tellers”; postmodernist ideas, which seeped into such fields as science and national security and laid the foundation for substandard discourse about truth; and the bitter political battles over the criteria of truth. The convergence of these four characteristics creates a sort of interference of four “peak waves” that together create a shared wave of greater amplitude. This interference challenges our ability to clarify reality in two ways in order to understand it and in order to function within it on the basis of facts.

The first challenge, dubbed here “the challenge of correspondence to facts,” argues that the distance between the consumers of information and the facts in reality that support it is steadily increasing due to the information explosion and disruptive technology, until it is nearly impossible to bridge, and that the second essential criteria for implementing the correspondence theory – direct relation between the information and the facts that support it – is nearly unattainable. In such a situation, the consumers of information are forced to rely on the “truth tellers,” but since faith in them is also dwindling, fact-based truth (in its version in correspondence theory) is losing its central position and other truths exist alongside it, which are based on opinions, beliefs, and personal interpretations.

The second challenge, called here “the challenge of the alternative facts,” is evident more and more in the current post-truth era – the denial of discovered facts, the preference for facts that correspond to and reinforce a person’s opinion over facts that refute it, and the fabrication of “facts” that never existed. For example, in relation to those who oppose vaccinations against diseases and those who deny global warming, not only do they tell another story about the same facts and propose a competing theory to the accepted scientific theory, but they also deny facts that were discovered in reality and observed

during a myriad of scientific experiments over many years of human experience, and prefer the facts that support and reinforce their belief over those that refute it.

When Donald Trump claimed that a million and a half people attended his inauguration ceremony, while the aerial photographs proved otherwise, and when White House spokesman Sean Spicer came out in Trump's defense and insisted that "this was the largest audience ever to witness an inauguration," they fabricated facts that did not exist in reality. And when Kellyanne Conway, Trump's assistant and election campaign manager, was asked why the White House spokesman had asserted what he did, even though the facts prove otherwise, and she responded, "We have alternative facts," she was referring – obviously without intending to do so – to precisely these fabricated facts. Already in 1967, Arendt said<sup>43</sup> that lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools of politicians and statesmen. Nevertheless, it appears that the lies of the past were softer: President Nixon could assert that he is not a crook, because the term "crook" can be interpreted in different ways, and Nixon, of course, did not perceive himself as such; President Clinton could assert that he did not have sexual relations with Monica Lewinsky because he attributed a strict interpretation to the term "sexual relations"; and politicians have always made promises to their constituents during election campaigns that they never intended to keep. Despite this, at the present time, the indifference to blatant lies is evident, to the point that a speaker could not care less about the value of the truth in his statements – exactly like the "bullshitter."<sup>44</sup>

Philosophy can provide only a partial answer to the key question "why now?" The response that this article proposes is drafted using the four characteristics of the post-truth phenomenon and the two challenges for clarifying reality that are created due to the interference of the four characteristics: the challenge of the correspondence to facts intensifies due to the growing distance between information and the facts supporting it, which derives from disruptive technology and the information explosion, and as a result of the dwindling of faith in the "truth tellers"; and the challenge of the alternative facts is intensifying due to the increasingly bitter political battles in the current period – left versus right, liberals versus conservatives, science versus religion – and due to the postmodernist ideas, which laid the foundation for casting doubt on truth and facts and for distorted and superficial "anything goes" discourse. These are penetrating and influencing the public discourse more so than in the past, as a result of technology that disseminates them so that they resonate and go viral.

Proposed here, therefore, is an alternative definition to Oxford Dictionary's definition of the term "post-truth": "a term denoting circumstances in which our ability to clarify the reality in order to understand it and in order to function within it on the basis of facts is weakening as a result of high-intensity interference by four peak waves: the information

explosion and disruptive technology; the dwindling of faith in institutions and in ‘truth tellers’; undermining postmodernist ideas; and bitter political battles.”

In closing, nothing resonates better than citing Hannah Arendt’s statement:

The result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth 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.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Tesich, “A Government of Lies,” *The Nation*, January 6, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Ralph Keyes, *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Oxford Dictionary, “Word of the Year 2016,” 2016, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>.

<sup>4</sup> George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2006), p. 258.

<sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” *The New Yorker*, February 25, 1967.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew d’Ancona, *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back* (London: Ebury Press, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Yuval Noah Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Kinneret-Zmora-Bitan Dvir, 2018); Yuval Noah Harari, “The Truth about Fake News,” *Yediot Ahronot*, December 20, 2018, <https://www.yediot.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5430064,00.html>; Yuval Noah Harari Extract: ‘Humans are a Post-Truth Species,’” *The Observer*, August 5, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2018/aug/05/yuval-noah-harari-extract-fake-news-sapiens-homo-deus>.

<sup>8</sup> Harari, “The Truth about Fake News.”

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (London and Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Carole Cadwalladr, “Interview with Daniel Dennett,” *The Guardian*, February 12, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Marmot, “Post-Truth and Science,” *The Lancet* 389, No. 10068 (2017): 497-98.

<sup>14</sup> Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1986).

<sup>15</sup> D’Ancona, *Post-Truth*.

<sup>16</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Understanding and Politics,” *Partisan Review* 20, No. 4 (1953): 377-392.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Lynch, *Truth as One and Many* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> Edward Snowden was a former employee at the United States National Security Agency (NSA), who became famous for leaking classified information about the NSA’s surveillance programs. The leaks were published in June 2013 in *The Guardian* and in the *Washington Post*.

<sup>19</sup> “The Panama Papers” is a collection of 11.5 million confidential documents of the law firm Mossack Fonseca of Panama that an anonymous whistleblower leaked to the German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. The incident was published in April 2016.

<sup>20</sup> “Dieselgate” was a scandal about the forging of the results of emissions tests in Volkswagen cars in violation of the Clean Air Act, which was exposed in September 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Cadwalladr, “Interview with Daniel Dennett.”

<sup>22</sup> McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, p. 126.

<sup>23</sup> D’Ancona, *Post-Truth*, p. 91.

- <sup>24</sup> See for example: Gary Aylesworth, “Postmodernism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2015, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/postmodernism/>; d’Ancona, *Post-Truth*, p. 91; Michael Lynch, *True to Life: Why Truth Matters* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 35-36.
- <sup>25</sup> See for example: Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Manchester UK: Manchester University Press, 1997).
- <sup>26</sup> See for example: Michel Foucault, *History of Madness* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006).
- <sup>27</sup> See for example: Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).
- <sup>28</sup> See for example: Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994).
- <sup>29</sup> See for example: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).
- <sup>30</sup> See for example: Cadwalladr, “Interview with Daniel Dennett”; McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, pp. 123-50; d’Ancona, *Post-Truth*.
- <sup>31</sup> McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, pp. 125-26.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid. pp. 128-29.
- <sup>33</sup> Michael P. Lynch, “Teaching Humility in an Age of Arrogance,” *The Chronicle Review*, June 5, 2017.
- <sup>34</sup> Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 218.
- <sup>35</sup> Ava Kofman, “Bruno Latour, the Post-Truth Philosopher, Mounts a Defense of Science,” *New York Times Magazine*, October 25, 2018.
- <sup>36</sup> McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, pp. 126-27.
- <sup>37</sup> Arendt, “Truth and Politics.”
- <sup>38</sup> A slightly different version of the thesis of underdetermination is also attributed to the physicist and philosopher of science Pierre Duhem (1861–1916).
- <sup>39</sup> Stanford Kyle, “Underdetermination of Scientific Theory,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2017. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/scientific-underdetermination/>.
- <sup>40</sup> Steve Fuller, “Post-Truth,” *Serious Science*, December 16, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M4Rwca7k\\_Fs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M4Rwca7k_Fs); Steve Fuller, “The Dialectic of Politics and Science from a Post-Truth Standpoint,” *Epistemology & Philosophy of Science* 5, No. 2 (2018): 59-74; Steve Fuller, *Post-Truth: Knowledge As a Power Game* (London: Anthem Press, 2018); Steve Fuller, “Post-Truth – with Prof. Steve Fuller,” *Virtual Futures Salon*, August 23, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKDEAFYhPm8>.
- <sup>41</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (reprinted by Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
- <sup>42</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
- <sup>43</sup> Arendt, “Truth and Politics.”
- <sup>44</sup> Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*.
- <sup>45</sup> Arendt, “Truth and Politics.”