# Truth, Politics, and Self-Deception

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### The Truth: Virtues and Methods

T HERE are social practices and virtues which, if we are to characterize them, require us to mention *the truth*. This is not the same as mentioning what other people hold true (their beliefs), or just mentioning what we regard as true (our own beliefs). We may contrast in this respect two different virtues of truth, which may be labeled *sincerity* and *accuracy*. Sincerity (at the most basic level) merely implies that people say what they believe to be true, that is, what they believe. Accuracy implies care, reliability, and so on in discovering and coming to believe the truth.

Among other questions that involve mentioning *the truth*, there are those concerning the properties of various methods of belief formation. Thus, if one is interested in the probable success of some military venture, augury is not a good method of acquiring true belief about it. It seems that there is a genuine property which some methods of inquiry have and others (such as augury) lack, that of being (roughly) truth-acquiring. It is dubious, though, that there is any interesting and non-trivial description of this property *in general*, as opposed to the form that it may take in particular sorts of cases.

It may be suggested that we can say at least this much: that no method will have the desirable property if its efficacy in generating the belief that P would extend equally to generating

the belief that not-P. In one sense this claim is correct. It is obvious, indeed trivial, that a method of inquiry will be ineffective—indeed, will not be a method for acquiring the truth at all—if its outcome is random with respect to the truth. But in another sense the claim is incorrect. A method of inquiry is a method that can answer a question, and this itself means that it can generate the belief that P (if P) and also can generate the belief that not-P (if not-P). A method which lacks the desired property is, rather, one that will generate the belief that P even if not-P and conversely. But this simply says that such a method generates belief without regard to its truth and so is useless, and this is the triviality which gets us nowhere.

The correct conclusion is that just as there is no characterization of *the truth* which is both non-trivial and totally general, there is no general and non-trivial account of *finding the truth* or *method which favors finding the truth*. We need general ideas such as *method of acquiring the truth*, but when we consider ways in which such ideas can be made effective, we are necessarily returned to the platitude that P is true if and only if P. Methods of acquiring the truth on the question whether P are methods of establishing whether P, and the question of what they may be is connected with what the particular proposition P is. In particular, it is connected with what the proposition means, though it is not simply determined by that, as various forms of verificationism and operationalism have claimed.

So far we have been concerned with methods of inquiry or truth-discovery: the situation in which no one in the relevant group knows whether P. But similar considerations apply to methods of preserving and transmitting the truth (these include at the basic level the virtue of sincerity). Of course, what is truth-transmission or preservation from one perspective can be truth-discovery from another.

Our present concern is with the transmission of truth over time and transmission between people.[1] Issues raised by this may be related in varying degrees to the medium and to characteristics of the message which are not simply content related. Be-

sides the straightforward cases of physical preservation, as with nitrate film stock degeneration and acid paper, there are examples in which some characteristics of the message or the way in which it is expressed affect the outcome, as in famous anecdotes about oral transmission. My interest here will above all be in characteristics of the message and the medium which are relevant to truth-preservation and which are content related, for instance, because they involve interests in propagating, distorting, concealing, or interpreting the message.

The basic point is that (beyond the most basic and unspecific description) it is a factual question, relative to a given class of information, how far a given method of acquiring or transmitting truth is effective. It is also important, if obvious, that multiple methods which are severally effective, or multiple applications of one effective method, cannot necessarily be combined or superimposed without loss of effectiveness (for example, everyone speaking at once). This is a qualification to the encouraging idea that truth is a paradigm of a non-zero-sum good. It is a non-zero-sum good because the mere fact that A comes to possess a given truth does not mean that B has less of it. But for all that, the joint attempts of A and B to possess, or to express, truth may well mean that both or one has less of it.

Basically, then, effective methods of discovering or transmitting the truth will vary with the kinds of truth in question. Formulations of what makes methods effective are likely to be trivial if they aim to be very general. However, there are some general conditions which are notably less trivial than others; or, even if they are trivial as practical advice, they are significant from a theoretical point of view. One of them is the ubiquitous danger of wishful thinking, which lies in the quite general indifference of the truth to what the inquirer, narrator, recollector, or informant would like it to be.[2] The virtues of accuracy, as I labeled them at the beginning, include, very importantly, dispositions and strategies for combating wishful thinking and generally sustaining the defenses of belief against wish.

In this, there is a consideration relevant to the way in which

we should think about self-deception. There is a very well-known question as to whether what is called "self-deception" can be seriously seen as a species of deception at all. But suppose we jump over that problem, and accept for the sake of argument that someone can, more or less literally, deceive himself. We then encounter another, and less discussed, question of where the fault in this transaction is located. The standard picture is that the fault lies with the self as deceiver—that we should concentrate on self-deception as a failure of sincerity. But at the ordinary social, inter-personal level, when there are deceivers around, it is at least as important to improve the caution of the potentially deceived as it is to censure the motives of the deceivers. The virtue of accuracy in listeners is as important as sincerity in informants. If there is such a thing as self-deception, the same, surely, should apply to it: our failures as self-deceived are to be found more significantly, in fact, in our lack of epistemic prudence as victims than in our insincerity as perpetrators.

My concern in this paper is primarily with applying the considerations about truth, its discovery and transmission, in a political connection to issues of free speech and public discourse. But the application of those considerations to the question of self-deception is not irrelevant to that purpose. In the political case, there are, of course, many potential deceivers and many potentially deceived who are straightforwardly separate people, and much of the discussion will necessarily be concerned with questions of how to make life difficult for the former. But there is also the significant phenomenon of collective self-deceit, where (as in the personal case, if we take it a little more seriously) deceiver and deceived conspire with one another, and we shall come back to that issue.

### Truthfulness and the Political

I have not so far used the notion of *truthfulness*. It should be understood as a virtue or desirable property, both of

individual people and of collectivities, which combines the qualities that were labeled earlier as sincerity and accuracy. A truthful person both says (with numerous familiar qualifications) what he or she believes, and takes some trouble that his or her beliefs should be true. Because of its connection with accuracy, it is a quality that essentially involves mentioning *the truth* in the ways discussed earlier, and this will be important to the discussion of truthfulness in politics.

We may start from some questions of why and how truthfulness matters in government, and what follows from its mattering. (The arguments that follow, focusing on government, can be broadened in various ways to apply to political life more generally.) One argument for truthfulness in government is to be found just in arguments for truthfulness. If it is a good thing (other things being equal) for people to be truthful, it is a good thing for people in government to be truthful. But this is rather a modest basis. It follows a general pattern of argument for governmental virtue, against which there stands a moderate version of Machiavelli's thesis: the responsibilities of government are sufficiently different from those of private individuals to make governmental virtue a rather different matter from that of individuals—or rather (and this is very much the point) from that of individuals who are being protected by a government. In particular, any government is charged with the security of its citizens, a responsibility which cannot be discharged without secrecy, and which it will be lucky if it can discharge without force and fraud.

But Machiavelli's axiom itself helps to provide the first argument: (1) *The Anti-Tyranny Argument.* Precisely because of their peculiar powers and opportunities, governments are disposed to commit illegitimate actions which they will wish to conceal as well as to conceal incompetent actions. It is in citizens' interests that these be checked. They cannot be checked without true information.

This yields only the conclusion that someone other than the

government should have information, not the populace at
large. In some areas, this is a practical point: security secrets,
for instance, may be shared in a democracy with non-executive
legislators, senior members of opposition parties, and so forth.
But the argument may be iterated to suggest that this is not, in
general, enough: either these other groups are sufficiently
distinct from government for the government to have interests
in deceiving them, or they are close enough to government to
form part of the threat of tyranny (that of an elite or political
class). This argues for truth being available, with restrictions,
to all the potentially tyrannized.

This, in turn, may be associated with a more *a priori*
argument to the same effect: (2) *The Argument from Democracy.*
The people is the source of the government's authority and,
under restrictions, of the government's policies. Government is
a trust. It is a violation of this conception for secrecy or
falsehood to come between trustee and people.

This yields a more comprehensive and less contingent
conclusion than (1). The downside is its high degree of
idealization, reflected in such well-known difficulties as this:
either "the people" means everyone, in which case it includes
many against whose activities the trust is being exercised, or it
is a construct, and—it may be said—an ideological and
potentially dangerous construct, of the kind vividly illustrated
by the events of 1793/4. This disjunction is not, of course,
exhaustive, but it does make clear that (2) by itself leaves many
problems about what should actually happen.

In order to yield more definite and comprehensive results,
(1) and (2) can be fortified with a further argument, from yet
more distinctive political conceptions: (3) *The Liberal Argument.*
This argument comes in two versions: (a) the *minimal* version
and (b) the *self-development* version. (3a) Government should
permit maximal freedom (compatible with other political
goods); denial of information is an important limitation of
freedom in itself and impedes the exercise of freedom in many
areas. (3b) Self-development consists of the exercise and

development of one's powers in the light of the truth. (3a) might be called the argument from negative freedom and (3b) the argument from positive freedom, so long as this is not-taken to imply that they are, just in themselves, incompatible with one another.

(3b) does lead distinctively to the value of *the truth* in truthfulness, which is much less the case with (3a). However, it is less clear what (3b) delivers, and the value it calls on is more distinctive and deniable; there is a contrast here with (1), which appeals to what anyone would regard as an evil.

In light of these very rough categories, we can ask whether—as many would claim—being lied to by the government is worse than being lied to by others. Argument (2) gives a special reason why the answer to this question should be "yes." Argument (1) also yields a positive answer, and, of course, the word "tyranny" in its normal sense signifies this fact. However, this is simply because the powers and opportunities that government possesses are what they are: any great concentration of power can generate a great evil in disseminating falsehood. In this sense, the evil of governmental lying is less special under this argument than it is under argument (2). The liberal arguments under (3), and particularly argument (3b), perhaps give us even less reason to regard the lying of government as something special or as more than contingently so.

A rather different aspect of truthfulness comes out if we turn from deceit to secrecy. It is a truism that, in general, secrecy may be justified where lying is not: one has a right to be told (if anything) the truth, even where one has no right to be told anything. (This is no doubt related to the values involved in the transmission of truth as contrasted with the acquisition or dissemination of truth.) The two different questions are deliberately run together in the journalists' favorite slogan, "the right to know."[3]

It is in virtue of this ethical truism that governmental secrecy is accepted to a much greater extent than governmental lying.

However, there is an old adage, "who asks no questions gets told no lies," and the question of how many lies have to be told is a direct function of how great the insistence is on being given an answer. This implies the correct conclusion that suspiciousness about government tends to be self-justifying. In fact, the situation is more complicated than this implies. The government's behavior in information management depends not just on the degree of curiosity, but also on the public's expectations of government (which can also directly affect the degree of curiosity). The "expectations of government" cover both the matter of whether the public expects the government to behave badly, and also what it counts as "badly." The best results with regard to truth management are unlikely to follow from the attitude adopted, or more usually feigned, by the media, which is that of unlimited intrusiveness combined with unlimited righteousness on the subject of how government can be expected to behave.

Now this is a conclusion only with regard to *the truth*, based on considerations of what institutions and practices are likely to favor, in political connections, the discovery and transmission of the truth. There may be other arguments in favor of the media and other people being as intrusive as they like, and taking whatever attitude they like to what they take themselves to have discovered. This will be an argument from freedom, in particular an argument from freedom of speech. The present point is that it must be a substantive question to what extent given practices based on the value of free speech also serve the values of truth and truthfulness. This is why, as I have already suggested, it cannot be assumed that the liberal argument about negative freedom, (3a), delivers a conclusion that favors, specifically, the values of truth.

The argument (3a) directly implies a strong presumption that anyone can say or ask anything, and the most influential interpretation of this offers a strong presumption against intervention in a marketplace of communication (construed in good part as indeed a marketplace). However, one has to recall

at this point the claim made in the first section of this paper, that it is a factual question what systems are favorable to truth-discovery and truth-transmission with respect to given kinds of truths. It is very doubtful how effective the market system is with regard to many kinds of truths.

There are two very familiar reasons for doubts about the market system. One is *noise*, the familiar point that messages compete for attention and cancel each other out. This would be a serious problem even if the messages were each true, but in any case the system does not strongly encourage this to be the case, in particular because messages are picked out for reasons that need not have much to do with truth. Further, the system tends not to offer any structured context for understanding messages. Typically, recipients will know that a given message means that P, but not know what that means.

If we take these familiar problems seriously, and if we look at the market system from the point of view of the various arguments in favor of truthfulness in politics, it does not do very well by the arguments other than (3a): this fits the point already made that (3a) is not all that interested in truth as such. The market system does not do too badly by a minimum interpretation of (1), since tyrannical outrages have quite a good chance of becoming known.[4] It does not do well for (2) unless democracy is understood in a radically populist sense, particularly because of the point about the absence of a context to make a given piece of information intelligible.

The market system also does badly for (3b), assuming that this is concerned with self-development in light of some significant or important class of truths, and not just the narcissistic self-construction out of commercially available materials which is sometimes called "autonomy," and which is a well-known target of cultural critics. A position that consists of the conjunction of (3a) and (3b)—idealistic liberalism—runs the risk of being inconsistent granted the effects of the market system.

The merits of the market system perhaps have been

exaggerated because liberal historiography tends to treat the history of science as a triumph of the market over restrictive practices. But this story is incorrect. The emergence of scientific inquiry from restrictions exercised by the Church involved a change in the legitimation of belief with respect to physical nature, together no doubt with some changes in the notion of "nature," which improved truth-discovery; and it involved free scientific inquiry. But free scientific inquiry is itself a clear example of a managed market, and it must be, since it involves such things as an increasingly high entry fee in terms of training and, necessarily, a powerful filter against cranks.

The limitations of the market system are acknowledged in modern societies by the presence of compulsory education, which besides its other functions can help under all the arguments. But there is a notable shortfall (at best a compromise between what is necessary and what can reasonably be demanded) between the standard results of such systems, and what would be needed if one took seriously the demands of truthfulness, particularly with regard to arguments (2) and (3b).

Certainly these are not arguments for replacing freedom of speech with a supposedly authoritative source of pronouncements. Apart from the well-rehearsed values of freedom, a mechanism of that kind would certainly do no better by the test of truthfulness itself. What they do remind us, however, is that it is one thing for a system to encourage freedom of expression, and another for it to be a system which is well adjusted to discovering and transmitting the truth in given areas; and it is always a substantive question how far the first feature helps the second, in itself or by comparison with alternatives, and it is a question which does not always get a positive answer. Consideration of that point should certainly have policy implications with regard to such things as public education, public broadcasting systems, and control of the ownership of the media.

## Who Needs Truth?

The argument of the first section rested on the idea that it is a genuine characteristic of some methods against others that they favor the discovery or transmission of the truth in given areas; the second section assumed that some such areas are relevant to politics. Some people might doubt both these claims; others might accept the first and doubt the second.

I am not sure how many people really doubt the first, once it has been made clear that it is not a question of some large "positivistic" claim that all questions are to be settled by one general, for instance scientific, method. In any case, this is not the place to try to argue with this skepticism. It is worth pointing out, perhaps, that the most fashionable reasons for such a skepticism in fact rely on its being incorrect. Those reasons rest on claims that various important structures of what is taken to be knowledge, in history or in the social sciences or (in the boldest versions) even in the natural sciences, are the product of various kinds of ideological distortion. The objection to this is not that all such claims must be false: some may be true.[5] The objection is that we are given some reason to accept such claims only because *something else* is taken to be discoverably true, such as the findings of a genealogical method which, as Foucault (1977) put it, is "gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary." It is in light of these findings that we can understand how the historical interpretations, or whatever they may be, have come about, and how their genesis may have too little to do with truth. The skepticism, then, is not and could not be about the very idea of truth and of methods for discovering it. It is rather about the extent to which certain large-scale stories which are or have been important to our life consist of discoverable truth. That indeed can be a very real type of question.

But how far does truth matter to politics? It is hard to deny at least that some reliable types of inquiry and transmission of truth are necessary for administration. It is hard to resist, too,

the force of the anti-tyranny argument, that the fear of abuse is always urgent enough to discourage, from the point of view of mere prudence, institutions of deceit, mystification, and concealment. But beyond those lines—and it is, of course, a good question how far and in what directions those lines themselves extend—what follows? If we were deeply partici-pant citizens, then each of us would have an immediate interest in truth in politics. But we cannot all be, and few of us want to be, and in this situation the fact that our institutions of education and communication, in particular the nature of the media, are not well designed for the discovery and transmis-sion of politically relevant truths may seem less to the point.

What they are better designed for, besides selling things, is certain kinds of entertainment. This might be seen, if charitably, as resting simply on a tacit agreement between the consumers, the providers, and those who shape the space in which the market operates that what is provided is most of the time concerned neither with truth or with politics.[6] But apart from the point that this is clearly an exaggeration, it is also too simple, since an important contribution to entertain-ment in many modern societies is made by what is supposed to be politics. Political leaders and aspirants certainly appear before the public and make claims about the world and each other. However, the way in which these people are presented, particularly if they are prominent, creates to a remarkable degree an impression that they are in fact characters in a soap opera being played by people of the same name. They are called by their first names or have the same kind of jokey nicknames as soap opera characters, the same broadly sketched personalities, the same dispositions to triumphs and humiliations which are schematically related to the doings of the other characters. When they reappear, they give the same impression of remembering only just in time to carry on from where they left off, and they equally disappear into the script of the past after something else more interesting has come up. It would not be right to say that

when one takes the view of these people that is offered in the media one does not believe in them. One believes in them as one believes in characters in a soap: one accepts the invitation to half believe in them.

The world in which such characters exist is often thought to be a creation of television, and there is certainly a lot here that comes from television, with its disposition to make everything mediatedly immediate. But in itself the basic status of figures of this kind is as old as storytelling. It is the status of myth. With regard to myths, when they are actually alive, questions of true and false are elided: indeed, one might rather say that in the most naive presentations of myth those questions are not even elided, since they had not come up in relation to these stories. It was something of an achievement eventually to raise them, as Thucydides did, when he started to work on the economics of the Trojan War. It is no accident, of course, that many myths have their origins remotely in what we would recognize as real events: some battles somewhere underlay the *Iliad* or the *Chanson de Roland*. The tale that is told, though certainly it is not presented by these poems as a piece of positivist historiography, is not presented as merely fictional either.

I mentioned earlier the idea that in self-deception there is a kind of conspiracy between deceiver and deceived, and in those terms there can be such a thing as collective self-deception. This applies to the representation of politics in our societies now. The status of politics as represented in the media is ambiguous between entertainment and the transmission of discoverable truth; and rather as the purveyor of living myth is in league with his audience to tell a tale into which they will enter, so politicians, the media, and the audience conspire to pretend that important realities are being seriously considered, that the actual world is being responsibly addressed. However, there is a difference. Those who heard the songs about Troy, when those conveyed living myths, were not at Troy, but when

we are confronted with today's politics, we are supposed to be in some real relation to today.

This means that in our case, more than with living myth, the conspiracy comes closer to that of self-deception, the great enemy of truthfulness, because the wish that is expressed in these relations is subverting a real truth, that very little of the world under consideration, our present world, is in fact being responsibly addressed. We cannot after all simply forget the need for our relations to that world to be truthful or give up asking to what extent our institutions, including the institutions of freedom, help them to be so.

## Notes

[1] For simplicity, I shall not treat non-personal information storage systems separately.

[2] I have discussed this general point and some relevantly various cases of wanting something to be true in Williams, 1973.

[3] The casuistical tradition has had much to say about the differences between concealment and deceit, as it has also about what counts as deceit. On one broad view, what is bad about lying is shared by other forms of deliberately misleading people; on a narrower view, it lies specifically in a misuse of the device of assertion. An approach such as the present one, which starts from our shared interest in the truth, is likely to favor the broader view, but I shall not pursue the issue here.

[4] There is, of course, an interpretation of "tyranny" under which the market system is precisely its ally and instrument. This was advanced by the Frankfurt School, but it is difficult to detach that interpretation from an immensely ideological construction of (2).

[5] Nor is it that such a claim will be intelligible only if we have some conception of what an undistorted account at the same level would be like: though the issue needs argument, it does not look as though that need be so.

[6] Once again (see note 4 above) I leave aside the old Critical Theory interpretation that the arrangement functionally works to make the consumers unfree.

## References

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