Can't Help Falling in Love (with Truth)

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Abstract

Gila Sher argues that the philosophy of truth needs to ask important questions about the value of truth, and how those values are threatened by the current post-truth crisis. I accept Sher's request, but argue that the phenomena that concern her do not reveal a particularly pressing crisis of truth. I defend *easy-going optimism*, which argues that the value of truth to society is not in genuine danger of disappearing. To do so, I articulate the various things we might have in mind by 'the value of truth', and argue that they are not under serious threat.

Introduction

What is the difference between a life that does and a life that does not value truth? What is lost in a post-truth civilization? These are questions that, Gila Sher argues, any adequate philosophy of truth must answer. While I welcome these questions into the theory of truth, their urgency depends on just how likely it is that we—as individuals or as a civilization—come to fail to value truth. One line of reply to Sher's questions—what I call *easy-going optimism*—maintains that a life that does not value truth is psychologically unrealistic. The view is optimistic in that it predicts that we largely do and will continue to value truth, and easy-going because it takes this prediction to be largely inevitable. As a result, if a post-truth civilization is one that neither lives with nor values truth, then it is not a genuine worry. Sher briefly engages easy-going optimism in her remarks on Harry Frankfurt and Simon Blackburn, but she does not think that they have sufficiently confronted the challenge to the status of truth that, on her view, finds its origin in Nietzsche and modern expression in contemporary social-political discourse.

The goal of this paper is to articulate and defend easy-going optimism as the best response to Sher's proposed adequacy condition for the philosophy of truth. The easy-going optimist argues that a desire for truth is psychologically inevitable: given what truth is, and what role it plays in our psychology, total indifference to truth is not a viable option. That is not to say that the easy-going

optimist is sanguine about the phenomena that concern Sher, what she identifies as "anti-truth sentiment" (Forthcoming: 5). The question, rather, is whether those phenomena constitute a crisis of *truth*; if not, then 'post-truth' is an unfortunate (but understandable) misnomer.

1. A minimal starting point on truth

In his paper on vagueness, Patrick Greenough (2003) employs an enviable strategy. His starting point is the development of a "minimal theory" of vagueness, one which relies solely on "mutually agreed points" about vagueness. From these neutral starting grounds he argues for a partisan conclusion about vagueness. Can something similar be done with truth? Here is my suggestion for a mutually agreeable starting point for truth: whatever else it may be, truth is the property that beliefs, statements, propositions, sentences, etc. that mean that *p* have if and only if *p*. What Sophia said is true because she said that seven is prime and seven is prime. The first sentence of Chapter 12 of *Le Deuxième Sexe* is true if one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman, since that's what it means. Sean Spicer's assertion that more people rode the Washington, D. C. subway on inauguration day in 2017 compared to 2013 was not true because it wasn't the case that more people rode the Washington, D. C. subway on inauguration day in 2017 compared to 2013. These claims about truth, I hope, are unassailable (or at least as uncontroversial as anything can be in philosophy). What's not mutually agreeable about the property of truth is legion: what sort of property it is, what (if any) analysis it requires, and even whether or not it exists or is ever instantiated.

My suggestion so far is that when we're talking about truth, we're talking about that feature that our sentences, statements, beliefs, etc. possess when they mean that *p* and *p*. This is not to make any theoretical claim about truth or its nature; the goal is simply to identify the topic of concern. In talking about truth itself, we're not talking about any natural language truth *predicate*, like 'true', 'wahr', or '**真的**'. Nor are we talking about the *concept* of truth (assuming there is such a thing). As modest as my starting point is, it will be helpful in clarifying what is at stake when discussing truth as a value.

2. Valuing truth

What is truth? Truth is the property that truth-bearers have just when they mean that *p* and *p*. Sher offers a different (but not a competing) answer: truth is a human value (Forthcoming: 5). I don't disagree, but I want to interrogate what this claim amounts to. I don't bring any metaphysics of values to the table here, but it strikes me that at the very least, values are things that either are valued, or perhaps ought to be valued. Truth is and ought to be valued, so I'm happy to assent to

truth being a value. Likewise, things like justice and friendship are also values. But truth is interestingly different from these others. Justice and friendship are not inevitable. Whether our world is filled with them depends on the choices and actions that individuals and societies make. Truth exists no matter what. No one knows whether the number of iron atoms in the thirtieth closest solar system is even or odd; presumably no one even has a belief on the matter. But there is a truth about it, and that truth has nothing to do with the decisions any of us act upon. In a sense, we can't make there be more or less truth in the world. Which truths (and falsities) we can think about, study, and argue for evolves over time. And we can develop new concepts, and in that sense create new truths. If gender is a social construction, for example, then we have created truths about gender. But at the same time we have created falsities about gender: the *balance* of truth in the world is not up to us. The balance of justice, by contrast, certainly is.

So while it's fine to say that truth is a value, we are not in any danger of losing truth—it's not ours to lose. Bernard Williams claims that it is therefore a category mistake to label truth itself a value (2002: 6-7). I don't believe that follows (and here I agree with Sher)—but I do believe he is correct to identify other core values related to truth: sincerity (presenting yourself as believing what you truly believe) and accuracy (aiming to believe what's true). These are values in a more straightforward sense, something we can cultivate, and something we can lose. Sincerity and accuracy may be defined in terms of truth, but they are not identical to it.

Sher believes not only that truth is a value, but that it is a *human* value. That is to say, truth is one of the values "enshrined by our civilization as indicative of our humanity"; human values are those "codified by our civilization through religious documents, constitutions, systems of laws, family teachings, individual reflections, philosophical theories, and so on" (Forthcoming: 8). As I read Sher, the set of human values are what *in fact* have been so enshrined. Other *inhumane* values might have been enshrined, but that doesn't mean they would have been human values, because Sher takes 'human value' to be a rigid designator. Nevertheless, since human values just are the values actually enshrined, the fact that a value is human is no argument in its favor. Humans can be nasty creatures, and we have enshrined plenty of ugly values in our religious documents, constitutions, and family teachings. For example, it strikes me that, say, patriarchy is a human value in Sher's sense. In fact, the value of patriarchy being enshrined in laws and traditions is exactly what one would expect from a patriarchal society. But that special status wouldn't make its loss anything to mourn. Hence, while I agree with the letter of Sher's thesis—that truth is a human value—I think this commitment falls short of the more relevant thesis: that sincerity and accuracy are values that ought to be enshrined, upheld, and cultivated. As a result, Sher's answer to her proposed adequacy condition on the theory of truth—that to lose truth is to lose a piece of our

humanity (Forthcoming: 22)—is inadequate: it's no crisis to lose a piece of our humanity simply because it's a piece of our (deeply flawed) humanity. Truth and its corollaries are valuable independently of their relationship to our humanity.

3. Easy-going optimism

Once we distinguish the value of truth from the values of sincerity and accuracy, we can immediately argue that we are in no danger of losing truth. Regardless of how much we value (or disvalue) truth, it will persist. But that kind of optimism is *too* easy: what is of more concern is the specter of society ceasing to value sincerity and accuracy. Sher writes that the post-truth crisis reaches beyond politics, stretching all across society: "It is the danger of truth disappearing from our life, disappearing as a factor or as something that matters, not just here or there but everywhere, that is the heart of the crisis. And it is the vivid realization that this *can* happen, that there is no external guarantee that it will not, that impels us to take note of this crisis, both as humans and as philosophers" (Forthcoming: 3). Again, *truth* disappearing from the world isn't a real concern (unlike justice disappearing, say). But can it disappear from our life? This would presumably happen, as Sher writes, by our deciding that truth doesn't matter anywhere: it doesn't matter whether our beliefs are true or our assertions reflect our beliefs. Accuracy goes out the window, alongside sincerity.

Easy-going optimism is the view that this grim possibility that Sher envisions is psychologically unrealistic, to the point of not being an urgent philosophical or social concern. The phenomena that trouble Sher are indeed deeply disturbing, but the optimist claims that those phenomena do not really involve the loss of truth, or our value of it.

Sher briefly confronts easy-going optimism in her discussion of Frankfurt and Blackburn. Blackburn writes that the *concept* TRUTH will "never die" because "to believe anything at all is to take a stand on its truth" (2018: 11). As I would elaborate the point, being able to form a belief at all requires possessing the concept TRUTH, since belief just is a cognitive stance directed at truth. So long as we form beliefs, we possess TRUTH, and so loss of the *concept* is precluded so long as we continue believing. And a life without belief is not psychologically realistic, ancient Pyrrhonians notwithstanding. As a result, we are in no real danger of losing TRUTH, just as we are in no real danger of losing truth. Sher concedes Blackburn's point, but equates this preservation of TRUTH with the preservation of our "survival instincts" and "most mundane aspects of our human behavior" (Forthcoming: 4). But the importance of Blackburn's observation is that it reveals just how mundane and fundamental the role of truth is in our thought. When we take a stance on the emptiness of the road we're about to cross, we're taking a stance on what's true. But it doesn't

matter how routine or survival-based the matter is: if we've got an opinion on it, we've got an attitude toward truth, whether we're talking politics, food safety, or astronomy. If something is in danger of being lost, it's not truth, and it's not TRUTH.

Frankfurt gets closer to the more substantive easy-going optimism I'm defending. "Practically all of us do love truth," he writes, since loving truth is required in recognizing "what dealing effectively with the problems of life entails" (2006: 47-48). Here the claim is that our *desire* or love for truth is more or less inevitable—not just the continued existence of truth and our concept TRUTH. His argument is straightforward, succinct, and sound: "Our success or failure in whatever we undertake, and therefore in life altogether, depends on whether we are guided by truth or whether we proceed in ignorance or on the basis of falsehood" (2006: 35-36). Life depends upon our beliefs about what's toxic and what's safe being true, and so anyone who cares at all about their life thereby cares about truth.

Again, Sher concurs, but thinks this argument doesn't probe deeply enough into the possible tragedy of life without truth. Suppose we must maintain our desire for the truth insofar as it enables our continued survival, but stop there. Is this partial rejection of truth a genuine worry? The easy-going optimist still isn't concerned, and to see why let's interrogate what a thoroughgoing rejection of the values of sincerity and accuracy would involve. Valuing sincerity means that we value ourselves and others representing ourselves in line with our beliefs. Valuing accuracy means that we value our beliefs being true.

First consider the value of accuracy. Accurate beliefs are true beliefs, and to believe something just is to take a cognitive stance on its truth. As a result, as Williams observes, the question 'Shall I believe the truth?' doesn't make any sense (2002: 87). You can't believe something that you don't take to be true, since taking to be true is the same as believing. We can choose not to have beliefs on some matter—such as the question of iron atoms in faraway solar systems—but we can't choose to be indifferent to the truth when we believe. By *taking a stand*, we manifest that we're not indifferent. This immunity to indifference is peculiar to truth, precisely because of what beliefs are. Some of our beliefs are popular, but coming to realize that a belief is unpopular is not to give up that belief. But coming to realize that a belief is false *is* giving up that belief. Indifference to the accuracy of our own beliefs, at least, is not an option.

Next consider the value of sincerity. Here we can (and surely all have) manifested *some* indifference: we don't always have to aim to be sincere in our assertions, and we can, at times, be indifferent toward others' insincerity. But is this a value that we could discard to a great degree? Everyone has told a lie, and, *pace* Kant, some lies are called for. To really abandon sincerity, however, is to not care whether others are telling us what they take to be true. It's to give up on

using others as a source of information. If I value you as a source of information, then I need you to tell me what you really think. Relying on others for information about the world is indispensable, and so too, then, is the value of sincerity.

4. Post-truth

Truth isn't ours to lose, and TRUTH is a basic element of our cognition. The values of accuracy and sincerity speak to very basic needs that aren't going anywhere: the need to form beliefs, and the need to rely on others for information. None of these things is under serious threat, and so they are not key to understanding what might constitute the "post-truth" crisis that Sher takes to be actual. Sher is most explicit about what she has in mind when she writes: "And in the present era, where the anti-truth sentiment is widely spread, where politicians disregard the need for truth in dealing with human and natural disasters, where intellectuals are drawn to relativisms of various kinds, and where the prevalent mood among people in all walks of life is one of skepticism and indifference to truth—philosophy cannot ignore these issues" (Forthcoming: 5). These examples deserve deeper engagement, but I briefly want to show how these are not obviously cases of people not valuing truth.

Do politicians think we don't need to know what's true to solve various disasters? I don't think this is plausible. Yes, there are politicians who do not act on what is *in fact* true, but this no more renders them indifferent to truth than it does Isaac Newton, who acted on his own false theories of physics. Politicians lie, cover up the truth, engage in wishful thinking, and dig their heads in the sand, all for cynical reasons and political gain. But they still have beliefs about the world, beliefs about what effects their actions have, and desires for their constituents to have particular beliefs as well. No one ever accused politics of being the paradigm of flourishing epistemic practice; but the point is that political bad actors *exploit* our value of truth, and still value it for themselves.

As for relativist academics, again the reality is that they are not rejecting the value of truth, but adopting a particular stance on it. There are as many forms of relativism as there are relativists, but at least one kind of relativist argues that although, say, 'Apartheid is immoral' is false, 'Apartheid is immoral relative to certain moral frameworks' is true. It's not that relativists don't value truth; it's that they have a particular stance on what's true.

Finally, I'm not sure what the "prevalent mood" is that Sher mentions, but one kind of character that looms large these days when discussing post-truth is the *truther*. But the very term, whose popularity arose to refer to 9-11 conspiracy theorists, showcases how the wrong way to describe them is as being indifferent to truth. Truthers believe that the standard account of some

event is false. 'Truther' is a derogatory term that ironically mocks what its target believes to be true. The problem with QAnon activists, Sandy Hook conspiracy theorists, and Holocaust deniers is that they have perverted and baseless views about what the truth is. By all appearances they too value the truth—they just have no clue as to what it is.

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