

Dignity and Credibility in the Age of Information: A Case for Self-Authorship and Impartial Review

Joshua Duclos
Boston University

June, 2020

Philosophers see a paradox the way a builder sees an uneven foundation: as a fundamental problem that should not be ignored. The paradox I wish to discuss, and perhaps to ameliorate, is that we live in an age in which we increasingly rely on information that we increasingly distrust. Lee McIntyre, Research Fellow at Boston University's Center for the Philosophy and History of Science and author of "Respecting Truth: Willful Ignorance in the Internet Age", sums up the contemporary situation like this:

"The extreme political partisanship, married to the social media, married to how quickly misinformation and disinformation can get out there, I think makes this sort of a unique challenge of our time. It's sort of a pandemic, if you will, of disinformation and misinformation that is new."

We have more access to more information than at any previous point in history. The consequences have been mixed. Our access is to good information as well as to bad; to information which is helpful and to that which is harmful; to the truth, and to a variety of truth-like alternatives clambering for likes and retweets (the social media equivalent of evolutionary success). As a friend recently remarked: "The more information I receive, the more incredulous I become." I cannot solve the problem of fake news, and I've no desire to tackle Pilate's question, *Quid est veritas?* Rather, I propose to take up McIntyre's metaphor of a pandemic.

As I write, the world is facing the worst virological pandemic in living memory. Though final success in the form of a vaccine appears some time off, we are not defenseless. Simple, proactive behavior can help to protect ourselves and others: practice social distancing; wash our hands; wear a mask. Similarly, though the ultimate solution to McIntyre's informational pandemic remains controversial, I believe that we can mitigate the damage being done by misinformation and disinformation by reaffirming and connecting three theses about opinion formation in a free society: (1) the right, and the importance, of allowing individuals to tell their stories; (2) the role of informed, impartial reviewers in establishing a story's credibility; and (3) the epistemic duty of the public to draw their own conclusions using the best available evidence.

These theses are unlikely to strike the reader as controversial. Indeed, the fact that they land somewhere between prosaic and obvious is a sign of the continuing success of Enlightenment thinking. We would expect Jefferson and Voltaire to endorse (1), (2) and (3); by contrast, one can envision Louis XIV or Urban VIII choking in the face of such audacious philosophizing. So why argue for the obvious? Three reasons.

Firstly, even obvious principles need reaffirmation; that is how they remain obvious (“obvious” literally meaning “in front of us, in the way”). We may believe the claims of the Declaration of Independence to be obvious to the point of self-evidence, but the surest way to lose hold of these claims would be to stop arguing for and about them. Secondly, even if each thesis is obvious on its own, I am not sure that the same is true of the connection between them. And thirdly, we need to reaffirm these theses because, as McIntyre states and as most of us already know, our moment in history poses unique challenges to truth, opinion formation, and credibility.

Consider, first, the chorus of concerns about objectivity in traditional news reporting. Changes in the media landscape, increased competition, and the resulting editorial sensitivity to the interests, opinions and world views of subscribers and advertisers has led to an increased perception of media bias and distortion. Then, there is the impact of a superfluity of social media platforms generating an unending stream of self-promotional content bereft of any authoritative, disinterested, third-party review. As a result, information consumers are left ill-equipped to say whether the information they have come to rely on is actually reliable, whether the information they use is actually useful.

My hope is that reaffirming the aforementioned theses about opinion formation can do for the informational pandemic what staying six feet apart and coughing into our elbows is meant to do for the virological pandemic: it won’t solve the problem, but it might slow the spread.

The Importance of Self-Authorship (or, Why Each of Us Should Get to Tell Our Story)

The most fundamental reason to enable individuals to tell their own stories is tied to the idea of dignity. Humans are worthy of a certain sort of respect simply by virtue of the kind of beings that we are. And what kind of beings are we? We are, as the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) put it, autonomous beings, ends-in-ourselves who ought not be manipulated in the way that we manipulate most other things in the world.

Kant’s terminology needs some explaining. “Autonomy” for Kant means the capacity for self-governance. More literally, it means the ability to give laws to oneself and to be able to follow those laws. Kant observed that there are two kinds of beings in the world, broadly speaking. On the one hand, there are objects, beings that are nothing more than tools to be used by others, means to someone else’s ends. Tables are objects, and so are chairs and dinner plates and knives and forks. These beings, these objects, have no subjectivity and therefore no autonomy. To use a chair merely for our own purposes does not disrespect the chair. As a mere object lacking autonomy, the chair has no goals, no desires, no projects of its own that can be thwarted if I use it exclusively for my own ends. The chair is not an end-in-itself; it is, at most, a means to the ends of others.

On the other hand, there are human beings. To be sure, humans have some object-like qualities. We can be used as tools, and we frequently use each other as means to certain ends. For example, I might arrange for a neighborhood kid to mow my lawn, and I might chat with a colleague to find out the office gossip. But unlike chairs and other mere objects, human beings have the capacity for autonomy, and this means that they are ends-in-themselves.

To treat an autonomous person like a mere object is wrong because it fails to respect the person’s dignity as a free, self-governing, rational agent. When I hire someone to mow my lawn, I use them

as a means to an end. But so long as the person I hire has freely consented to our exchange of goods for services, I have respected their autonomy. Their dignity has not been violated given that they have *chosen* to enter into a means-ends relationship with me: they are my means to a tidy yard, I am their means to \$50, and thus each of us satisfies our desires as ends-in-ourselves.

The wrongness of treating someone as a mere object is implicitly understood by most of us. It is even woven into our ordinary language. To *objectify* someone is to wrong them, perhaps not materially, but to wrong them in the sense of violating their dignity as a self-governing subject. The demand not to be objectified is a demand to be treated with the dignity that is the right of all human beings.

When a person is prevented from telling their story, or when another's story about them is given *de facto* priority, perhaps in virtue of the latter's reach or *presumed* authority, their dignity is violated. A geologist can write an account of the sediment of Mt. Everest – she can tell the sediment's story, so to speak – without worrying that she is disrespecting the mountain's dignity. But as mere objects, mountains have stories of their own to tell only metaphorically. People, however, as autonomous agents, have the capacity to speak on their own behalf. Preventing a person from telling their story, or allowing another's story about them to take immediate precedence, is to objectify them inasmuch as it treats them as one would treat a pile of rocks.

The call, in recent years, to enable marginalized groups to tell their own stories, in their own voices, can be grounded in Kantian notions of dignity and respect. And the same reasoning that has led us to conclude that distinct ethnicities, genders, and religions deserve to tell their stories in their own words (and that there might be something lost if the only stories we have about them are told by others) applies to individuals no less than groups. Human dignity bestows the right to exercise our autonomy. When we are prevented from telling our own story, or when a second or third-hand account obscures the first-person perspective, we are denied basic respect as autonomous agents. We are reduced to the status of mere things, objects to be manipulated by others for ends of their own.

In addition to the moral considerations of dignity and respect, self-authorship has epistemological importance. The solicitation of first-person accounts is as much about the efficient creation of a factually accurate picture of a given state of affairs as it is about fairness to those involved. Once again, ordinary language helps us to understand what we already implicitly know. When one is seeking information, one wants an 'authoritative' account; that is, an account with 'authority'. Notice that the root of both words is 'author'. In a very basic way, our language has preserved the philosophical insight that an authoritative account is one that comes from, or at least attends to, the perspective of a story's *author*.

Our legal system, like our language, supports the epistemological primacy of first-hand accounts. Hearsay – information received from another – carries less weight in a court of law, less *authority*, than information given by one who witnesses or participates in a given event. Now, testimony of any kind is notoriously unreliable. Humans are fallible observers who may genuinely believe they have seen or heard something they have not; explicit and implicit bias can color our perception. Be that as it may, the closer one is to the source of information, the more credible (not to say true) that information tends to be. You have more reason to believe that *A* stole from *B* if I tell you that

I saw *A* snatch *B*'s bag and make a run for it than if I tell you that *A* robbed *B* because I heard from *C*, who heard from *D*, who heard from *E*.

Establishing Credibility (or, The Need for Informed and Impartial Review)

I have just argued that it is morally and epistemologically important that each of us be enabled to tell our story. But there is a problem on the epistemological side. The problem is evident if we consider the relative merits of two literary genres: autobiography and biography.

An autobiography is, by definition, a self-authored text. By contrast, a biography is the telling of one person's story by another. If self-authored texts are necessarily more authoritative than any other form of account, then biography, as a genre, is necessarily an inferior source of information. Yet even amateur historians understand that autobiographies are rarely the optimal source for a complete, impartial, and accurate presentation of facts. In addition to the problems caused by first-person epistemic fallibility and bias, most autobiographical accounts are motivated by self-interest. Self-interest is a useful quality in sustaining market economies of scale, but it can be a liability for researchers who rely on texts to create an accurate picture of people and events. If you want to know what Lyndon Johnson thought of himself, read his autobiographical accounts. If you want the most reliable picture of Johnson available, read Robert Caro's four-volume biography of the former President.

The epistemic superiority of (some) biographies over (some) autobiographies does not impinge on the moral point made earlier: each of us has the right to tell our story in our own voice. Neither does it devalue the epistemic value that comes from promoting first-hand accounts. Caro could not have written so complete, accurate, and reliable a picture of Johnson without carefully attending to Johnson's written legacy: his speeches, his correspondence, and indeed his own autobiographical accounts. A good biography must take seriously the stories that the individual subject tells about themselves. Perhaps the optimal biography is one in which the author is able to collaborate – impartially – with the subject.

The salient point for this article is to recognize that the chief difference between autobiography and biography is that the latter tends to be made more credible than the former through the epistemic virtue of impartial third-party review. And impartial review is the second thesis about opinion formation that I wish to reaffirm.

I do not suggest that impartial review will get us to Truth with capital 'T'. Ours is an age wary of Truth. Perhaps we've read too much Derrida; perhaps we're just lazy. Yet even if we are dubious of the notion of absolute, objective knowledge, the account of "competent judges" and "true judges" that has come down to us from the English philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) and the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) respectively can help us to see how the right kind of informed, impartial review can establish trust in the absence of Truth.

To be clear, neither Mill nor Hume were immediately concerned with the theses at the heart of this essay. Mill introduced competent judges to support an assertion he had made about the nature of pleasure. Hume brought up true judges in a work about standards of taste. Yet both ideas – competent judges and true judges – speak directly to the formation of credible opinions in the

absence of definitive answers. In a moment, we will see how both ideas can inform the matter of establishing credibility for first-hand accounts.

Mill, a hedonist, noticed that people have honest disagreements over which activities produce the most pleasure, hence which activities are conducive to happiness. If I say that eating ice cream is more pleasurable than jogging, and you say the opposite, we appear to be at an impasse. How can we resolve the dispute?

Mill suggests that the debate can, and should, be informed by what he calls competent judges. Competent judges are those qualified to render an informed opinion on a given dispute. In our case, the only people qualified to say whether ice cream is more conducive to happiness than jogging are the people who have experienced both ice cream and jogging, ideally to the same extent. Find these people – these competent judges – and ask them which is more pleasurable. If a consensus answer emerges, then we have the only credible answer that we can hope for. The same reasoning holds for more serious matters. Suppose I say that life in a capitalist multi-party state is more pleasant than life in a socialist one-party state, and you say the opposite. A credible opinion on the matter can only come from one who has lived in both types of societies, or at least from one who has studied, equally and fairly, how people fare in both systems.

Whereas Mill wanted to know how one might establish a credible opinion about the quality of various pleasures, Hume was interested in how one could make credible judgments on matters of taste. Take the example of art. I say that Picasso was a genius; you say he was a peddler of childish tricks. You praise the beauty of Beethoven's *Kreutzer Sonata*; I think Dvorak's *Symphony from the New World* is superior. There is no shortage of opinion about art, but the question is: are some opinions more credible than others, and if so, why?

Hume tells us some opinions are more credible, notably the opinions of what he calls "true judges". A true judge is one who has been properly educated, is uncommonly attentive to matters of sense, expresses sound judgment and has no overt bias. So, in trying to settle the relative merits of Beethoven and Dvorak, a true judge might be one who is educated in the history of European classical music, and, has some knowledge of the musical arts and sciences; one who can easily discern the sound of piccolo from that of flute in a full orchestra and has no trouble saying that Bach is superior to Andrew Lloyd Weber; one who does not stand to gain or lose by deciding in favor of the German over the Czech, or vice versa. If we can find such a judge, you and I might have a reliable way to settle our disagreement and form a credible opinion.

And isn't this what we usually do in most disputes that cannot be resolved scientifically? Turn to an informed, impartial expert in order to establish a credible position? There is no agreement on who is the greatest quarterback of all time, but most of us accept that the judgement of the average Joe is of less value than the considered opinion of a panel of Hall of Fame players, coaches, and sportswriters. Though the debate may never end, some opinions matter more than others. And the most credible opinions are those that are reached independently by *several* true judges. As Hume puts it: "the joint verdict of such [true judges], wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty." We may not get Truth with a capital "T", but the joint verdict of true judges is a sound basis for a credible opinion.

Let us bring the discussion back to the matter of establishing the credibility of self-authored texts. Morally and epistemologically, self-authored texts have value. But epistemologically, they also have a weakness. Human cognitive fallibility and bias, coupled with the distortion wrought by self-interest, can give us reason to doubt the credibility of first-person accounts. But by heeding the insight of Mill and Hume, we can mitigate this doubt and reestablish credibility by submitting first-person accounts for informed, unbiased third-party review. The shared opinion of a group of such “true” or “competent” judges cannot establish Truth, but it should be enough to establish trust. Three Michelin stars cannot *guarantee* a delicious meal, but they promise at least the exceedingly high likelihood that something exceptional is in store.

The Duty to Form Our Own Opinions (or, Why We Should Think for Ourselves)

The final thesis to be reaffirmed is the duty of the public to draw their own conclusions using the best available evidence. Or, in the form of a directive: *take care with what you believe and why you believe it*. We have already discussed the value of first-person accounts, as well as the need to temper such accounts with informed, impartial third-party judgement. The last point to make is that each of us, as members of a democratic society, has an obligation to seek out the most credible information available, and to avoid those habits of thinking that lead us into error. I will make this last point with help of the English scientist and philosopher Francis Bacon (1561-1626).

Bacon wanted to help human beings avoid error and acquire knowledge. To this end, he created an intellectual system that laid the groundwork for the modern scientific method. In addition to giving us a positive method for knowledge acquisition based on observation and testing, Bacon elaborated four mistakes, four “idols of the mind” as he put it, through which humans are typically led to false beliefs. Humans are inhibited from forming credible opinions, thought Bacon, when they are seduced by the idols of the tribe, the idols of the den, the idols of the marketplace, and the idols of the theatre.

“Idols of the tribe” refers to the limitations of human cognition. When we think we are capable of knowing that which human beings simply cannot know, we are liable to form false impressions and make bad judgements. Idols of the den are misconceptions that derive from our upbringing: our culture, our habituation, our education. As these misconceptions have been with us most of our life, we hold them very dear, and they are not easily displaced. Idols of the marketplace are false beliefs formed through human discourse; that is, beliefs formed on the basis of unreliable testimony from those no better informed than ourselves. Lastly, “idols of the theatre” is Bacon’s term for the deceiving influence of unproven and unprovable dogmas, most of which are taken seriously only by virtue of having been around for a very, very long time (e.g., astrology). Avoiding these four idols of the mind, these unreliable modes of thinking, is the first step towards the formation of credible opinions.

Implicit in Bacon’s account of the idols of the mind, it seems to me, is an imperative to think for ourselves. Those in search of credible opinions must take an active role in their acquisition. To do otherwise is to allow one’s opinions to be unintentionally distorted by the limitations of the human mind, the random influence of culture and habit, the assertions of those who might be less informed than ourselves, or by the dogmas of antiquity. Taking intentional ownership of the formation of our beliefs will not make us infallible, but it should make us less prone to error.

The idols most germane to our discussion are the idols of the marketplace: false beliefs derived from unreliable human discourse. I suggest that by recognizing the moral and epistemological value of first-person accounts, and by tempering these accounts with the considered, shared judgement of qualified individuals, we are not only performing our democratic duty to become informed citizens, we are exercising epistemic virtue by avoiding a detrimental habit: the reliance on the inaccurate assertions of others in the formation of our own opinions.

More Than we Want, Less Than We Need (or, Why Scepticism Isn't the Solution)

Most of us feel that we already receive more information than we want. Cable news, Twitter, Facebook, radio, newspapers, blogs, magazines, official press releases, word of mouth, *et cetera*, *et cetera*. Francis Bacon was among the first to argue for the explicit link between knowledge and power, but by “knowledge” he meant something like true justified belief. He certainly did not mean “information” in the sense that we have come to use the term.

The information avalanche of the digital age is more likely to enfeeble than to empower; more likely to enervate than to motivate; more likely to result in the paralysis of scepticism than the confidence of enlightenment. To increasingly rely on information that we increasingly distrust is to spiral ever deeper into paradox. It is to make ourselves ever more vulnerable to the informational pandemic noted by McIntyre. And yet, while many of us feel that we already have more information than we want, most of us (probably all of us) have less *reliable* information than we actually need.

To that end, the response to the paradox, and the defense against the pandemic, should not be a general scepticism leading to quietism. The response must be proactive. If authoritative information – ‘authoritative’ both in the sense of being derived from the author and being made credible by informed, impartial review – is not coming to us, then we must do more to seek it out. If such information does not exist, then the onus is on us to produce it and promote it.

Joshua Duclos holds philosophy degrees from Connecticut College (B.A.), the University of Chicago (A.M.) and Boston University (Ph.D.). A former Fulbright Scholar to the Czech Republic and a former Research Fellow at the Pardee Center for the Study of the Longer-Range Future, Dr. Duclos currently teaches humanities and philosophy at St. Paul's School, Concord, New Hampshire.