

# Truth and Evidence

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# Truth as a Democratic Value

Michael Patrick Lynch

What has truth to do with politics?<sup>1</sup> Common sense, not to mention the depressing detritus of lies, deceit, and propaganda strewn about by governments everywhere, suggests the answer is, “not much.” As Hannah Arendt dryly noted, “no one has ever doubted that truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other.”<sup>2</sup>

Arendt, in her classic essay on the topic, worried that it might be in the “nature of the political realm to be at war with truth in all its forms.”<sup>3</sup> And she suspected that this war was getting more intense and in an unexpected way. Even though, she noted, she lived at a time and place that was uniquely tolerant of religious and philosophical diversity, the value of truth seemed particularly under threat: “factual truth, if it happens to oppose a given group’s profit or pleasure, is greeted today with greater hostility than ever before.”<sup>4</sup> If it was a war between truth and politics, truth was losing, and in a way that seemed particularly dangerous to democracy.

By now it is a banality to point out that most of us feel similarly about our own political moment. Indeed, one suspects that if Arendt were alive today, she would be dismayed to see that the war seems all but lost. We live at a time when a world of information is literally at our fingertips, where knowledge is in some ways easier to attain than ever before, but where we can also find instant confirmation for any belief—no matter how bizarre. Even ideas such as, the COVID-19 pandemic is a hoax, or that ingesting disinfectant might ward off the virus, or that the earth is flat, are given credence in some quarters. Moreover, and especially in the case of the first two examples, these blatant falsehoods have been promulgated by some in the halls of power—perhaps not because they are believed, but in the hope that others may give them credence. And, more alarmingly, the very “democratization” of knowledge that the Internet had briefly promised to bring has been weaponized. Our

online life, and hence our political life that largely lives there, has become toxic, and its poison is spread by, and contributes to the spread of, tyrants and authoritarian leaders across the globe.

Those of us who find ourselves on the losing side of this battle between truth and an increasingly authoritarian politics may find it strategically useful, therefore, to revisit some basic questions. This chapter aims to answer two: First, what makes truth a democratic value? And second, what are the most pressing threats to that value?

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In wondering about truth's democratic value, what we are wondering about is whether, and how, democracies qua democracies have a special political interest in truth.

By that, I *don't* mean that democracies have a special interest in truthfulness—in government, and in citizens. I think that might be so, and it is an important question, but it isn't the one that concerns me here.<sup>5</sup> I'm concerned not with truthfulness but with true belief—that is, whether and why democracies might have a special interest in their citizens believing what is true. Understood in the very minimal sense of “knowledge” where knowledge is just true belief, I'm asking about the value of knowledge in a democracy.

Here too some clarifications are in order. The question of whether democracies have a special interest in true belief isn't the question of whether democracies benefit from citizens having answers to life's persistent questions. Obviously, they do. The government, for example, has an interest in its citizens knowing about the danger of a virus, how it spreads, and how to minimize that spread. But the question at hand is not about the value of any particular true belief or beliefs; it is about the democratic value of true belief as such, independent of content.

Relatedly, the question is not about the *epistemic* value of true belief. True belief, by definition, is an epistemic good, given that it is a necessary component of knowledge. And one might think that what justifies democratic authority is that democratic politics is the best way of achieving that good.<sup>6</sup> That too may be so, but it is not our question here. Our question concerns not truth as an epistemic value but as a political value. It is whether *democracies have a special political interest in their citizens believing what's true as such.*

I think that the answer to that question is clearly yes. But the

reason why is both more and less obvious than we might think.

It is less obvious because the most straightforward answer turns out, surprisingly, to be a non-starter. Consider, for instance, the following proposal: True belief is politically valuable in a democracy the same way wealth or income is. It is a primary social good.<sup>7</sup> In other words, it is the sort of thing that is needed by free and equal citizens and that should therefore be protected and fairly distributed in any democratic state. Other possible examples of such social goods would include items like health and basic freedoms of movement and assembly. To the extent a society loses such goods, it is worse off; to the extent it makes them more difficult to acquire fairly, or to put them in only the hands of a few, means it is, to that extent, less democratic. Or so one might argue.

Could true belief be such a good? One might think this follows the timeworn and honorable belief that an informed citizenry is essential for democracy to flourish. In order to act—individually or collectively—you need to know your options. Reasonable political action requires a reasonable amount of political knowledge. If citizens are going to make even indirect decisions about policy, they need to know at least some of the facts both about the problems the policy is meant to rectify, and some understanding about how effective that policy would be. And they need to know what their government is already doing to address the problems at hand and how its current policies affect their interests. This is the danger presented, one might think, by fake news, deep fakes, and other forms of digital information pollution. The more people are actively misled by false information and propaganda, the more their epistemic bubbles are reinforced by misinformation tailored to fit their preexisting biases, the less real political knowledge citizens will have. The social good of true belief, one might think, is being drained away.

There is something right about this thought of course. But it won't get us far, because true belief as such is simply a poor candidate for a primary social good in the first place.

Primary social goods are those goods that democracies have a vested interest (qua democracy) in fairly distributing. But true beliefs can't be *directly* distributed, fairly or otherwise. To imagine otherwise is to pretend true beliefs are like gold coins. But true beliefs are mental states, arguably dispositional, often not conscious, and indefinite in number. These facts complicate the analogy with

wealth. To consider just one point: A person who adds by one all day long every day of the week will have more true beliefs than most. But he hardly increases his stock of a social good worthy of the name. Put differently, knowledge, unlike wealth, is not a pie that can be divided. Moreover, even if this were not so, it would be unclear how to *fairly* divide true beliefs among citizens. Giving everyone the same number of true beliefs (again, assuming that even makes sense) is a non-starter. That's because not all truths are created equal (knowing about the coronavirus is more likely to be useful than knowing that  $245719 + 1 = 245720$ , for example).

It is similarly unclear how society can legally protect true beliefs. One's right *to believe* can be protected perhaps, but it is unclear how laws could be constructed to further protect *just* the true beliefs—where again, we are not talking about some particular belief or set of beliefs, but true beliefs as such, no matter what their content.

Finally, true belief is an unlikely candidate for a primary social good for democracies because it is contentious matter who has it. The finer points of tax law aside, it is not difficult to agree on what counts as wealth or income. But *what counts as true*—that is, what counts as something really known in the minimal sense—is itself going to be a point of contention in any plural society. As a result, it is difficult to see how any democratic government in a plural society could protect and fairly distribute in the manner of other primary goods.<sup>8</sup>

At this point, it should be clear things have gone awry, since there seems to be something right about the idea that democracies have a special political interest in true belief. So where did we go wrong? The clue to our mistake lies in the obvious: When truth is obscured or its pursuit undermined, or the institutions that protect it threatened, democracy is harmed. What this should tell us is that we've started the wrong way around. It is as if we were wondering about the value of climbing a mountain and started out by asking what's so great about being on the top. That's a natural strategy, obviously. But it isn't the only way. Perhaps we need to ask about what would allow us to get to the top in the first place. That means starting not at the top of the mountain but with the climbing itself; that is, not with the value of truth, but with the valuing of it.

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The claim I want to defend can be stated thus: The democratic value of true belief is derivative of the value of its pursuit. More precisely, it is in a democracy's interest, qua democracy, to protect and fairly distribute the means by which citizens can pursue true beliefs. And it is this fact—that democracy has a special interest in the pursuit of truth—that historically has made democracies vulnerable to certain epistemic threats. Hence, it is also what we need to understand if we wish to counter those threats in times, like our own, when they loom large.

Before I say why I believe this, let me pause to marvel at the fact that we are living in a time when, for reasons I'll try to make clear later in the chapter, we can no longer take such seemingly obvious claims as "democracies have interest in the pursuit of truth" for granted. That's what happens when you begin to lose the war of truth against politics. Ground that once seemed wholly in one's possession has been ceded, and one must fight to get it back.

That said, it is hardly difficult to make a prima facie case for the idea that democracies have a political interest in promoting, protecting, and fairly distributing the means by which we pursue truth. More difficult is making that case without relying on an antecedent political value of true belief as such.

The prima facie case is simply this: Democracies have a political interest in promoting deliberative decision-making procedures such as rational legislative processes and participatory politics.<sup>9</sup> To achieve those ideals clearly requires promoting and protecting the means by which people can come to have true beliefs. We cannot rationally legislate or meaningfully participate if we lack access to the means by which we can come to know.

This may seem as if we are justifying deliberative democratic procedures by appealing to their ability to get us an epistemic good—truth. But the point I am making here is different (if consistent). It is that protecting and providing fair access to the means by which we pursue truth is politically valuable in itself—because it is demanded by one of the most fundamental, and least controversial, democratic values: basic respect for persons.

Basic or "recognition" respect is to be distinguished from what Stephen Darwall has called appraisal respect.<sup>10</sup> That's the kind of respect we give someone for accomplishing something difficult. Recognition or basic respect, on the other hand, is the kind of respect

they are due just by virtue of their place in the realm of reasons. Or, to put it differently, just by virtue of being a person.

When we think of basic respect for persons, we are typically thinking of moral respect—that is, respect for someone as a potential moral agent. But we can also respect or disrespect each other as epistemic agents. Here too there is a difference between respecting someone for being epistemically accomplished—for being learned, intellectually careful, curious, or open-minded. That would constitute epistemic appraisal respect in the terms of Darwall’s distinction. We don’t owe epistemic appraisal respect to anyone in particular. They must earn it. To give a fellow citizen basic epistemic respect, on the other hand, is to treat them as someone who is a potential participant in what Robert Brandom memorably called the game of giving and asking for reasons.<sup>11</sup>

To the extent that we don’t protect and fairly distribute the means by which citizens can pursue truth, we don’t accord them basic epistemic respect. We don’t do so because to the extent that citizens are unfairly barred from utilizing the resources by which they can form judgments about what is or isn’t the case, to the extent to which they are unfairly denied the educational means, including the relevant concepts, to understand the problems before the body politic—to that extent they are not being treated with the respect due a potential participant in the space of reasons. A just democracy must provide its citizens with the means to figure out what to believe—not just because doing so helps them to get food on the table, but because it is demanded by basic epistemic respect.

To see democracy in this light is to regard it, with Hannah Arendt and John Dewey, as aspiring to a kind of common space—a space where disagreements can be navigated without fear of violence or oppression. Democracies, we might say, are spaces of reasons.<sup>19</sup> To see democracy as a space of reasons is to regard the ideals of democratic politics as requiring a commitment to not just practical but epistemic rationality—that is, to the employment of practices that aid us in pursuing truth. “The essential need, in other words, is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion,” Dewey noted. “That is *the* problem of the public.”<sup>12</sup>

The Deweyan ideal that democracies are spaces of reasons can be put quite generally. Because of the value of basic epistemic respect, democracies must encourage, protect, and fairly distribute

access to *reliable social-epistemic practices*.<sup>13</sup> These are practices that (a) aim at producing true belief; (b) are, overall and in the long run, more reliable than not in accomplishing that aim; and (c) are distinctively social in that they involve public interactions between agents. These are the kinds of practices we aspire to employ, for example, in scientific, historical, educational, journalistic, and legal institutions. We aim to use such practices when teaching students, engaging in archival research, investigating a crime, replicating an experiment, employing blind review, and independently confirming a source. Individually speaking, reliable social-epistemic practices help us get what we want out of life. But politically speaking, encouraging, protecting, and fairly distributing access to such practices facilitates an informed public, allows for more effective deliberation, and promotes epistemic justice. That's why the pursuit of truth is a central democratic value. It helps us realize the ideal of democracy as a space of reasons.<sup>14</sup>

Where it seemed strained to talk of legally protecting and providing fair access to true beliefs directly, we are already familiar with doing just this with social-epistemic practices—for example, by providing primary education to all citizens, protecting free assembly, speech, a free press, and the norms of academic freedom.<sup>15</sup> And while we may disagree over exactly how to fairly distribute access to the institutions that enshrine reliable social-epistemic practices, it is clear that no such distribution can be fair if it favors certain races, classes, gender preferences, or religious affiliations over others.

The conclusion I draw from these reflections is that the means by which we pursue truth via reliable social-epistemic practices are a primary social good, and the defense of the value of truth consists in the defense of those practices.

This conclusion has two significant explanatory advantages. First, far from ruling out true belief as a democratic value, *it shows us how and why it is one*. Truth derives its political value from the value of its pursuit.<sup>16</sup> Call this the bootstrapping argument. Truth may be worth valuing intrinsically. But it can also be worth valuing because the *very act of valuing of it is itself valuable*. To appeal to a previous analogy: It can be valuable to climb the mountain because of what is on top; but there is also worth in the climb itself. So too with the political value of truth.

The argument here is simple and depends on a link between



what is worth valuing and what is worth pursuing. To say that something is *valuable* means that it is worth valuing. And it is worth valuing if it is worth pursuing. As a result, we can say that true belief as such is politically valuable in a democracy if it is politically worth pursuing. But the reason it is politically worth pursuing is because that pursuit is itself a democratic value—more precisely, the means by which we pursue it are a primary social good. In this way we pull the alethic boot up by its social-epistemic straps.

Second, our conclusion sheds light on certain distinctive epistemic threats historically faced by democracies. These threats are both philosophical and existential. They are philosophical because, if realized, they undermine, in various ways, our claim that reliable social practices are a social good. They are existential because they are not idle. They emerge out of real concerns pressing upon the health not just of our democracy but of many others worldwide.

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The first threat we could call the problem of epistemic disagreement. This is what happens when we disagree not only over values—which is healthy in a democracy, and not only over the facts—which is inevitable, but over which sources and methods we should trust for figuring out what the facts are. This is disagreement over how best to pursue the truth, or over which social-epistemic practices are reliable.

Like the other threats we'll discuss, epistemic disagreement is not a new phenomenon. Nor is it peculiar, in its most general form, to democracy. It crops up whenever epistemic norms and principles are unsettled, whenever there are competing methods for getting at the truth. It was, for example, a central cause of strife during the reformation and counter-reformation, which saw widespread disagreement over the best methods of achieving religious truth. And epistemic disagreements were central to the intellectual debates of the late Renaissance and the Enlightenment, with their battles between science and religion.

Epistemic disagreement has long been regarded as a serious philosophical challenge. As the Pyrrhonian skeptics, Sextus Empiricus, David Hume, and Michele de Montaigne all noted, the challenge becomes more difficult the more basic the social-epistemic practices in question happen to be. How do I rationally defend my most basic practices for determining what is rational

without at some point relying on those very practices? When we try to defend our most fundamental practices for determining what to believe, it seems like, in Wittgenstein's words, our spade is turned on bedrock. Reasons run out. That's the classic skeptical problem: You can't give reasons for your most basic standards of reason without ending up in a circle. And it invites the classic responses: (a) just dig in—dogmatically cling to one's own standards; (b) embrace the circle and hence convince no one; or (c) just shrug and admit that no epistemic practice can be shown to be reliable.

In terms of our discussion, growing disagreement over which social-epistemic practices are reliable threatens the idea that such practices form a collective social good in a democracy. We noted above that such goods presumably must be ones that reasonable citizens not only recognize as such but can agree on whether they've been achieved. Health and wealth are clear examples. True belief, on the other hand, did not seem to meet that test, but we hoped that which social-epistemic practices are reliable might. Increasing disagreement over social-epistemic practices threatens that possibility.

How serious a threat this is might seem to depend on how common such disagreement really is. And one might think it is not that common. Perhaps we actually agree more than we disagree over how to pursue truth, and many apparent disagreements could be resolved with enough time and patience. After all, you might think, most people still implicitly seem to accept standard medical and engineering practices—they go to doctors, trust engineers to build safe bridges, rely on computer science to construct their digital devices, and so on.

I am less optimistic. Brexit, the 2016 US election, and the COVID-19 pandemic have made it clear that the Internet is fueling a do-it-yourself approach to inquiry and disagreement over whether and where scientific practices are reliable. But more important for the present context, *actual* epistemic disagreement isn't necessary to threaten democracies' ability to hold the pursuit of truth as a social good. That just requires the widespread *perception* of epistemic disagreement.

That people perceive there is epistemic disagreement is consistent with recent research on political polarization.<sup>17</sup> While clearly there is significant disagreement between the Right and the Left on any number things, it also appears that ordinary Americans

would actually support many of the same policies, no matter what the party affiliation. Yet that same research indicates that we *are* polarized in a very different way—in our *perceptions* of those with different political viewpoints. And this kind of polarization—what is sometimes called attitude or affective polarization—does seem to be on the rise. We increasingly perceive those in the other political party with deep suspicion, as untrustworthy and relying on bad sources.

It is likely, I suggest, that this polarization in perception carries all the way to how we perceive the other party's attitudes toward truth and the practices they use to pursue it. Think, for example, about how debates over the spread of COVID-19 played out differently on television news networks FOXNews and CNN during the spring of 2020. Each side invoked its own experts (or “experts”) and derided the other side's methods as flawed and unreliable. And similar disagreements over how seriously to take climate change are familiar.

Even were there not widespread epistemic disagreement, the perception that there is turns out to be dangerous enough. That's because that perception is itself sufficient to encourage mistrust in experts. They go hand in hand: If A perceives that she disagrees with B over which source information or practices are reliable, then A is not going to trust B's experts who rely on such practices. And vice versa. Moreover, widespread mistrust in specific experts has a way of encouraging a kind of cynicism about expertise itself. It can engender the idea that there really are no experts on some matter, and hence that maybe there are no reliable practices for pursuing the truth on that matter either. That in turn can threaten a society's commitment to protecting and fairly distributing access to reliable social epistemic practices. When people come to perceive (even mistakenly) that no one really knows what those practices are, then the idea that we should protect and promote them will become less compelling.

And that in turn threatens to remove something essential to deliberative democracy—a common currency of reasons in which we can trade. Currencies hold value only when they are commonly perceived to do so. And without a common currency of reliable social epistemic practices, debates over what to do can hardly be settled by appeal to the facts—because such appeals hold little weight if we don't agree on how to determine what the facts even

are. The practical upshot is hardly unfamiliar to us: It is that debates over policy are decided by fact-free means.

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If the first threat to democratic value of truth is disagreement over how best to pursue truth, the second is the attitude that we already know what is true, so we have no need to pursue it.

This is the problem posed by *intellectual arrogance*, the psycho-social attitude that you have nothing to learn from anyone else about some subject or subjects because you know it all already. Such arrogance isn't simply about misplaced overconfidence; it involves a self-delusion about that confidence's *basis*. While the intellectually arrogant think their felt superiority is due to their knowledge, it is more likely compensation for insecurity due to a perceived threat.<sup>18</sup>

The idea that this attitude is bad news, both personally and psychologically, also isn't new. Michel Montaigne, the sixteenth-century French philosopher, was convinced it led to dogmatic extremism and that it could result in political violence. Dogmatic zeal, he famously said, did wonders for hatred but never pulled anyone toward goodness; "there is nothing more wretched nor arrogant than man."<sup>19</sup> Montaigne knew what he was talking about, having lived through religious wars that littered France with corpses from end to end. He was so disgusted by the dogmatism of his day that he retreated to a literal ivory tower and tried to isolate himself with books.

I don't recommend that strategy. For one thing, it didn't work out for Montaigne—who found himself dragged back into politics. For another, in a democracy, we need citizens to engage, to participate. But I do think Montaigne's warning about factional intellectual arrogance is worth heeding, particularly because it poses a clear threat to a democracy's ability to value the pursuit of truth via reliable epistemic practices. That's because factional arrogance at root is an epistemically unhealthy attitude. The intellectually arrogant are not motivated to pursue truth; indeed, they can be motivated to resist it.

As Montaigne knew, intellectual arrogance becomes a real social problem when the attitude becomes factional—or indexed to a group whose members share a self-identity.<sup>20</sup> When this happens, members of the group begin to think "we" know and "they" don't. When convictions that are central to the group's identity become

part of its shared cultural narrative, it is more likely for the members of the group to be intellectually arrogant about them, simply because any threat to those convictions threatens the group identity. It is perceived as a threat to “who we are.” As a result, such convictions become immune from revision by members of the tribe and protected at all costs from counter-evidence. This unwillingness, when expressed as a form of widely shared intellectual arrogance, results in what is sometimes called active factional intellectual arrogance; it is typically directed at *other* groups and the sources of information that are associated with those groups. As a result, someone who is arrogant toward African Americans and Latino immigrants will dismiss sources perceived to be friendly to those groups—for example, CNN and the *New York Times*—as “fake news.”

But factional or group-based intellectual arrogance isn’t just about “us” versus “them.” It is about “us” *over* “them.”<sup>21</sup> This fact is most apparent in the factional arrogance involved in racism, since racists think not only that they are superior to other races but that the others are somehow at fault. People can be factionally arrogant but not racist, but it is difficult for them to be racist without, at least on some level, being factionally arrogant—without thinking, in other words, that their capacities for knowledge are superior and that they are to be morally commended, and the others morally blamed, for this fact. This holds generally for the intellectually arrogant, whether their arrogance is racist or not: Their knowledge is superior, they know the secret truths. And they think this means that their humanity, too, is *morally superior*. They are better people because they know what’s what; the “others” are responsible for just not keeping up.

Intellectual arrogance is, in general, a human problem; it does not stay within the political lines. But, I believe, there is also no doubting that, at this political moment, it is the far Right that most embodies this attitude. We need look no farther than the conspiracy theories concerning the COVID-19 epidemic—such as claims that it is a hoax, that Bill Gates created it, that the Chinese pulse it into bodies through 5G networks, or that it can be treated by various vitamins or by injecting disinfectant. As often happens where factional arrogance is concerned, such claims are frequently made from a position of defensiveness—accompanied by accusations that it is the scientific experts that are arrogant, that “they” are the ones

who are not listening to reason. This is all weird enough—after all, this is an actual global disaster and one would hope our responses to it would be data-driven. But the advocacy of similar wild theories by political leaders—including at points the president himself—indicates they are not one-off throwaways. Such conspiracies are driven by narratives of factional arrogance—a sense that “we” are the ones that really know the truth, and that licenses, even encourages, denials of obvious facts.

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The two epistemic threats I’ve outlined—the problems of epistemic disagreement and intellectual arrogance—can interlock and amplify each other. When they do, as they are doing now in our society, they give rise to a third epistemic threat: What we might call contempt for truth.

The most notable sign of this contempt is the uptick in political statements that simply fly in the face of an obvious matter of fact—the bald-faced political lie. As a number of commentators have noted, bald-faced lies are on the uptick by political leaders in democratic countries worldwide. In the United States, for example, we are becoming numb not only to outrageous falsehoods, but to the bizarre self-assurance with which they are pronounced. We were told crowds were bigger than they were, that the sun shined when it didn’t, that Trump won in a landslide—and that was just in the first few days after his election. What has shocked so many is the fearlessness in the face of the facts, the willingness to simply deny reality outright, and the apparent toleration, even joy, with which his followers greet the practice.

By a bald-faced political lie, I am talking about the overt assertion of an obviously false proposition—one where there is overwhelming evidence of its falsity that is directly available to almost anyone. I am not talking about claims that, while false, require some expertise or research to see they are false. I’m talking about the political equivalent of saying that you didn’t eat the chocolate cake when it is all over your face. Or, to put it differently, they are the political equivalent of being told it isn’t raining by someone standing with you in pouring rain.

Bald-faced political lies are puzzling because, unlike normal lies, their function isn’t to deceive. While some outrageous bald-faced lies might fool some of the people some of the time, it is implausible to think that this is their primary communicative

purpose. After all, there are time-honored and much better ways of deceiving the public, including spin and the implantation of false stories in the media. Simply denying what is obviously false isn't, in contrast, particularly effective. You won't generally convince someone it is not raining when the raindrops are sliding off their nose.

Similarly, while bald-faced political lies may sometimes be intended as sarcasm or jokes, that doesn't seem to be their function either. Indeed, I doubt most bald-faced political lies are actually meant to be humorous. And I think one sign of this fact is that these sorts of explanations are often trotted out in a politically self-serving attempt to explain away, for example, tweets that are outrageously false or offensive. Jokes you have to explain as jokes aren't generally meant to be jokes the first place.

An analogy can help us see what is really going on. Imagine that during a football game, a player steps way out of bounds and sprints down the sidelines with the ball. The referee blows the whistle. But the player—still standing out of bounds—declares that he is in bounds and insists on continuing to play. He isn't fooling anyone, but as his actions suggest, he isn't joking either. What he *is* doing is pretty clear: He is expressing his contempt—his contempt for the referee, the other team, and perhaps for the very idea that the rules apply to him.

If the game is a normal one, he'll be thrown out. But if he—or his team—hold some power (perhaps he owns the field or brought the ball), then he may be able to compel the game to continue. Imagine his fans, all of whom know he stepped out of bounds, cheering him on anyway—let him play, they yell. The video, they might say, can't be trusted anyway. It is controlled by sinister forces out to get their team. And so on. Meanwhile the player continues to insist that he never stepped out of bounds in the first place.

If the game continues, the other team might start flouting the rules as well. The referees' calls will be increasingly moot. It may be unclear that they are even playing the same game—or any game at all. Perhaps everyone will take their balls and go home; or fights will break out and the game will end very badly indeed.

Bald-faced political lies are like the player's insistence that he was in bounds when he deliberately stepped out. And they serve the same function. They are deliberate expressions of contempt meant to display power.

As our imagined football player expresses his contempt for the rules of the game, so the bald-faced political liar is expressing contempt for the rules or norms that govern those social-epistemic practices that help us to know what's true. These are the rules that govern truth-seeking in law, journalism, education, and science. They include, for example, the rules that journalists should use more than one source, that teachers should use accurate textbooks, that detectives need to collect evidence against the accused, or that judges should recuse themselves when their personal interests are at stake. All of these rules are all examples of professional norms aimed at helping the profession consume and transmit justified information in line with their professional goals. This is why we say that such institutions are “evidence-based.” They are institutions that employ social-epistemic practices, and are aimed, at least in part, at pursuing truth. Thus, bald-faced political liars, in expressing contempt for the rules that govern such practices, also express contempt toward the means by which we pursue truth in normal democratic societies. By the terms of our discussion, this means that such contempt can be properly called contempt for the value of truth.

The social impact of this contempt, however, depends on the power of the contemptuous. It depends on the politician's own institutional power—his position of authority, his influence on the media and his political allies, and so on. It also depends on his social power—whether, and to what extent, he can rely on his followers to cheer him on. Given sufficient institutional and social power, expressions of contempt for social-epistemic rules can encourage widespread questioning of the value of even following the rules. This is particularly so if, as in our football example, the rule-breaker gets away with it—where the “it” is both the rule violation and the assertion that no such violation occurred. The rule begins to seem less important—not just to the liar, but to the other team and the people in the stands.

Perhaps most insidiously, the bald-faced political lie can cause people to treat the lie as if it were true. The football analogy helps to illustrate how this might happen. The rule-breaker who also owns the field can force the game to go on under the assumption that he didn't step out of bounds. Likewise, given sufficient power, the political bald-faced liar can bring into being not the truth of what he says, *but its passing for truth*.<sup>22</sup> In short, he can make people *treat what he says as true*—to treat it, in other words, as a goal of inquiry,



an answer to a question.

One way this can happen is when the lie is adopted as a means of identity expression. In a recent study, Brian Schaffner and Samantha Luks asked 700 Americans about two well-known and highly discussed photos of the crowds attending the Obama and the Trump presidential inaugurations.<sup>23</sup> Both photos are taken from the same vantage point; each shows throngs of people assembled in front of the Washington Monument for the inauguration. But one photo (Obama) clearly has more people in it than the other (Trump). The researchers asked a simple question: Which photo has more people in it? The results were revealing. Trump supporters were six times more likely than Clinton supporters or nonvoters to say that the half-empty photo contains more people. This might suggest that Trump supporters are twisting their beliefs into knots. That's possible, but I think a more likely suggestion is the one made by Schaffner and Luks themselves: Some Trump supporters have come to treat a bald-faced lie as true not because they believe it, but because doing so is an act of identity expression.

This is how the bald-faced political lie functions to demonstrate power. The rule-breaker aims to show that he has the power to break or flaunt rules *and* to make others go along with, or at least ignore, that fact. In the case of the powerful football player, the rules that are flaunted are basic rules of the game; in the case of the political bald-faced liar, the rules are rules of assertion and the rules that govern our social-epistemic life. In both cases the aim is similar: to demonstrate or affirm power that is greater than any rule. And such demonstrations, as just noted, can have dangerous downstream effects. They can, as the Schaffner study suggests, cause people to take the expression of the lie on board as a part of their factional political identity.

The phenomenon of bald-faced political lying illustrates how the problems of disagreement and arrogance form the ground from which the poisonous flower of contempt for truth grows. Epistemic disagreement—or the perception that it exists—makes political parties suspicious of each other's sources. And arrogance convinces us that “we” are always right. Together that can lead to contempt. Hannah Arendt was chillingly clear on this point: “The chief qualification of a mass leader has become unending infallibility; he can never admit an error.” That's because to admit an error is to admit that there is something more powerful than you,

that your triumph—and hence your group’s—may not be inevitable. As a consequence, Arendt writes, speaking across the decades, “before mass leaders seize the power to fit reality to their lies, their propaganda is marked by its extreme contempt for facts as such, for in their opinion, fact depends entirely on the power of the man who can fabricate it.”<sup>24</sup>

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The problems we’ve just canvassed are at the same time both practical and philosophical. They are philosophical because they are normative; they stem from a loss of value. But they are practical because they bear on our immediate lives. They cannot, if I am right, be ignored if we are committed to the health of democracy.

Some readers may wonder why, in my defense of the value of the pursuit of truth, I haven’t paused to consider two well-known, one might even say tired, objections to that value. The first, best expressed by Richard Rorty more than twenty years ago, is that truth is not really a goal of inquiry because “we can’t aim at that which we don’t know whether we hit.”<sup>25</sup> This is the idea that truth is too difficult to obtain, and thus we should re-conceive of inquiry as aiming at something else, like agreement. The second objection, also endorsed by Rorty but also a host of other philosophers, is that truth itself is simply an uninteresting concept, unfit to bear much theoretical weight and certainly not that of normative political theory.<sup>26</sup>

I have ignored these two arguments in part because I have had much to say about them elsewhere.<sup>27</sup> Knowing whether we’ve succeeded in hitting the target of truth is indeed difficult, but so is knowing whether you’ve actually achieved agreement, or mere capitulation or obedience to those with the guns. Moreover, what we agree on today we may not agree on tomorrow, and we should look to our social-epistemic practices for more reliability than that. To the idea that truth is an empty concept, devoid of theoretical interest, I respond that interest is often a matter of need. The global political order of the latter half of the twentieth century led not only to complacency about our political institutions and their viability (History has reached its glorious neoliberal end! We are the last Men!) but complacency about the philosophical concepts that underwrote them—including concepts like equality and, yes, truth. What we need now is less talk about truth’s relative unimportance and more talk about its role in our democratic enterprise.

Yet I confess that in the end, I've really ignored such objections because paying much attention to them now, in our current political moment, seems akin to worrying about whether you watered the plants when your house is burning down. There are other things to attend to of a more urgent nature.

One of those urgent matters—and one I have not directly attended to here—is that democracy itself is less and less valued across the world. We are at a stage now where we can no longer take it for granted that everyone agrees that democracy is “the worst form of government except for all the others.” But the devaluing of democracy, the sense by many that there may be *better* worst forms of government, is not unrelated to the topic discussed in these pages. If the above argument is correct, if the pursuit of truth is something like a primary good for any democracy, devaluing it can only bring with it a devaluing of democracy itself.

## Notes

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- 1 Thanks to audiences at the University of Binghamton, University of Connecticut, the University of London, and Princeton University; special thanks to my helpful commentators Michael Saks and John Sides and to comments from Melissa Schwartzberg.
  - 2 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 2006), p. 223.
  - 3 *Ibid.*, p. 235.
  - 4 *Ibid.*, p. 231.
  - 5 For more on this question, see Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton

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University Press, 2002), and Lynch, *True to Life: Why Truth Matters* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

- 6 Various arguments for this (I think basically correct) position can be found in Elizabeth Anderson, “The Epistemology of Democracy,” *Episteme* 3 (2006): 1–2, 8–22; David Estlund, “Beyond Fairness and Deliberation: The Epistemic Dimension of Democratic Authority,” *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 173–204; and Robert Talisse, *Democracy and Moral Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- 7 Here I draw on Rawls’s notion of a primary good. I do not claim to be using the notion in exactly the same {AU: OK TO ADD? YES} manner. See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 180.
- 8 It may be for this reason Rawls didn’t include knowledge or true belief among his own list of primary goods. According to Rawlsian doctrine, in a liberal democratic society, the government attempts to remain neutral with regard to different visions of the good life, or comprehensive doctrines.
- 9 One can presumably endorse this thought even if you don’t think, with deliberative democrats, that democracy is defined in terms of such practices.
- 10 Stephen L. Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality,*

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- Respect, and Accountability* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).
- 11 Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. xxi.
- 12 John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry* (Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 1927/2016), p. 224.
- 13 Alvin Goldman, *Knowledge in a Social World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 4–5. Goldman would call such practices “veritistic”—that is, practices that aim at truth.
- 14 Here I am influenced by Philip Kitcher’s claims concerning the overlap (and tension) between democratic and scientific aims in *Science, Truth and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), as well as by Anderson, “The Epistemology of Democracy.”
- 15 For development of this point with regard to academic freedom, see Michael P. Lynch, “Academic Freedom and the Politics of Truth,” in Jennifer Lackey, *Philosophy and Academic Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- 16 For a related argument, see Lynch, *True to Life*, and Chase Wrenn’s *Truth* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015).
- 17 See, for example: Pew Research Center, “Partisan and Political

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Animosity in 2016,” [www.people-press.org/](http://www.people-press.org/)

- 18 This point was first made by Alessandra Tanesini’s important paper, “‘Calm Down, Dear’: Intellectual Arrogance, Silencing and Ignorance,” *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 90, no. 1 (June 2016), pp. 71–92.
- 19 *The Complete Essays*, translated and edited by M. A. Screech (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 495 and p. 693, respectively.
- 20 A fuller statement of this point can be found in Michael P. Lynch, *Know-It-All Society: Truth and Arrogance in Political Culture* (New York: Norton, 2019).
- 21 Jason Stanley, *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* (New York: Random House, 2020), pp. 21–22.
- 22 See Don Fallis, “Are Bald-Faced Lies Deceptive after All?” *Ratio* 28, no. 1 (2015): 81–89.
- 23 Brian Schaffner and Samantha Luks, “Misinformation or Expressive Responding? What an Inauguration Crowd Can Tell Us about the Source of Political Misinformation in Surveys,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 82, no. 1 (2018): 135–147.
- 24 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1973), p. 350.
- 25 Richard Rorty, “Is Truth a Goal of Enquiry? Davidson vs. Wright,” *Philosophical Quarterly (1950–)* 45, no. 180 (1995): 281–300.

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- 26 This a leading point of the deflationary approach to truth as advocated by Paul Horwich, *Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
- 27 See, e.g., Lynch, *True to Life*, and Michael Patrick Lynch, *Truth as One and Many* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).