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Life and Truth: A Response to Joel Backström[1]

Abstract

The "post-truth" phenomenon is not primarily a cognitive problem, but a moral or existential problem, a problem of self-deception. But what does this mean? In order to clarify that, two things need to be discussed. First, if the conception of belief is rejected according to which a belief has sense in isolation from the roles it, and the holding of it, plays in our lives, then the problem of self-deception needs to be met as a problem of life. Second, a problem of life is not something that individuals get into all by themselves. In other words, ways of living can be self-deceptive. The task of the text is hence to discuss some of the ways in which truth, belief and self-deception unfold on this non-individual level, specifically on the political one.

In *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes claims that human beings are:

> setting themselves against reason, as oft as reason is against them: Which is the cause, that the doctrine of Right and Wrong, is perpetually disputed, both by the Pen and the Sword: Whereas the doctrine of Lines, and Figures, is not so; because men care not, in that subject what be truth, as a thing that crosses no mans ambition, profit, or lust. For I doubt not, but if it had been a thing contrary to any mans right of dominion, or to the interest of men that have dominion, *That the three Angles of a Triangle should*

> *be equall to two Angles of a Square*; that doctrine should have been, if not disputed, yet by the burning of all books of Geometry, suppressed, as farre as he whom it concerned was able. (1968: 166)

As we can see, the "post-truth" phenomenon is far from new. Furthermore, if Hobbes is right, there cannot be any uncontroversial examples of it; climate change denialism is one example, I would say, and I will now and then refer to it in this text, but if you dispute that it is such an example, I am sure you are able to think of another one. Talking about "post-truth" is however potentially misleading. For the climate change denialists, strange as it superficially may sound, are not at all not caring about truth. As Hobbes points out, if people did not care about the truth, they would have no issue with it. Not caring about the truth would be saying, "I know that the way we are living is destructive, but I don't care" or "people are trying to find out whether our way of living is destructive, but I don't care what the truth may be", and it is such things that are difficult to say, even to oneself. Or not merely difficult (cf. Strandberg 2016): could you imagine yourself saying things like these in the same tone of voice, in the same frame of mind, in the same emotional disposition, as when saying that you do not care whether there are 986 or 987 peas in the bag?

Denialism is hence an example of self-deception, and the problem can therefore only be tackled by working on the moral dynamics involved, not by simply insisting on truth or reason. In view of that, the term self-deception is only partly helpful. The term could be understood as suggesting that its opposite is cognitive coherence, and we would then be back in such notions I just said are not by themselves of use. The term repression, by contrast, clearly refers to such dynamics, and I guess this is Backström's reason for using it so frequently.

As the term is used by Freud, repression is one, albeit the most important, of several related but distinct defence mechanisms. Denialism corresponds to negation in Freud's sense of the term (see Freud 2010: 373–374). Another defence mechanism is isolation: here you are able to utter the repressed content, and utter it without denying it, but you prevent it from getting into emotional and cognitive contact with anything in your life (see Freud 1997: 264–265; Freud 2003: 420). These technical distinctions are not as such important, but what they

point to is: the fact that the "post-truth" syndrome, if we for the moment use that expression, afflicts considerably more people than only the denialists. Does not the way I am living show that I do not fully believe that there is a climate change problem? Self-congratulatory poking fun at the stupidity of "post-truthers" is one of the results of an intellectualist conception of belief, according to which a belief has sense in isolation from the roles it, and the holding of it, plays in our lives, roles which are hence conceived of as no more than possible external consequences. But that the life somebody is living can give rise to questions about whether she fully believes what she says to others and to herself, whether she really means it, whether she really understands what she is saying, shows that such a conception of belief must be rejected, for it disregards the meaningfulness of such questions.[2] This does not mean that the belief I try to isolate counts for nothing. The point is that such an attempt at isolating it will not fully succeed: the belief will get into contact with other things, will be disturbing.

The problem should hence not be seen as a problem that can be solved by simply adjusting the things I tell myself. It is a problem of life. But not a problem each one of us gets into all by herself, as if it were a coincidence that it is as widespread as it is. On the contrary, it is our form of life, as it were, which is the problem. Not only beliefs can be self-deceptive, also ways of living can be so (and in the rest of this text this is how I will use the term); this explains why self-deceptions are held in common.

Here I will not say much about what the problem giving rise to climate change denialism and the corresponding attempt at isolation consists in. What I would like to discuss, however, are some of the ways in which truth, self-deception, repression, and related notions unfold on this non-individual level, specifically on the political one. These questions are mostly put on one side by Backström, for the reason that he sees them as less fundamental, I presume, less fundamental in the sense that the understanding of them presupposes

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[2] As Wittgenstein writes (PI: § 580): "An 'inner process' stands in need of outward criteria." What the criteria are is however not always clear, and, moreover, questioning whether someone means what she is saying, or whether I mean what I am saying, is not automatically intelligible (cf. OC: § 372). As Backström (2019: 120, 124) points out, using the concept of "criteria" is potentially misleading; see also Strandberg 2017.

that one is clear about those issues he does discuss.[3] But that he does not discuss them much is actually a reason for me to discuss these question, a discussion which will make it possible to see that Backström is indeed right in seeing them in that way.

In the quote I started with, Hobbes distinguished between suppressing and disputing doctrines. This distinction is nearly related to Backström's distinction between external and existential threats: the one who is suppressing a doctrine, for example by burning books, may have a very clear grasp of the truth, only wants to prevent others from getting hold of it, but the one who is disputing a doctrine is deceiving himself primarily and does not want to see that he is driven by "ambition, profit, or lust". As the external case is not without existential dimensions – the one who takes to suppression tells himself that this is, say, politically necessary, and the reason why he tells himself this must be understood in existential terms – suppressing doctrines is no less self-deceptive than disputing them, but the self-deception is more complex in the latter case. Making a very rough description of political history, one tendency is the waning of suppression, and what Hobbes calls disputing doctrines thereby becomes relatively more important, as a consequence of which self-deception hence grows in complexity. But not only in complexity: to the extent suppression is needed, the ones suppressed do not take part in the self-deceptive thinking of the suppressor, which means that non-individual forms of self-deception will be relatively more important when suppression becomes less so.

That the waning of suppression is closely connected to the development of democracy is clear, but it is also possible to connected it to the development of capitalism. According to Marx (1962: e.g. 91–92, 168–169), power-relations in capitalism are not as direct and personal as in feudalism, and the ultimate holder of power is not a human being but the automatic subject, value itself (or, in other words, the economic dynamics of our form of life). In other words, direct suppression is not needed. As regards the specific question of truth and its possible suppression, the question of truth is in pre-democratic times asked within the confines of what those in power permit. (This

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[3] As Backström (2019: 97–98) writes: "grasping the contemporary constellation of problems presupposes clarity regarding the background against which it arises".

situation is however not a stable one, for even when the green light has been given, seriously investigating something will bring to light a possible way of relating also to other questions, among which not permitted ones, and therefore has a liberatory potential, cf. Kant 1968: 61.) In a capitalist society, by contrast, the primary question is not whether truth is permitted but whether it pays. That this is not only an external requirement but something that frames a cultural mind-set is seen when paying attention to the way in which economic terms are not only used to conceptualise, but are above all influencing the way people behave with regard to things without, or at the most with indirect, economic significance – confer concepts such as "attention economy". To the extent that that mind-set is part of the social and cultural conditions under which scientific research is done today, the very act of doing research therefore no longer has a liberatory potential. Picturing science as the antidote to the post-truth phenomenon is in that respect premature.

The distinction between suppression and non-individual forms of self-deception makes it possible to make a thoroughly anti-populist point, which however is at the same time an anti-anti-populist one. If I take the problem to be one of suppression, I do not take myself to be part of it, but if I understand it as a matter of such forms of self-deception, the way of being I have to set to work at is just as much my own. The populists, as well as the anti-populists, do not see things in the latter way: the root of all problems is some specific group (immigrants, the cultural elite, populist politicians, groups which, as it happens, the speaker does not belong to), everything was alright before this group popped up, and we just have to get rid of it to get back to the normal state of things. This is the idea, once a progressive one, that revolt is called for, against parents, authority figures, the establishment, but which now hides the fact that any real revolt must be a revolt against myself.[4]

That the problem is one of non-individual forms of self-deception is partly the result of a historical development, I have indicated, but it can also be understood in terms of those difficulties of isolation I talked about a moment ago. These difficulties mean that the idea that it is possible to sharply divide oneself – on the one hand the inner life,

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[4] Cf. CV: 51e: "The revolutionary will be the one who can revolutionize himself."

on the other hand one's outward comportment – must be questioned, as well as the idea that it is possible to divide one's life into distinct spheres with no contact with each other – on the one hand business, say, on the other hand politics. In other words, one's way of being part of an economic life of self-promotion and competition will not be without relations to one's inner life and to politics: there will be tensions, evident particularly if one strives to set them apart from each other, for that very striving shows that there is such a relation, tensions which are however not only a matter of the one corrupting the others, but also of utopian potentialities not possible to quench. For example, in a society where few people raise their eyebrows when reading advertisement slogans like "Carlsberg – probably the best beer in the world", a Twitter bragging president should come as no surprise, even if such slogans are in themselves harmless. In none of these cases is it a matter of plain lying: the successful salesman believes in his products, or makes himself believe in them.[5]

All this has important consequences for how democracy should be understood. For Simone Weil, "democracy" is one of the prime examples of "words of the middle region" (1957: 43). This label can be explained in the following way. Democracy replaces "brute force" (1957: 23); for example, power is no longer in the hands of the military. But with what is it replaced? There is certainly nothing that guarantees that the same kind of striving for power which brute force was an example of will not characterise democratic life too, only with "some traces of training" (1957: 24). For this not to happen, democratic life must be inspired by that "from which [it] proceeds" (1957: 43), it must "continuously receive a renewal of existence by a renewal of the supernatural operation of grace" (1957: 24). In other words, democracy is a field where complex forms of self-deception will thrive, for striving for power cannot exist here without dressing up as other things, concern for the common good, say. At the moment when it no longer dresses up in that way, only brute force remains and no democracy is there at all.

But how should "inspiration" and "grace" be understood in this context? In the beginning of this text, I referred to climate change denialism as an example of political self-deception. This example might

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[5] For an illuminating analysis of the issues I have discussed here, see Jappe 2005.

seem to be ill-chosen, for even though life on this planet in the more or less distant future is a topic to have a democratic discussion about, it does not itself participate in such a discussion. In other words, Backström's main focus, interpersonal I–you-understanding and the repression of it, would only have a clear application when it comes to the discussion, but not when it comes to the relation to that which the discussion is about. Still, that I acknowledge something as a moral problem means that it worries me, that I care about it. But not primarily about "it", if understood just as an abstract puzzle, but about those the problem concerns, be it human beings, animals, nature. And a word for such a care is of course love, or, speaking with Weil, grace. The spirit from which democracy proceeds and by which it must be animated in order not to succumb to brute force is that love without which there would not be anything – no matter whether a concrete human being or life on this planet in the future – that concerned me at all, and this is of course all the more significant when that love is not only a care for someone or something but a longing for togetherness manifesting itself in, for example, discussions with them. In other words, that without which there would be no democracy are questions of care and people to discuss these questions together with, both of which radically contrast to brute force, striving to subject everything to its will (cf. Strandberg 2015: ch. 7, 10, 11). The word Weil uses to describe that love – grace – highlights one dimension of it in particular, namely that love is better not understood as an action on my part, but as a welcoming response to that which, or the one who, has moved me, in contrast to trying to shut it out, in which case its knocking will however still be heard.[6] Although this attempt at repression comes out in different ways depending on what it concerns (that care for life on this planet in future I feel without my choosing, or someone and those sayings of hers which have touched me when discussing with her), these struggles with love are not unrelated. For love is not an "attitude" which is possible to take up towards some "objects" and not others;

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[6] As Weil puts it (1991: 122–123, 195): "The belief in the existence of other human beings as such is *love*. The mind is not forced to believe in the existence of anything […]. That is why the only organ of contact with existence is acceptance, love. […] when projecting the light of attention equally on the one and the other [good and evil], the good seizes it through an automatic phenomenon. […] There is not a choice to make in its favour, it suffices not to refuse to recognize that it exists."

drawing a boundary for whom I will be loving towards is a threat also to those within it, and therefore unloving *tout court* (cf. Strandberg 2011: ch. 8).

This is then the sense in which I would say that Backström is right when pointing out that the political questions are less fundamental, that the understanding of them presupposes that one is clear about those issues he does discuss.

And this is also an additional reason why the post-truth concept is misleading: what we have troubles with, and which cannot be totally repressed, is not primarily truth, but the relations to what or whom truth is about, hence truth only as a dimension of love.[7]

The problem is of course that these troubles are not only there in the lives of the readers – as Hobbes seems to believe, for he does not pay attention to the risk that his own "ambition, profit, or lust" might make him set himself "against reason"[8] – but are there in the life of the author as well. Consequently, morality cannot be studied from the outside, moral philosophy will always be affected by the same problems it is about.[9] Wittgensteinian questions, as always philosophically vital to ask, questions like "To whom would I say this? why? as a response to what?", are therefore here also questions of conscience. My willingness to accept or not to accept a certain description, my tendency to use certain concepts and not others, and my readiness to take certain alleged problems seriously and other ones not, are things I must question as to their moral clear-sightedness. In other words, Wittgenstein's famous saying has a special significance in this context (CV: 24): "Work on philosophy […] is really more work on oneself. On one's own conception. On how one sees things." But that should not be taken to mean that that work is only of concern for me in isolation. Such questioning takes place in conversations with others; the problems and difficulties I have are hardly unique; the problems

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[7] Cf. Weil (2013: 319): "One desires truth only to love in truth. One desires to know the truth about what one loves. Instead of talking about love of truth, it would be better to talk about a spirit of truth in love."

[8] On the contrary, Hobbes ends *Leviathan* by stating that the book is written "without partiality" (1968: 728).

[9] As Backström (2019: 118) writes: "there's no morally neutral meta-perspective from which to decide where the truth actually lies. But the point is that this doesn't mean that there's no truth in moral matters, or that it is somehow essentially uncertain; it means that there's no morally unengaged way to know it."

we have are problems me have with each other; what needs to be questioned are also non-individual forms of self-deception. But, as I have tried to indicate in this text, self-deception cannot be understood merely as a matter of beliefs, in isolation from the life they are part of, and a form of life will not change simply because I change my ways, only if we change the dynamics between us. Ultimately, truthful thoughts are only possible as part of a truthful life.[10]

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[10] Alluding to CV: 16, Marx 1958: § 11, and, to some extent, Adorno 2003: § 18.

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