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What *Is* New in Our Time: The Truth in ‘Post-Truth’

A Response to Finlayson

Abstract

Finlayson argues that ‘post-truth’ is nothing new. In this response, I motivate a more modest position: that it is something new, to some extent, albeit neither radically new nor brand new. I motivate this position by examining the case of climate-change-denial, called by some *post-truth before post-truth* (see e.g. Runciman 2017; Krebs 2018). Climate-denial is certainly the most ‘epic’ form of fake-news that our culture has ever known. It is unprecedented in its extremity and absurdity (at least, in the kind of culture I am writing from. It might be compared with such previous absurdities in different settings, such as Lysenkoism in Stalin’s Russia). I examine here the (over-determined) nature of climate-denial. What precisely are its attractions? How do they manage to outweigh its glaring, potentially-catastrophic downsides? I argue that the most crucial of all attractions of climate-denial is that it involves the denier in a kind of fantasised power over reality itself: namely, over the nature of our planetary system, and thus of life itself. Climate-denial pretends to give the denier a power greater than that of nature, including in nature’s ‘rebellion’ against humanity, what James Lovelock (2007) calls Gaia’s incipient and coming ‘fever’ (i.e. global over-heat). Climate-denial seems to give the denier freedom from truth itself, in the case of the most consequential truth at present bearing down upon humanity. The most crucial of all the attractions of climate-denial is then that it provides would-be libertarians an ultimate freedom. They reject the reality of human-triggered climate-change, in the end, because *they are unwilling to be ‘bound’ by anything, not even truth itself*. Climate-denial has been around for a while, but not for more than 30-35 years or so. I thus suggest that Finlayson is right to be sceptical of the claim that post-truth is radically new and extremely recent, but I suggest that it is *relatively* new and has been with us for only about a generation or at most two.

1. Introduction, and an opening example

Lorna Finlayson makes a trenchant critique of the label ‘post-truth’ for our times. I am sympathetic with much of what she says. In particular, I think it unwise to suppose that something radical, new and terrible has *suddenly* happened in the last few years to our politics and our public conversations. Something fairly new has happened technologically, to worsen previous trends: the Cambridge Analytica scandal (see Lewis and Hilder 2018; Merrick 2018) couldn’t have happened, until very recently. But the deeper ideological trends themselves have been going for some time. And it is those that are of the most *philosophical* interest.

However, I think they are still *relatively* new, at least from the perspective of Philosophy! I would trace their beginnings, very roughly, to the emergence of the constellation called ‘neoliberalism’, over the last generation or two. I think, in particular, that we have been subject for a while now to the growth of something that is historically exceptional, and whose relative newness Lorna ought to give more credit to: an attitude of individualism or consumerism concerning truth itself. An attitude that, from a philosophical point of view and indeed from the point of view of sanity, is very concerning. (I think that this attitude can be traced ultimately to the political philosophy of liberalism in its recent form. One sees in particular, I would suggest, in John Rawls’s influential proposed indifference to others’ conceptions of the good – and in the indifference to others concealed in his proscription of envy – an individualised consumerism of the mind whose logical consequences are being drawn by the subjectivistic rhetoric of ‘post-truth’. But I shan’t seek to make that case in any detail here.¹)

Let me turn straight to an important example: Lorna claims that Trump voters aren’t indifferent to the truth-value of the claim that Trump will make America great again.

As a philosopher, one wants to say: this must surely be roughly right. One surely *can’t* be indifferent to truth. This is a conceptual point. The only question can be of *which* truths one cares about.

¹ I make some of that case *here*: Buckle 2018.

And yet... it seems to me that there is a possibility neglected hereabouts. Lorna suggests that it is unlikely that Trump actually will make America again. I share the inclination to believe the suggestion; though I note that “making America great again” is an idea whose truth-value is decidedly unstraightforward! Perhaps for some it really is a question of perception? Perhaps if one feels great as a result of Presidential rhetoric, that could already be halfway to America being great again, so far as one is concerned, subjectively? If so, then we already have a potentially significant departure from the supposed norms of politics as a game of facts and realities.

Or maybe what many Trump supporters really care about is that Trump will put ‘America first’ (another slogan of decidedly vague truth-value and determinacy). Maybe it’s not true that Trump supporters believe that Trump really will make America great again. But maybe he (really) will/does make (some) people *feel* great, *feel* as if they/their country is being put first, ‘at last’.

Or maybe it’s less even that that. Maybe what Trump supporters care about is merely that they will get to feel good about someone as prominent as it is possible to be *saying* they’ll put America first. But if it’s only that, then we have managed to come by philosophical standards quite a – surprisingly – long way from any standard concern with truth or facts, as what ‘necessarily’ motivates people.

Obviously, the line of thought offered above does not establish that that *is* what has happened! That would require a very difficult historical/sociological analysis, which may be as yet impossible. But my line of thought does offer at least some *possibility* of understanding the otherwise-peculiar phenomenon of the seeming indifference to reality – to truth - of many of Trump’s supporters. A phenomenon which, I will suggest, can be seen as only an extreme example of a trend that has been developing for some time in our societies.

Lorna suggests that it is Trump’s promise to make America great again that motivates his supporters, and that this is why they don’t care about him being caught lying. I have queried whether they really necessarily have a ‘standard’ factual attitude to the ‘promise’ to ‘make America great again’. And I think it would sit most oddly with that alleged promise being intended literally, if they didn’t care about him lying; for why wouldn’t they then worry that he would potentially be

lying when he made that ‘promise’? But there is another interpretation available of their not caring about his lying. One that points disturbingly in the direction of the slippery slope towards fascism that an emotive subjectivism combined with ‘populism’ have arguably put us on. It is this: perhaps the reason why Trump supporters are not put off by him lying or bullshitting is that they *like* it. Because being able to do this and not being finished by it (i.e.: getting away with it) are a sign of *strength*. If that is the reason why then, as I say, we are quite close to a neo-fascist situation here. Where there is in public a kind of active despising of truth²— of the ‘naïve’ habit of truth-seeking and truth-telling.

2. The semi-newness of post-truth: The case of libertarianism

Now; how new *is* what I am talking about here?

In evidence of my suggestion that it is more distinctive and novel, at least within living memory in the countries of the ‘West’, than Lorna allows, but not as radically recent as our short-memored commentariat tends to suggest, let me cite what is perhaps the original ‘post-truth’, the original ‘fake news’: denial of human-caused climate change.

Why does this denial exist and flourish? Let me point to a philosophically-important reason: We live at a point in history at which the demand for individual freedom has never been stronger – or more potentially dangerous. For this demand – the product of good things, such as the refusal to submit to arbitrary tyranny characteristic of ‘the Enlightenment’, and of bad things, such as the rise of consumerism at the expense of solidarity and sociability – threatens to make it impossible to organise a sane, collective democratic response to the immense challenges now facing us as peoples and as a species. ”How dare you interfere with my ‘right’ to burn coal / to drive / to fly; how dare you interfere with my business’s ‘right’ to pollute?” The form of such sentiments would have seemed plain bizarre, almost everywhere in the world, until a few centuries ago; and to uncaptive minds (and un-neo-liberalised societies) still does. But it is a sentiment that can seem

² I have in mind here Cora Diamond’s argument in her “Truth: defenders, debunkers, despisers” (1994).

close to ‘common sense’ in more and more of the world: even though it threatens to cut off at the knees action to prevent existential threats to our collective survival, let alone our flourishing.

Such alleged rights to complete (sic) individual liberty are expressed most strongly by ‘libertarians’. For, far too often, ‘libertarianism’ involves a fantasy of atomism; and an unhealthy dogmatic contrarianism. Too often, ironically, it involves precisely the dreary conformism so wonderfully satirized at the key moment in the Monty Python film *Life of Brian*, when the crowd repeats, altogether, like automata, the refrain “We are all individuals”.³ Too often, libertarians to a man (and, tellingly, the vast majority of rank-and-file libertarians are males; see Heer 2015) think that they are being radical and different: by all being exactly the same as each other. Dogmatic, boringly-contrarian hyper-‘individualists’ with a fixed set of beliefs impervious to rational discussion. Adherents of an ‘ism’, in the worst sense.

Such ‘libertarianism’ is an ideology that seems to have found its moment, or at least its niche, in a consumerist economic world that is fixated on the alleged specialness and uniqueness of the individual (albeit that, as already made plain, it is hard to square the notion that this is or could be libertarianism’s ‘moment’ with the most basic acquaintance with the social and ecological limits to growth as our societies are starting literally to encounter them). ‘Libertarianism’ is evergreen in the USA, but, bizarrely, became even more popular in the wake of the (still-ongoing) financial crisis (a crisis caused, one might innocently have supposed, by too much license being granted to many powerless and powerful economic actors: in the latter category, most notably the big banks and cognate dubious financial institutions...⁴

My case points up a contradiction at the heart of the contemporary strangely-widespread ‘ism’ that is libertarianism. A contradiction that,

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHbzSif78qQ>

⁴ In the UK, furthermore, it was a striking element in the rise to popularity of UKIP (which in turn led to the Brexit vote, a key symptom of the rise of ‘populism’ and of ‘post-truthism’): for, while UKIP is socially-regressive/reactionary, it is very much a would-be libertarian party, the rich man’s friend, in terms of its economic ambitions: it is for a flat tax, for ‘free-trade’-deals the world over, for a bonfire of regulations, for the selling-off of our public services, and so on. (Incidentally, this makes the apparent rise in working-class (or indeed middle-class) support for UKIP at the present time an exemplary case of turkeys voting for Christmas. Someone who isn’t one of the richest 1% who votes UKIP is acting as a brilliant ally of their own gravediggers.) See also Read 2014.

once it is understood, essentially destroys whatever apparent attractions it may have. And, surprisingly, shows libertarianism now to be a closer ally to cod-‘Post-Modernism’ or to the most problematic elements of ‘New Age’ thinking than to that of the Enlightenment...

Libertarianism likes to present itself as a philosophy or ideology that is rigorously objective. Wedded to the truth, and rationality. Ayn Rand called her cod-philosophy ‘Objectivism’. Tibor Machan and other well-known libertarian philosophers today place a central emphasis on Reason as their guide. Libertarians like to think that they are honest, where others aren’t, about ‘human nature’ (it’s thoroughly selfish), and like to claim that there is something self-deceptive or propagandistically dishonest about socialism, ecologism and other rival philosophies. Without its central claim to hard-nosed objectivity, truth and rationality, libertarianism would be nothing.

But this central commitment is in profound tension with the libertarian commitment, equally absolute, to ‘liberty’. For truth, truths, truthfulness, rationality, objectivity, impose a ‘constraint’.⁵ A massive utterly implacable constraint, on one’s license to do and believe and think whatever one wants. One cannot be Carroll’s Humpty Dumpty in a world of truth and reason. One cannot intelligibly think that freedom of thought requires complete license, or that moral freedom requires complete individual license, in such a world.

The dilemma of the libertarian was already laid bare in the progress of the thinking of a hero of some libertarians, Friedrich Nietzsche, in the great third and final essay of his masterpiece *The Genealogy of Morality* (for my reading of this essay, see Read 2012: Ch. 10). Nietzsche can appear on a superficial reading of that essay to be endorsing a kind of artistic disregard for truth; but it turns out, as the essay follows its remarkable course, that this is far from so; in fact, it is the opposite of the truth. In the end, taking further a line of thought that he began in the great fifth book of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche lines up as a fanatical advocate of truth: he speaks of drawing the hard consequences of being no longer willing to accept the lie of theism, and of “we godless anti-metaphysicians” as the true heirs of Plato:

⁵ The scare-quotes are essential, for reasons brought out in Kuusela’s article in this special issue.

[E]ven we seekers after knowledge today, we godless anti-metaphysicians still take our fire, too, from the flame lit by a faith that is thousands of years old, that Christian faith which was also the faith of Plato, that God is the truth, that truth is divine. (Nietzsche 1974: § 344)

He contrasts his stance with that of the legendary Assassins, who held that “Nothing is true, [and therefore] everything is permitted” (1994: 118). He admires their ambition, but absolutely cannot find himself able to simply agree with what they said.

Contemporary libertarianism is stuck in a completely cleft stick: stuck wanting to agree with Nietzsche’s considered position and yet wanting to endorse something like the Assassins’ creed too. Libertarianism, centred as its name makes plain on the notion of ‘complete’ individual freedom, inevitably runs up, sooner or later, against ‘shackles’: the limits imposed on one’s thought and action by adherence to truth. Acknowledging the truth of human-induced dangerous climate change is only the most obvious and consequential case of this; there are many many others.

Let’s briefly examine this stark case, climate, specifically.

3. Libertarianism and climate-denial

The above line of thought explains, I suggest, the extraordinary and pitiful sight of so many libertarians finding themselves attracted to climate-denial and similarly pathetic evasions of the absolute ‘constraint’ that truth and rationality force upon anyone and everyone who is prepared to face the truth, at the present time. Such denial is over-determined. Libertarians have various strong motivations for not wanting to believe in the ecological limits to growth: such limits often recommend state-action / undermine the profitability of some out-of-date businesses (e.g. coal and fracking companies) that fund some libertarian-leaning thinktank-work. Limits undermine the case for deregulation. The limits to growth evince a powerful case in point of the need for a fundamentally precautious outlook: anathema to the reckless ‘Promethean’ (for explication see Read 2016a) fantasies that animate much libertarianism. Furthermore: Libertarianism depends for its credibility on our being able to determine what individuals’ rights are, and to separate out individuals completely from one another. Our massive inter-dependence as social animals in a world of ecology (even

more so, actually, in an internationalised and networked world, of course) undermines this, by making – for example – our responsibility for pollution a profoundly complex matter of inter-dependence that flies in the face of silly notions of being able to have property-rights in everything (are we supposed to be able to buy and sell quotas in cigarette-smoke? ... Much easier to deny that passive smoking causes cancer⁶). Above all though: libertarians can't stand to be told that they don't have as much epistemic right as anyone else on any topic that they like to think they understand or have some 'rights' in relation to: "Who are you to tell me that I have to defer to some scientist?"

This then reaches the nub of the issue, and explains the truly-tragic spectacle of someone like Jamie Whyte – a philosopher and critical thinking guru who made his name as a hardline advocate of truth, objectivity and rationality arguing (quite rightly, and against the current of our time, insofar as that current is consumeristic, individualistic, and (therefore) relativistic/subjectivistic) that no-one has an automatic right to their own opinion (you have to earn that right, through knowledge or evidence or good reasoning or the like; see Whyte 2004) – becoming a climate-denier. His libertarian love for truth and reason has careened – crashed – right into and up against a limit: his libertarian love for (big business / the unfettered pursuit of Mammon and, more important still) having the right to – the freedom to – his own opinion, no matter what. A lover of truth and reason, driven to deny the most crucial truth about the world today (that pollution is on the verge of collapsing our very civilisation); his subjectivising of everything important turning finally to destroying his love for truth itself... Truly a tragic spectacle. Or perhaps we should say: farcical.

The remarkable irony here is that libertarianism, allegedly congenitally against 'political correctness' and other post-modern fads, allegedly a staunch defender of the Enlightenment against the forces of unreason, has itself become the most 'Post-Modern' of doctrines. A new, extreme form of individualised relativism; an unthinking product of (the worst element of) its/our time (insofar as this is a time of 'self-realization', and ultimately of license). Libertarianism, including the

⁶ E.g. Sullum 2013. See Wegrzanowski 2009 for a useful analysis of the striking tendency of libertarians to deny 'externalities' (most strikingly damage from passive smoking and damage for burning fossil fuels).

perverse and deadly denial of ecological constraints, is – far from being a crusty enemy of the ‘New Age’ – in this sense the ultimate bastard child of the 1960s.

4. *Libertarianism vs Wittgenstein*

Libertarianism was founded on the love for truth and reason; but it is founded also, of course, on the inviolability of the individual. Taken to its ‘logical’ conclusion, truth itself is (felt as) an ‘imposition’ on the individual. The sovereign liberty of the self, in libertarianism, is at ineradicable odds with the willingness to accept ‘others’ truths. And it is the former, sadly, which tends to win out. For, as we have seen, the denial, by libertarians, of elementary contemporary scientific truths such as that of the theory of greenhouse-gas-heat-build-up, is overdetermined. When truth clashes with a dogmatic insistence on one’s own ‘complete’ freedom of mental and physical manoeuvre (not to mention, with profit); when the truth is that we are going to have to rein in some of our appetites if we are to bequeath an even habitable world to our children’s children (see Read 2017) ... then the truth is: that truth itself is an obstacle easily overcome, by the will of weak only-too-human libertarians.

The obsession of libertarians with individual liberty crowds out the value of truth. In the end, their thinking becomes voluntaristic and contrarian for the sake of it. They end up believing simply what they WANT to believe. And, as explained above, they don’t WANT to accept the truths of ecology, of climate science, etc.. And so they deny them.

As Wittgenstein famously remarked: the real difficulty in philosophy is one of the will, more even than of the intellect. What is hard is to will oneself to accept things that are true that one doesn’t want to believe, and moreover that perhaps one’s salary or one’s stock-options or one’s ability to live with oneself depend on one not believing.

It takes strength, fibre, it takes a truly philosophical sensibility –it takes a willingness to understand that intellectual autonomy in its true sense essentially requires ‘submission’ to reality – to be able to acknowledge the truth; rather than to deny it.

5. *The original post-truth*

Climate-denial has prepared the ground for the growth of the fake-news and ‘post-truth’ landscape as we now, explicitly, know it.

Many of those who are dominant in that landscape are not only climate-deniers, but they cut their very political and/or media teeth on climate-denial.

This is very serious. Donald Trump is the most powerful man in world; and he is a climate-denier, who has acted accordingly in office. Dangerous climate change is a white swan: it will destroy us, unless we intervene to stop it. It is utterly reckless to play politics with it in the way Trump is doing.

So the reasons why climate-change-denial is absurdly-widely found so attractive are deeply worthy of investigation. I’ve argued that the most crucial of all attractions of climate-denial is that it manifests and indeed is not just the original but also the ultimate possible form of post-truth, in that it involves the denier in a kind of fantasised power over reality itself in the form of the ultimate reality: the nature of our planetary system, and thus of life itself.

Climate-denial seems to give the denier freedom from truth, in the case of the most consequential truth at present bearing down upon humanity. The most crucial of all the attractions of climate-denial is then that it provides the would-be libertarians (more generally, advocates of and *practitioners* of a licentious freedom of thought, a consumerism of the mind) – who are simultaneously in practice many of the ‘post-truthers’ – an ultimate freedom. They reject the reality of human-triggered climate-change, in the end, because they are unwilling to be bound by anything, not even by truth itself. In an age of consumer freedom and individual choice, having to go along with others’ truths feels to them too much like what Kuusela (in his contribution to this special issue) calls domination by reason.

We can recall other ‘precedents’ or analogues for this, of course. Compare the Bush neocons’ insane and terrifying rejection of ‘the-reality-based community’ (see Helman 2017). Compare the long effort through the media to dispute the reality of the smoking-cancer link, a direct precedent for the denial of human-caused climate-change (see Hulac 2016). But none of these phenomena share the gravity and

extremity of climate-denial. Which is why I have focused here on the latter.

6. How new then is post-truthism?

Why the change in epistemic habits that this essay has concerned? Lorna argues that, if there is a change, it is because disgust at pseudo-democracy has spread. I agree. But I'd suggest that the phenomenon – this dangerous epistemic change – is itself over-determined. I'd suggest that it also has essentially to do with:

- Exposure to new forms of propaganda. *Personalised* propaganda. The diminution of the public sphere that began with the direct mail revolution, that was pivotal to the rise of 'conservatism' in the U.S.A. (see especially Viguerie and Franke 2004), has gone into overdrive with the emergence and hegemony of Facebook and its use by unscrupulous purveyors of personalised appeals and 'fake news' (see especially Cadwalladr 2017 and 2018). As a result, we may be in danger of losing the public sphere altogether; real election campaigns are now increasingly conducted in internet-mediated *direct* lines invisible except to their recipients.
- The rise and rise of individualist ideology. As exemplified in the epochal, disastrous longevity of climate-denial. This is the most pernicious way in which we are losing the public sphere: we're losing the very concept of it, as we lose our shared implicit sense of the value of truth and as other values triumph over it.

I've drawn attention to libertarianism, as an apogee of this deadly trend. But I would humbly suggest that such libertarianism is simply an extreme version of liberalism and consumerism. A drawing out of their logic(s).

In a way, libertarianism is at least *honest* in its (extreme) dishonesty, its contempt, ultimately, for truth. Liberalism and consumerism are not as blatantly dishonest, as untethered; but they are more dishonest *about* themselves and about their implications. They pretend – in hegemonic discourses such as that of 'sustainable development', 'green growth', etc. – that we can have endlessly-growthist consumerist society

worldwide while dealing with human-triggered climate change.⁷ They do not practice the big lie – they don't pretend that the climate crisis is plain unreal – but their soft denial⁸ is subtle, and ultimately therefore potentially *more* dangerous. They pretend (as it were) that we can keep making cake together, even though the ingredients are running out and the kitchen is filling up with smoke.

People have changed their epistemic habits as they have internalised the values of liberal individualism and consumerism. 'Post-truth' is consumerism *as applied to opinions*. I would hazard that it works the same way, basically, for most actually-existing liberalism as it does for libertarianism.

So I agree with Lorna that post-truth is not all new, not by a long shot. But it is a relatively novel constellation, in that it is an *accentuation* of previous trends, trends that are tied to the distinctively recent form of our malady of 'progress'. Lorna expresses scepticism as to the idea that people have suddenly become subjectivists *en masse*. Sure, it's not sudden, but it is a trend that people have become more and more willing to embrace.

A world-picture of multiple worlds, of alternative truths indexed to individuals, makes sense (sic) in a time of rampant individualistic ideology.

Nietzsche saw this coming. It is part of what he meant by 'nihilism'. Wittgenstein also saw the danger inherent in it. That danger is implicit for instance in the *Philosophical Investigations* §§ 240–242. Our time is one such that we can no longer quite take for granted the deeper than deep *agreement in judgements* that Wittgenstein references in *PI* § 241. It's absurd that we can't. But I think we must countenance the sad truth that we live in absurd, darkening times. It's absurd that people treat matters of fact as if they were matters of opinion... and yet, they do, more than they used to; and I think we all probably know this, from our experience as teachers of philosophy. It's absurd that we are calmly walking into the mass suicide of climate catastrophe (Read 2017)... and yet, largely, we are. It's absurd that at this moment in history the

⁷ That and why we can't is sketched and evidenced in Green House Think Tank 2017 and Anderson 2013.

⁸ For explication of this concept of a very widespread 'soft' climate-denial, see the case made in RogerCO 2017.

President of the USA is a climate-denier... and yet, he is. And perhaps the rest of us are not as profoundly different from him as we like to think we are; perhaps we are so vituperative against him because that allows us tacitly to deny that we are living in ‘soft’ denial. We are not facing reality, not changing our lives as climate-reality demands. (In this sense, I think that there is something right about Joel Backström’s audacious claim, elsewhere in this special issue, that ‘pre-truth’ would be at least as apposite a label for our times as ‘post-truth’.)

In sum, I think that the post-truth storm has been brewing and at times even raging for years, even decades – it’s only that it was not until recently that it became close to ‘perfect’.

Post-truthism is absurd, but, tragically, that doesn’t imply that we don’t live in semi-would-be post-truth times.

7. Conclusion

I claim, *contra* Lorna Finlayson, that what has grown over the past generation or more is a trend toward a lack of *interest* in the claim of truth among some/many voters, and toward a rank *contempt* for truth among those (some in the academic world,⁹ some in thinktanks, some in business, some in politics) who have deliberately promoted a ‘consumeristic’ attitude toward truth. This lack of interest and this contempt are absurd: but I submit that we live in absurd times.

Do we therefore literally live in post-truth times? Of course not: but it is nevertheless *as if* we do. Much like we used to live in times in which it was as if there was a God.

It is demonstratively absurd for libertarians to see truth or reason as substantive and potentially-regrettable constraints upon their thinking that may be sloughed off in the name of freedom; but, as Wittgenstein sought to teach us, it takes effort and courage, and not mere intellectual acuity, to demonstrate this in our actual lives together, i.e. to will to want to see reality, and to *live* accordingly.

⁹ See Read 2016b for support for the view that Post-Modern Relativism is not entirely devoid of responsibility for the triumph of Trump.

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