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INTRODUCTION

“While Darkness Still Prevails”

“AT NO TIME in history have words meant so little as they do today,” declared John Dewey in 1941. Even in wartime, when the world was burning, that may have seemed like an overstatement. But Dewey had a particular problem in mind: what he called the “complete violation of the integrity of language” by totalitarian movements and their sympathizers at home. For Dewey, who before the war had warned about growing antidemocratic sentiments and widening polarization in both the United States and Europe, the problem wasn’t the typical stretching of truth in politics. *That*, Dewey said, people have the good sense to expect. The problem was the prevalence of “complete inversions of truth”—which produce a “state of daze” that persists “long enough to enable its creators to accomplish their will while darkness still prevails.”¹

Dewey’s warning resonates today more than ever. Over the last decade, democracies around the globe have been experiencing two crises of faith—crises that Dewey would recognize. The first crisis is a growing skepticism about the value of democracy itself. The global popularity of authoritarian leaders and movements is one sign of this skepticism. Another sign, particularly

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in the United States, is an increasing lack of confidence in the institutions of representative democracy—the courts, legislatures, even universities. Most worryingly, there is growing dissatisfaction with democracy by the young, with one respected poll reporting that over 40 percent of people worldwide aged 18 to 35 supported military rule, and a third preferred a “strong leader” who did not hold elections.² Yet authoritarians and their followers still use the language of democracy even while they denigrate those same values. They work hard to undermine the integrity of elections, for example, while insisting that all elections be “free and fair.” Liberal democracy, which at the end of the last century seemed secure, seems under continual threat, even as those who do the threatening pay lip-service to the idea.

The second crisis involves a loss of confidence in the value of truth. There is increasing skepticism about whether believing propositions that are true—that accord with reality, as opposed to flattering our partisan preferences—matters in politics. The signs of this crisis of faith are equally apparent. They include a willingness by politicians from Europe to South America and of course the United States to repeat *obvious* falsehoods without fear of contradiction, and a matching willingness by the public not only to tolerate this but to believe, or at least endorse, those same obvious falsehoods. Many repeat these Big Lies online and off, marching in verbal solidarity with their fellow partisans in contradiction to the facts. Yet, as with the assault on democracy, whose enemies continue to triumphantly fly its banner, those who most vigorously denigrate the value of truth are keen to own the *word*, repackaging it Orwellian-style and selling it back to the masses.

These two crises are not unique to our time; as Dewey reminds us, they have a history.³ Nor are they confined to any one country, or politician, or election cycle—their tentacles undulate across the globe and straddle partisan lines. Most important, they are also not as independent as they seem. They are interlinked because the ideas of truth and democracy are interlinked. Truth, I’ll argue in the pages that follow, is a

core democratic value. The more we lose faith in that value, the less democratic our politics becomes.

This may sound surprising, even paradoxical. To many, politics and truth mix like oil and water. No one has ever doubted, Hannah Arendt once dryly noted, “that truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other.” It may even be the “nature of the political realm to be at war with truth in all its forms.”⁴ Wherever politics enters the room, reason goes mute, or it becomes, as the philosopher David Hume famously said, the slave of the passions. We rationalize, we listen to only what we want to hear; we are biased, prejudiced, and think with our gut. We tell ourselves “we” know and “they” don’t, even when what we “know” is obviously wrong. Decades of psychological research have borne this out. The political brain is not often the rational brain, it is the conforming brain; as a result, politics is by nature in an uneasy relationship with truth from the get-go.

Various philosophers have argued that this conflict is particularly acute in the case of *democratic* politics—politics that involves deliberation between free and equal citizens. For some, the conflict between truth and democratic politics is truth’s fault. The concept of truth is just too ethereal, too *metaphysical* to be of any help in real democratic deliberation. Moreover, it carries authoritarian connotations. Here the argument is historical: truth or falsity has often been identified as the sole province of kings, of the colonialists, of those who held power. To claim that this or that political judgment is true, therefore, can seem like an attempt to push one’s own viewpoint, to express power.

For others, the reasoning goes the other way around: it is democratic politics that pushes the concept of truth aside. In a democracy, there is always going to be a plurality of reasonable political viewpoints. Some think the idea of political truth is antithetical to accepting this pluralism. If one understands pluralism as requiring that we treat all reasonable political views equally, then it is unequal or exclusionary to label some as true and others as false. So better to hold onto pluralism, this camp

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argues, and reject the idea that political judgments are usefully labeled “true” or “false.”

These complaints are understandable. The concept of truth, like any important philosophical concept, has its baggage. And of course, *knowing* what is true is often difficult, especially in politics. But the basic *idea* of truth isn’t that difficult to understand, and it isn’t antidemocratic.

In the most basic sense, true propositions are those we seek when sincerely asking questions; they are propositions that accord with the way things are, not as we hope or believe them to be. To grasp that idea is to accept that there may be some true propositions we may never believe, and that believing doesn’t make it so—no matter how powerful the believer might be. Yet this is precisely the concept under threat right now in many democracies, where authoritarian movements are encouraging people not only to repeat outrageous lies, but to *value* true belief less than loyalty to an ideology or even a person. From the authoritarian perspective, if people believe their lies, all the better; but they are also fine with commitment—that people *act as if* the lies are true. This is one reason the popularity of authoritarian politics, even when its practitioners aren’t in power, is a direct threat to democracy. Functioning democracies require their residents to speak truth to power. Speaking truth to power means saying what is true even when it is uncomfortable or dangerous. But it also means being committed to what’s true, including those truths that authoritarians want to scrub from history. When truth is not valued in politics on the Right or the Left, when we allow ourselves to shrug it off, or ignore it, both of these crucial tasks become more difficult, even impossible. We stop speaking truth to power and instead speak power to power.

To value truth in democracy doesn’t mean that everyone must believe the same things. That’s not even possible, let alone democratic. Valuing truth means investing in those institutions and practices that help us to reliably *pursue* the truth—to acquire knowledge as opposed to lies, fact rather than propaganda. I

take this to be a central lesson of the work of Dewey, who lived through his own era of rising authoritarianism. For him, the problem of encouraging more rational public deliberation was *the* problem of politics. That’s because to engage in democratic politics, we must engage with others in a space of reasons—treating each other as capable of basing our opinions on evidence. But we can’t do that if society fails to protect and promote practices that help us gather coherent information. Those practices—the practices of responsible education, journalism, science, and history among others—are what help us pursue the goal of having true beliefs about the world. They are the foundations for the “epistemic infrastructure” democracy needs to flourish. And that is why the biggest threats to truth’s value for democracy are threats to those practices and institutions. When we ignore science, denigrate the teaching of history and the “lamestream” media, and encourage everyone to “do their own research” on the echo chambers of the internet, we are abandoning the very tools that can help us become better citizens, better participants in the space of reasons.

That is why democracies around the world must urgently redouble their commitment to epistemic infrastructure—to the institutions and practices that undergird the responsible search for truth. That means protecting science and history from political intrusion. It means early education aimed not just at media literacy, but at giving students concepts and techniques appropriate for detecting misinformation in the age of artificial intelligence, or AI. And in the United States, it means making higher education affordable.

These are political solutions to political problems—those caused by the two-sided crisis for truth and democracy that I’ve outlined. There might be better solutions. But whatever the solutions ultimately turn out to be, they will never receive sufficient support if we continue to underestimate the scope of the threat. Even the allies of democracy often don’t fully appreciate how central a value truth is for democracy, having

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convinced themselves that truth is too fuzzy a concept to take seriously in politics. A central task of this book is to correct those assumptions—to convince you not only that the concept of truth can be rehabilitated but that democracy demands it.

In my view, the philosophical tradition Dewey represents—good, old-fashioned American pragmatism—offers us the best hope for a philosophical rehabilitation of political truth. Pragmatists are often accused of reducing truth to whatever “works.” But that is a parody of their real view, which connects truth to inquiry—to what we are pursuing when we’re asking questions. The founder of pragmatism, Charles Sanders Peirce, labeled what we pursue during inquiry “concordance.” For Peirce, concordant answers are those that survive the fires of experience, would hold up to rational scrutiny in the long run, and don’t run afoul of the empirical facts. This is the idea I think explains truth in politics. Political propositions are true when they are part of a concordant vision of human political and social practices—a vision that holds together internally but also concords with the facts *outside of politics*.

In our polarized political life, we attach political meaning to almost everything. But the world is bigger than human politics. Facts or truths about that wider world—about the climate, about diseases, about the far side of the universe—are independent of humans in a way that political truth never can be. That is the key point pragmatists themselves sometimes don’t fully appreciate: to explain truth in politics, we must avoid saying that truth comes in only one kind. Political truth is *truth*, and political reality is *reality*—politics can get you killed, after all, and nothing is more real than that. But it is a mistake to think that our political judgments are true in the exact same way as our judgments about rocks and trees. Truths of this latter kind represent a human-independent world; to speak truth in politics, on the other hand, is to give concordant explanations—explanations that durably cohere with both the human world and the world beyond the human.

Without question, explaining these ideas takes us back onto rough philosophical ground—ground that some believe we left well behind. During the 1980s another great American philosopher, Richard Rorty, declared “epistemology”—the study of knowledge—dead and bid it good riddance. To Rorty and many other thinkers of that era, the idea that we even needed a theory of knowledge at all rested on outmoded Cartesian assumptions that the mind was an innocent mirror of nature. Rorty urged that we throw out the baby—“truth”—with the bathwater of seventeenth-century rationalism. *What’s the Use of Truth?*, he asked in the provocative title of one of his last books. His answer, like that of many of his contemporaries, was clear: not much. Rorty drew a very different lesson from Dewey; he argued that democratic politics didn’t need to aim at truth, it needed more concrete goals like solidarity and reform. Defending such politics certainly didn’t require explaining the nature of truth. Indeed, the question of what truth amounts to in politics is generally avoided in political philosophy. Even those willing to say that truth has some role in democratic life don’t typically bother to say what truth *is*—or how political judgments can even be true. And some who have addressed that question at any length have become tangled in metaphysical idealizations. That has caused others to simply punt on the whole issue, agreeing with Rorty that if we take care of freedom, truth will take care of itself.⁵

The idea that truth was of minor political importance may have seemed like sensible advice when the Cold War was won and democracy waxed ascendant. That was a time when democracies and their leaders assumed they knew what truth was and were content to think that people cared about it. Hindsight, and a radically changing world of communication, has revealed those assumptions to be wildly misguided. Rorty was writing before smartphones, social media, AI—and before political leaders who publicly posited their own “alternative facts.” Technology and ideology have made epistemology matter not less but *more*.

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Yet in ways that I believe both Dewey and Rorty would recognize, these disruptions have also made the problem of knowledge more grounded—less concerned with whether knowledge is possible and more with how ignorance is actual. In a real sense, we must all become epistemologists now—specifically of a kind of epistemology that grapples with the challenges of the political world, a *political* epistemology. Truth *can't* take care of itself when conspiracy, denialism, and the political ideologies that promote them run rampant. We need a theory of truth in democracy that is formally coherent, humanly grounded, but not idealized. We need, in short, to take care of truth and democracy together.

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