

There's No Such Thing as a 'Fact'

It's commonplace today for people to loosely use the term "fact."

When invoked, it's used as a predicate for something that simply *is* and therefore not open to question or debate. For instance, when President Obama said in his 2014 State of the Union Address that "The debate is settled. Climate change is a fact." Or, when Ann Coulter says, "It would be a much better country if women did not vote. That is simply a fact."

But as philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has argued in *After Virtue*, the term "fact" is an Enlightenment "folk-concept" that doesn't actually exist.

As he explains, the term was used to designate those realities or truths that were able to be determined through pure observation, apart from any prejudice or presumption: "It was... to suppose that the observer can confront a fact face-to-face without any theoretical interpretation interposing itself."

One slight problem: that's impossible for human beings. Men and women do not have a pure perception that is free of theories and assumptions. Even the supposedly more rigid scientific method cannot get away from these assumptions, as MacIntyre points out:

"The belief that Jupiter has seven moons is put to the test of observation through a telescope; but the observation itself has to be vindicated by the theories of geometrical optics. Theory is required to support observation..."

Human beings are contingent beings, which means that they didn't have to exist. When it comes to human knowledge and

utterances, there is never any necessity that attaches to any of it. Nothing is a pure, unadulterated fact; *everything is interpreted*.

But, as strange as it may sound, that doesn't necessarily exclude things from being "true."