

Reality: Most People Don't Care about Truth

"The pain of our corruption must be healed by virtue, knowledge, and eloquence."—Giambattista Vico (1668-1744)

In the wake of the ["Trump phenomena"](#) and other recent political developments, many people have become concerned that we have entered a "post-truth" era characterized by a contempt for objective facts. Fittingly, Oxford Dictionaries [made "post-truth" the word of the year for 2016](#), while over the past weekend one of Trump's top counselors coined the phrase "alternative facts," which quickly began trending on Twitter and other social media.

While I agree that this tendency is distressing, and though I, too, think there is much to be said for John Adams' claim that facts are stubborn things, I nevertheless find the belief that facts (or truths) have power *by themselves* to compel human actions and events to be extremely, and perhaps dangerously, naïve.

If we care about truth and facts, and want to promote and defend them in the political domain, then we need something more. First and foremost, we Americans need to do a better job of educating ourselves, which means everyone. The need for this is widely recognized.

We also need to cultivate bigger and better ideas as a people. A key element in all this, however, has to be *rhetoric*, which is the art of persuading others to agree, not only with us, but with facts and the truth itself. Bigger ideas, like taking a cosmic perspective on the human condition, for example, can only be effective if they are effectively communicated.

Plato addresses the issue of rhetoric in his dialogue [Phaedrus](#). At one point in the conversation, Socrates and

Phaedrus are considering whether rhetoric concerns truth or only what can be made to seem plausible. In a key passage Socrates personifies rhetoric and has her say this: