

Truth: Often Unwelcome, Never 'Dead'

In March 2017, frustrated by the new president's casual approach to truth, *Time Magazine* published an issue cover with the title "Is Truth Dead?" Its graphics were identical to those of an iconic 1966 cover with the title "Is God Dead?"

Such hype isn't unique. Just last January, *The Atlantic* [published](#) a thoughtful article whose subtitle expressed a closely related question: *When truth itself feels uncertain, how can a democracy be sustained?*

Fortunately, we can be confident that truth is not dead and will not die, whatever our theology and whatever the fate of "democracy" may be.

First, the logic of the matter. If truth were well and truly dead, it would be otiose to assert that "Truth is dead" as, you know, *true*. Such an "assertion" is poetry, or sometimes just a bit of posturing of the kind that adolescents of whatever age like to indulge in. But we know that truth isn't dead. That some statements are true, and others false, is certain.

Still, the question "Is truth dead?" expresses a legitimate concern. In an age of rampant subjectivity, where everything is marketed and "fake news" is easily spread, fewer and fewer sources of information seem trustworthy. Even science seems to have been corrupted enough by politics and money to become suspect on many topics.

To a degree, however, even that concern is overblown. We know scientific findings are sound when they are repeatedly replicated by independent researchers and/or are relied on to make things that we observe to work. We know enough about advertising to be skeptical even when we enjoy it and our

subliminal buttons are being pushed. And while believing fake news is a serious problem, it has always been so.

We want to believe the worst about our enemies, however we define them, and the best about our friends and allies.

Indeed, humans often believe what they want to believe until reality forces them to believe otherwise. People aren't always so forced, of course, but it happens often enough to let us all know that truths express what is the case whether or not it's also what we want to be the case.

The practical challenge to the concept of truth is, ironically, philosophical.

If, [as Nietzsche thought](#), there are no "facts," only "interpretations," then which version of the "truth" we believe can only be an expression of somebody's preference—our own, perhaps, but usually those with the most power. Yet few people really want to live in a universe of "might makes right," and they are right not to want to, if only because it would be unsustainable. For we know that might which is based on falsehoods about humanity and its place in the scheme of things is bound, usually sooner than later, to destroy itself—just as ignoring the laws of physics will get you hurt. The former just takes longer than the latter.

A more urgent challenge to truth comes from what I call "the pose of relativism": "What's true for you might not be true for me, and that's OK." Of course, sometimes that's just shorthand for saying that there's nothing wrong with my beliefs' being different from your beliefs. And saying so is true sometimes.

But sometimes it isn't true. If I believe it's wrong to torture babies and you think it is not, that isn't just a matter of perspective. I'm right and you're wrong—and most people who *claim* to be moral relativists would agree. Hardly anybody is really a moral relativist; therefore, hardly anybody is really an epistemological relativist. But a great

many people get mileage out of pretending otherwise—especially in academia.

That is dangerous because it tends to undermine people's respect for truth, thus undermining science, politics, and personal relationships. But truth itself will never die.

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