INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE
FOR ETHICS AND CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

RESPONDING TO
THE CHALLENGES OF
POST-TRUTH

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The present collection of essays entitled *Responding to the Challenges of Post-truth* constitutes an attempt to critically assess the phenomenon that receives immense media attention in the recent years. The authors analyze post-truth in diverse contexts and demonstrate its novelty, peculiarity, and difference from as well as non-reducibility to classic lies. Apart from the phenomenological encounter with post-truth, the papers in the present volume engage with the wide range of theoretical and applied matters: from the implications of post-truth in education and academy to the role of truth in sociopolitical life. A strong trajectory of ethical reflection is the common denominator that binds together the papers in the present volume. All contributors are concerned with the issues of the moral weight of facts, soundness of judgements, and condition of public trust.

Most of the authors are the members of an interdisciplinary group of scholars and experts associated with the International Institute for Ethics and Contemporary Issues at the Ukrainian Catholic University. Nonetheless, almost all papers are written in a rather accessible manner with few references to highly specialized literature. In addition to the relative accessibility of the expositions, the theme that does not require any special background makes this volume potentially attractive to wide circles of readers interested in the junctions between classical ethical categories and contemporary global dynamics.

Contents

Elucidating Post-Truth

For some time, talk of post-truth has regularly appeared in the leading media of the Atlantic world and beyond. Although the origins of the term can be traced back to the past century, the discourse of post-truth in the present day has been revitalized by the growing power of information technologies, the massive spread of right-wing populism, and the dissolution of Enlightenment dreams envisaged in liberal projects depicting the path of reason through dialogue towards understanding and consensus.

The initial impulse behind the recent increase of attention to the notion of post-truth and related phenomena was motivated by the plain fact that a result-oriented approach to political action is remarkably efficient. It is reasonable, when concerned solely with the consequences, to confine the discourse to pragmatic interests, bracketing questions of truth, right, and goodness. The amount of data that is continuously produced on social networks on a daily basis turns out to be more than sufficient for manipulative instrumentalizations of citizens' electoral rights. Emotionally comforting labels turn out to be more than sufficient for disguising potentially destructive political agendas. The unprecedented advancement of Artificial Intelligence, combined with Big Data and

bioengineering studies, is more than sufficient to question the tenability and truthfulness of our deeply rooted basic assumptions about the nature of contemporary polities, social units and even individual human beings. Furthermore, well-designed orchestration of public emotions and collective memories turns out to be more than sufficient to make us wholeheartedly hate each other, while condemning those who don't share our hatred. Meanwhile, effective use of the attitudes of false neutrality in the hybrid wars of the new millennium turns out to be more than sufficient to achieve a *status quo* of ignoring radical evil and tolerating deliberate assaults on human rights in the name of non-interventionism, compromise, and peace-building.

The array of post-truth manifestations is as multidimensional as it is equivocal: plenty of themes emerge, beset by multifarious ambiguities. One of the reasons for this is that post-truth imitates truth, which in the words of Oscar Wilde, is "rarely pure and never simple". In this vein, both the enormous complexity and controversial nature of post-truth discourse eventually moves that discourse from social, political, economic, and broadly cultural realities reflected in media headlines to academic conferences and scientific papers. This volume is an instance of one such relocation.

The urgency of academic reflection on post-truth is not only justified in descriptive terms of comprehending permanently fluid external reality. As a matter of fact, the condition of post-truth offers a unique opportunity to test the governing imaginaries concerning the relevance of diverse manifestations of truth for supra-individual dimensions of human life. The principal purpose of this volume is, therefore, not to reach a consensus on ideals, but instead to look at the stock of post-truth phenomena from multiple analytical and evaluative standpoints. In different ways, the contributors offer critical reflections on the origins, nature, revela-

tions, and implications of such phenomena with a clearly present ethical angle.

The volume is divided into three distinct albeit largely inter-related parts, each consisting of several independent essays. While the first part provides a preliminary synopsis of the mainstream issues of post-truth, the second and third ones focus on two specific themes. The essays of the second part embark on an evaluation of the fundamental anthropological problems brought by post-truth phenomena. The third part picks up the discussion and takes it to applied matters: it overviews the manifestations of post-truth and, conversely, deals with the question of the relevance of different kinds of truth in social and political realms.

The impetus for this volume arose from the international seminar "Responding to the challenges of the post-truth" that was jointly organized by the International Institute for Ethics and Contemporary Issues of the Ukrainian Catholic University and Collège des Bernardins in Paris in November 2017. Although most of the essays included in the volume have been presented at academic events, part of the concept of this volume is to attempt to articulate the complex matters in an intelligible manner. For that reason, the contributions have been adapted to be accessible for readers from outside of academia.

The theme of post-truth has been revived recently. It has not yet been sufficiently studied. Its nature, scope, and dimensions are still very vague and highly dubitable issues. One of a few certainties about it is that it has to do to the quality of communication patterns. The dangers of a post-truth world are increasingly put forward precisely because of a widespread and growing problem concerning the values of openness, mutual understanding, and trust in the public spaces. There is, however, an even more fundamental though often unnoticed problem involved here. It is the problem

of living by the demands of the ethics of belief such as the duties of undertaking a responsible reflection and being entitled to one's judgements. The temptations to defend one's strategic interests from the pressure of higher-order values, to mask the shortcomings of one's reasoning with the beauty of rhetoric, or to justify one's standpoint by the reluctance to engage with the alternative standpoints are great. The temptations are to be resisted. This is the point of departure of the present volume, an invitation to take off post-truth attitudes when elucidating post-truth.

Viktor Poletko

Part I

Post-truth:
from the Public to the Academy

Volodymyr Turchynovskyy

Experiencing Dignity in a Post-Truth World: Public Culture as a Challenge

Within the last year or two, a "post-truth world" has been mentioned and discussed in the world's leading media with increasing frequency and is becoming a trendy concept widely referred to by the many in the expert and academic circles. However, in the today's "digital world" of "exponential growths" in technology and rapidly changing patterns of social interactions our abilities to reflect upon and to cultivate appropriate attitudes often seem to lag behind the new realities which, ironically, we, humans, have engineered and brought into existence.

As we are trying to make a home in 21st century space and time (what if we all happen to become the new immigrants into a digital world) an effort of sustaining a discourse on the challenges of the post-truth world is both timely and important in helping to position ourselves politically, socially, and morally in view of the emerging challenges and opportunities.

In what follows, I would like to begin by sharing a few observations on the concept of "post-truth". I will proceed by making

a reference to the case of the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity which, I think, powerfully highlights some important insights as to how the experience of the dignity of the human person brings about a new quality and depth of authenticity in the people's relationships. I will conclude by asking myself whether a new kind of the public culture influenced by the post-truth attitudes will be capable in sustaining the liberal society projects.

1. Post-truth: A few observations

My first observation is about the change of an attitude. Our attitude towards truth is changing massively: we are not ashamed of telling lies publicly any more. A lie seems to be perfectly qualified as an opinion not only of an individual but also of a social group, party, etc. The "factual truth" is retreating from the foreground of the public and political space in the face of what is seen as a sincerity and authenticity of an expression of emotions and feelings about something or someone. It is not "thinking right" but mostly "feeling right" which increasingly defines the present public culture and articulates the current culture of communication.

My second point highlights the connection between the change of attitude towards truth with the issue of the political elites and a rise of populism. A shift towards a kind of an "emotional thinking" also reflects a shift in the people's perception of the political elites and their messages. The rise of populism clearly indicates that there is a clear cut division in a social and political texture of any given society. Namely, there are us – "the true people" – confronting the "fake elites" (predominantly, political elites but certainly not limited to politicians only) which cannot be trusted no matter how rational and sound they are in presenting their arguments, solutions, and strategies to us.

The power of an argument rooted in the facts no longer works. The more researched, analytical, and facts-based a presented case is the more its proponent is blamed by us "the true people" as someone who exercises the "fake elites'" manipulative power games. Something just doesn't feel right.

What instead feels right is someone's ability to express, visualize, and communicate an emotion or feeling which matches and reinforces our own emotions. As it seems there is no apparent need to say true things to win the people's attention, it is much more efficient to communicate the right emotion which would make your addressees feel right. Thus, the notion of a factual truth seems to be retreating in the face of an understanding of a truth as a way to sincerely and authentically express an emotion in the public square. It is not so much "thinking right" as "feeling right" which is increasingly counted in the present public culture. Our present day communication capability to almost instantaneously transfer "emotion" to a vast number of people amply reinforces the "feeling right" trend and attitude of the people.

The third observation has to do with a rapid technological advancement and the emergent social networks patterns. The famous Facebook "like" which has grown to a kind of a "like"-industry of its own, not only reflects but also actively promotes and shapes our new communicational style, attitudes, and habits. "Like/dislike" becomes the dominant language of the present days. "True/false" or "right/wrong" options are not considered as the elements of a new communication style promoted by Facebook. Even though Facebook becomes the largest "fact- and data-collecting" factory in the world it, ironically, manages to successfully diminish the value and role of "factual truth" in our own eyes. We are continuously and increasingly training ourselves to express our attitudes towards the facts, events, people, etc. by positioning ourselves on either "like" or "dislike" side.

This becomes a new communicational pattern of the present day which has an incredible marketing potential (in business and likewise in politics). The "like" becomes almost a "currency" of its own which is easily converted into more conventional ones.

It is obvious that with Facebook we are quickly learning a new language and new communicational habits. Our "Facebook language" is image- and emotion-based with an in-built focus on the "like" as a kind of "communicational multiplier". With this Facebook language seems to be a perfect fit for a post-truth world in which facts and "things as they are" are seen as less and less relevant in shaping public discourse. Instead, technological advancement allows for individual feelings to be instantaneously transferred into a public opinion domain. The message "this is what we feel" displayed by the social networks qualifies for a public opinion or, perhaps, even a decision when it comes to referendums or elections.

My concluding observation is about a search for the authentically human experiences and relationships. An important thing which is manifested by the phenomenon of a post-truth world is a desire of the many to find ways for the sincere expressions of their feelings. Perhaps, our public cultures were not conducive (or became less and less so) of an emotional and spiritual profundity in our relationships as much as they encouraged and facilitated an emotionally shallow "surfing" and interacting. Profundity of our emotional life and the depth of the experiences we are experiencing "here and now" are also conditioned by our capacity of making and sustaining our long-term commitments and visions which in turn implies our ability to unfold the truth of who we are.

If viewed from this angle, a concept of post-truth is not so much referring to the times emptied of truth altogether but rather points to an anthropological challenge, namely, the fact that there is a growing gap or imbalance within our human lives between a ra-

tional and an affective self which is often augmented by a lack of the long-term commitments (responsibilities) which transcend not only the present moments but even one's life. The attitude of the post-truth world is a manifestation of the changes in people's self-perception and self-understanding which in turn further modify our public culture. In a word, the architecture and design of our public squares mirrors the images we have of our own selves.

2. Revolution of Dignity: A Ukrainian case for a new public culture

One of the major achievements of the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine, 2014 is this. The Revolution has released the whole of Ukrainian society from any obligations entailed by its previous post-soviet ethos (or public culture) which was a kind of mutation of what used to be a soviet style totalitarianism. By the word "ethos" I mean here a tacit agreement of the majority to replace the vanished communist ideology with a strange mixture of paternalistic nostalgia, corruption as a way of making decisions and doing things, and distrust as a default attitude.

Maidan clearly indicated that there is a critical mass of people in Ukraine who can effectively challenge the existing post-soviet social habits and attitudes on a scale which is truly unprecedented since the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Empire. It is also clear that people's feeling of being released from the powers of the past cannot be immediately converted into new social patterns and virtues. It requires time, commitment, hardship, and sacrifice. It is a process.

The Revolution of Dignity in virtue of its being "staged" and thus lived from within by millions has made a major contribution by letting us make a breakthrough in unfolding a whole new dimension of communication with the concepts such as dignity, solidarity, and sacrifice being at the very heart of it.

Until very recently, we in Ukraine used to predominantly speak the language of identities: people from the Western Ukraine vs. people from the Eastern part of the country; Ukrainian speaking vs. Russian speaking persons; those who were born and spent a larger part of their lives under the soviets vs. those who are young and never breathed the air of the soviet era; Greek-Catholics vs. Orthodox; etc. This is not by the way a uniquely Ukrainian situation. I am sure that there are many patterns like this if viewed globally, where the language of identities is predominantly defining and shaping the public culture.

What was so powerfully witnessed at the time of the Maidan was the emergence of a new modality of communication, which we might call a language of values. It was very spontaneously and beautifully born from the spirit and ethos of the solidarity of the Maidan community. The very name "Revolution of Dignity" aptly reflects our growing ability to communicate in a language which enables us to transcend the differences among ourselves not by simply ignoring them but rather by respectfully allowing them to unfold and enrich our dialogue.

Maidan became a place where representatives of multiple identities each speaking in its own voice met and collaborated. And this is, by the way, another important lesson which, I think, the Revolution teaches us: if we are seriously concerned about our future we should be bilingual. Meaning we should be able to master both the language of identities and language of values.

By winning freedom from the communist past we have opened ourselves up for the design of a new public culture rooted in a different set of values and based upon different principles from those defining a post-soviet (and post-totalitarian) ethos. Importantly, it was the experience of the dignity of the others which moved hearts, cultivated people's attitudes, cleared their vision, and motivated their actions.

I am using the "public culture" concept here in a rather broad sense as a set of consistent values, attitudes, communicational patterns, and actions which are centred around the following questions: How do we as a Ukrainian society portray the future of the country? How do we define and articulate our idea of the common good? What is the concept of citizenship which would connect and leverage our vision of Ukraine's future and the common good of its people? A fourth question adds some very crucial existential weight by inviting us to test our own level of commitment to the principles and values we laid out in answering the first three questions. One should certainly ask oneself how far one would be ready to go by committing oneself to protect and grant to fellow citizens the civic values and rights articulated by a new social contract.

These are the questions which, I believe, set the long-term agenda for Ukrainians and trigger their commitment to cultivating a new public culture along with the social capital needed to facilitate societal transformations in Ukraine. In a word, my hope is that the Revolution of Dignity will be continued in a culture of dignity which will define, shape, and orient the country's future.

3. Towards a free society public culture

An important question we should be asking ourselves is whether the "post-truth world" and the public culture associated with it are capable of sustaining a free and virtuous society along with its (political) democracy and market economy machinery.

Liberal society can't function properly and it would mutate into something very different if it is not permeated by a certain kind of public culture and values. Thus, it requires a certain social capital of a given culture which enables cultivation of certain attitudes and ways of acting reflective of the fundamental values among which the human dignity is of the utmost importance.

Volodymyr Turchynovskyy

To put things in a somewhat oversimplified way, there are two constitutive elements of a liberal society, namely, a public square and a public culture. A public square is a space wherein political activity and market (-economy) actions take place while a public culture serves as a kind of "software" (or an "application") needed to properly run a democratic kind of interaction. Such as, the ways we understand our own humanity and personhood along with a role played by dignity in defining interpersonal communication and in promoting attitudes that prioritize the common good are critical in cultivating and sustaining our public culture and its communication pattern, its language.

What happens if these two ideas, namely "public culture" and "public square" do not appropriately match one another, are not sufficiently cohesive, and are not really complementing and leveraging one another? Well, things go wrong. A public square without an appropriate public culture could be turned into a kind of political supermarket, or become empty, useless in the citizen's eyes and thus an utterly unwelcoming and void place, or, perhaps, it would be transformed into an entertainment stage which promotes "having fun" or, however sad it might sound, it can become an inhumane place of violence, persecution and execution.

In one of his texts, George Weigel claims that the rapid secularization of Europe has posed a dilemma for a modern liberal-democratic state. What he has in mind is this: a state rests on the social capital that it could not itself generate. Weigel gives his own phrasing to this problem by saying that "it takes a certain kind of people, formed by a certain kind of culture to live certain virtues, to keep liberal democracy from decaying into new forms of authoritarianism".[1] On a personal level we might find ourselves

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[1] "Democracy and Its Discontents", *Ethics & Public Policy Center* (blog), accessed April 3, 2018, https://eppc.org/publications/democracy-and-its-discontents/.

caught in this kind of a problem as well. Think of the situations wherein one readily utilizes his or her relationship with the other and thus becomes a "consumer" of that relationship's benefits without being able (or even willing) to sustain and cherish it on his or her own part. To enjoy the benefits of our relationships there have to be a set of attitudes and values accepted by us as a kind of "interface" for our interpersonal communication along with the commitment to invest ourselves in sustaining and "cultivating a culture" of our being-in-relation.

Lord Jonathan Sacks in his acceptance speech *Rediscovering Our Moral Self* as 2016 Templeton Laureate reminds us of the idea that a free society is a moral achievement. Thus, he claims that "without self-restraint, without the capacity to defer the gratification of instinct, and without the habits of heart and deed that we call virtues, we will eventually lose our freedom".[2]

It's important to realize that moral achievements unlike many other things are not really transferable in a way that many other things can be. We might own buildings, land, and all kinds of assets which we inherited from our predecessors but I can't think of inheriting moral achievements from my predecessors in exactly the same way. I may admire them, they might be a huge motivation and inspiration for me, I might feel proud of having some personal lineage with those who were morally great, but certainly I can't confer someone's moral achievements upon myself and become a proud owner of those qualities myself.

This is why a liberal society is always a challenging goal for every generation. And we have to go time and again through the challenge of achieving liberty or failing to do so. It is true that

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[2] "Rediscovering Our Moral Purpose", *Standpoint*, accessed June 28, 2018, http://www.standpointmag.co.uk/text-july-august-2016-speech-lord-jonathan-sacks-templeton-prize-rediscovering-moral-purpose.

a previous generation or generations might provide us with social capital which might in some important way facilitate or, sadly, hinder our generational effort to achieve liberty. Already established policies and procedures, patterns of political life, the quality of a "public square" and level of trust, as well as the vitality of civil society, its values and culture are hugely important instantiations of the social capital accumulated by previous generations.

One thing we should attend to is a temptation to "outsource" this kind of a constant achievement of a free society and sustainment of our freedom to something other than ourselves. The market itself isn't *per se* a source of a free society, nor is the state, nor current technology with its miraculous potential for artificial intelligence. Generally speaking, the idea of outsourcing a "free society project" is an extremely risky and potentially very damaging endeavour if looked at from political, social, historical, and moral viewpoints.

Conclusion

In my view, the phenomenon which is labelled a "post-truth world" is manifestly sending us the following two important messages. One of them is, as I have already indicated, of an anthropological nature. Existentially, it reveals itself as a thirst and search for an authenticity in one's life, actions, expressions, and communications. On a deeper personal level what is experienced by us as a "thirst for authenticity" is derived from a lack of inner unity and simplicity (oneness) of our inner selves challenged by the widening gaps between the rational, religious, and emotional parts of oneself which often seem to exist in their own "silos".

The second message is this. The post-truth world manifests, I think, the fact that the social capital which was crucial for

the sustainability of a liberal society is critically diminished. If you think of social capital as a kind of endowment generated by a certain public culture, my intuition is that we have reached a point at which we may want to ask ourselves whether we are still "producers" of a liberal society's social capital or, perhaps, we would rather qualify as the "consumers" of a product marketed as a "liberal society".

Thus, the extent to which an idea of outsourcing "a free society project" embeds itself into the texture of our current public culture is proportionate to the risk of "democracy mutations" into a kind of authoritarianism (either manifested in by a brutal repressive power of one ruler or by a much "softer despotism" which nonetheless eventually excludes and disregards people's civic responsibilities and virtues). And the truth about post-truth is that whenever we decide to outsource the "big things" (such as our families, religious commitments, moral convictions, values, civic responsibilities, death, etc.) which were actually enabling us to receive our life as a gift and make a sincere gift of it, we end up dwarfing ourselves by self-confinement to the pleasures and emergencies of the "now".

I would conclude by referencing Charles Taylor's idea[3] of the "ethics of authenticity" which, I believe, has the power to build the foundations of a vibrant public culture in which being authentic grows from a person's ability to transcend oneself towards the other in domains as diverse as the family life, education, business, public or military service, politics, neighbourhood activities, or religious communities.

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[3] See Charles Taylor *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Harvard University Press, 1992).