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A Post-Factual World?

The boogey-man is alive and well in our scientifically “enlightened” age: Knowledge is profoundly under siege by a threatening relativism called the “post-factual” and “post-truth” world. Even well-intended proponents of cultural relativism have been seduced by a “world view” that at first appears to be a challenge to all “dogmatisms” but in the end undermines the very confidence in understanding that is necessary for humanity to constructively and responsibly play its role in the order of things. The consistent relativist, like the radical skeptic, is left with no foot on which to stand to question anything, not least the injustices of her/his own society much less injustices in another society.

Paradoxically, a major contributing factor to the crumbling of knowledge into relativism is that a certain kind of knowledge has come to be accepted as the litmus test of education. Pedagogists are feverishly (in the full metaphorical sense) developing “competency tests” to measure whether students are sovereign over a “body of knowledge.” We reward and punish teachers for the “success” of their students in gaining this sovereignty. We celebrate the “gifted and talented” who are most proficient when it comes to acquiring this kind of knowledge. Rarely, do we question the legitimacy of this knowledge.

In the western world, we invoke the triumphant march of the natural sciences as confirmation of the “truth” of this knowledge, and any warning that there is a breach in the dike is derisively dismissed as “anti-science.” Yet, when the dike breaks, as one can say it has with the triumph of “post-factualism” and “post-truth” in popular consciousness, then not even science is capable of holding back the rushing force of the flood waters. Everything, good and bad about empirical truth claims gets washed away. We may, perhaps, fold our hands and hope

that the “ultimate author” of the flooding has a plan for our best interests, but we sink into a hopeless swamp by ignoring that humanity built the dike, not the “ultimate author.”

However, to speak of a “post-“factual reality is just as premature and shortsighted as it is to speak of reality as a mere “collection of facts.” Both assertions are examples of how a little understanding is dangerous -- not only to humanity but to the world. The danger of “post-“factuality is its implication that there are only relative opinions whose authority is anchored exclusively in power, a position taken by Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*. Although appearing to confirm Foucault’s claim that power trumps knowledge, the danger of mere factuality rests on its ignoring of the limits to judgment that can lead to destructive, unintended consequences.

Facts

Let’s examine facts, first! The common assumption is that we get facts by clear and distinct sense perception. It is a fact that I am sitting at my computer writing this text. Nonetheless, it also is no surprise to us that clarity and distinctness of perception is no guarantee that we have grasped a “fact.” In fact (!), there is clearly a spectrum of clarity and distinctness of perception from subjective, nocturnal dreams, to objective, diurnal perceptions of our everyday life-worlds that are accurate, and on to diurnal, objective perceptions that are clearly false.

An intriguing aspect of nocturnal dreams is precisely the extent to which their events are “perceived” as clearly and distinctly as if they were experiences of our diurnal, wakeful lives. One could claim that our feeling of responsibility or at least accountability for our dreams is the consequence of this vividness as if they were events of diurnal life. We will return to this theme in a moment.

However, there is a crucial aspect of nocturnal dreams that distinguishes them from our diurnal experience: the relationship among the clearly and distinctly perceived “events” of nocturnal dreams do not adhere to any causal order comparable to the lawful, causal order of diurnal life. To be sure, there is a connection between our nocturnal dreams and diurnal lives because they both occur in the accompaniment of our physical bodies so that our nocturnal

dreams are not disconnected from the physical, causal order. Nevertheless, the sequences in the dream are nothing like the sequences of diurnal life. The elements, scenes, and events all occur unpredictably even if not entirely incoherently – after all, the events and content are perceived clearly and distinctly.

Nonetheless, we can distinguish between the nocturnal and the diurnal on the basis of the absence or presence of degree to which we experience their events as coherently and causally ordered. Nocturnal dreams are incoherent and absent any predictable causal order comparable to physical events; whereas diurnal life is governed by imperceptible, but discernable, causal sequences that allow us to even predict what the consequences of the series of events is going to be. Nocturnal dreams may have other value, but a crucial value that they have is precisely the fact that they are a sequence of clear and distinct perceptions WITHOUT any predictable causal order, which underscores how important our ability to discern an imperceptible causal order for events in diurnal life is. Nocturnal dreams confront us with what a truly “post-factual” or “post-truth” world would really mean! We will return to the significance of this difference between nocturnal dreams and diurnal perception for the determination of “facts,” shortly.

However, at the other extreme of the spectrum of clarity and distinctness, there are other clear and distinct, diurnal perceptions that are false. A frequently invoked example is that, when one views a stick inserted into water, the stick, clearly and distinctly, appears to be bent. We all have had the experience of seeing a friend on a (crowded) street several yards or a block ahead of us only to be startled to realize when we catch up that the person is a total stranger. In short, appearances deceive. Yet, there are other examples of clarity and distinctness of perception that mislead us so that we have to explicitly deny otherwise even frequent and repeated perception. This is the significance of the Copernican Revolution in the 15th Century (whose model is in some respects remarkably similar to that of the 14th Century, Islamic scholar, Ibn al-Shatir¹).

1. See V. Roberts and E. S. Kennedy, "The Planetary Theory of Ibn al-Shatir", *Isis*, 50(1959):232-234

There is no position on earth that one can take that allows one to see literally that the sun is standing still and we are moving at some 1,000 miles/hour on the rotating surface of the earth. How do we “know” that these clear and distinct perceptions are false -- particularly in a post-factual and post-truth world?

In the case of the “bent” stick, we can simply pull the stick out of the water and see that the stick is not bent. However, to account for our misperception when the stick is inserted in the water, we have to employ a strategy that is rather extraordinary in degree, for certain, in contrast to any other species: We must insert an “artificial” symbol system into the stimulus/response structure of perception that we share with all other sentient beings.

“Artificial” is placed in brackets not because these symbols systems are not real but because they do not occur naturally in nature. Humanity hasn’t gotten them just by opening its eyes and perceiving them in nature. To be sure, once a symbol system has been sufficiently cultivated, it can be written down and perceived by others as a short-cut to their acquisition and further development of the symbol system, but the original symbol system, whenever it occurred, is the product of the unique contribution on the part of humanity to the physical order. For example, we can count physical objects as number 1, 2, and 3, but nowhere in nature are 1, 2, and 3 given with the mere perception of physical objects. In short, numbers are not natural. They are something that humanity *adds to* perceived phenomena in its quest to understand perceived phenomena. The same is true of languages of cultural range like Japanese, French, or English. If language was natural, then, we would all use the same language. Languages of cultural range do not occur naturally even as they are the product of a very natural species: humanity.

The “facts” of diurnal experience require more than mere perception of phenomena for the phenomena in question to reach the status of a fact. It is *necessary* that we *add to* the phenomena a conviction that there are phenomena that are governed by an imperceptible order of physical laws that humanity (alone?) appears to be able to discern – even if those laws are not

perceptible. Facts are a product of “theoretical reason,” which in turn is the basis for any kind of instrumental reason although theoretical reason is not reducible to instrumental reason.

Theoretical reason, then, requires adherence to *hypothetical* imperatives. The hypothetical is a symbol for all understanding that is driven by our external circumstances. The presence of the hypothetical is announced by an “if.” If I want to understand the phenomena that I am currently experiencing, it is imperative that I add a lawful system of concepts and laws to the phenomena. Furthermore, in Section II of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant speaks of “technical” and “pragmatic” imperatives.² This discussion allows Otfried Höffe in *Kants Kritik der reinen Vernunft. Die Grundlegung der modernen Philosophie*,³ to identify four kinds of imperatives (necessities) that govern experience, understanding, and action: with respect to 1) the appetites, 2) technical, 3) pragmatic,⁴ and 4) practical. The first three are hypothetical whereas the fourth, in dramatic contrast, is categorical. Hypothetical imperatives govern theoretical reason, which we examine here. Categorical imperatives will be discussed below under practical reason..

Of the three sets of hypothetical imperatives, the appetites are obvious: if (!) there is to be life, food, clothing, shelter, and reproduction are necessary. Technical imperatives govern humanity’s form of *intentional* transformation of its world: if (!) I want to build a house, I don’t start by hanging the roof in the air. Kant distinguishes pragmatic imperatives from technical imperatives in that the latter drive by human interest: if (!) I want to be a school-medicine physician, it is imperative (necessary) that I attend medical school to obtain the credentials that allow me to practice medicine.

² See *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* AA IV: 414ff.

³ See Höffe, *Kants Kritik der reinen Vernunft. Die Grundlegung der modernen Philosophie* (München: C.H. Beck, 2004), 296-297.

⁴ Höffe examines technical and pragmatic imperatives at *ibid.*, 251-252.

If (!) we were, in fact, in a post-factual world, all of these imperatives would be meaningless, and not only our understanding of the physical world but, for example, any and all efforts to satisfy our appetites, to generate technical projects, and to obtain credentialing for to demonstrate competencies in a profession would be ridiculous and downright dangerous. To be sure, there are more than one way to satisfy appetites and to act on the basis of technical and to fulfill pragmatic imperatives, but the spectrum for fulfilling them is not infinite and is anchored in the necessity that we add lawfulness to phenomena by means of theoretical reason.

We have identified three elements that are necessary for understanding: 1) clear and distinct perception; 2) the presence of a coherent and predictable causal system that generates the effects that are physical phenomena, but, because causes are not themselves effects, they are imperceptible directly in sense perception; and 2) non-natural symbol systems not directly derive from sense perception that make it possible for (and even on occasion require) us to deny our senses. These three elements for understanding are driven by the hypothetical imperatives (necessities) imposed upon us by our circumstances.

Note: two of the three elements necessary for understanding are not given directly with sense perception! Yet, the determination of the “facts” requires that each individual employ (frequently, of course, unconsciously) these imperceptible elements in order to “grasp” the facts. Facts are very precious and precarious things! All understanding is dependent upon them, yet they are dependent upon elements that are not directly given in sense perception. As a consequence, they can be denied easily, and “fake news” can be generated that is contrary to the “facts.”

Post-Factual and Post-Truth Reality

What is crucial about even “fake news,” though, with its exploiting of the “post-factual” and “post-truth,” is that it employs the same, necessary ingredients to formulate a judgment (clarity and distinctness of perception, causal explanation, and symbol systems), but 1) its causal explanations defy any order of consistency to humanity’s grasp of physical causality (e.g., global warming) and 2) it employs symbol systems not to establish universal understanding but to

further the interests of the few -- however taken to be justified by the proponents of “fake news” (e.g., nationalism, identity politics to the exclusion of others, an oligarchy, etc.).

To be sure, there is a value to the world of “post-factuality” and “post-truth;” As it threatens to lead us into the dark night of incoherent and destructive, nocturnal dreaming and as it threatens the notion of “instrumental” reason that has come to dominate our understanding of what it means to know, it can awaken us to the awareness that there is more to understanding than what is obviously given in the senses. This “more” is a “more” of reason beyond theoretical reason and both theoretical and practical reason together border on being a capacity only possessed by the members of the human species -- certainly to the degree that we can employ our symbol systems to grasp universal, causal systems. Assuredly, this is no argument for human exceptionalism that justifies the capricious and destructive use of these extraordinary capacities in order for humanity to achieve its particular, selfish interests. After all, proper understanding is universal, not particular.

Multiple Notions of Reason

In addition then, to “instrumental” reason that, when unbridled, leads to justifying the classification as “dumb losers” as those who do not have access to the privileged conditions that make possible the acquisition of “instrumental” reason, we must identify a more comprehensive, “theoretical” reason that is able to employ symbol systems to grasp universal, causal systems that are imperceptible to the senses but must *necessarily* be added to the phenomena for there to be any proper understanding of clear and distinct phenomena. This “theoretical” reason itself is something that must be acquired by the individual. We do not inherit it by birth as an instinctual strategy for understanding in the way that other animals are pre-programmed by instinct to successfully negotiate their worlds, and no one can exercise it for someone else.

Our instincts are lousy, and depending upon them alone for our understanding and acting is not only foolish but dangerous. Thankfully, we are a species that can acquire symbol systems to discern the imperceptible depths of physical phenomena to conquer diseases like Ebola and to send satellites to make our everyday lives more convenient and launch space probes into the

depths of space to acquire understanding unavailable to any other species on this planet. Nonetheless, it is crucial to note that none of these activities are accomplished simply by “opening one’s eyes.” The “facts” require adding elements to the phenomena that simply are not given with the phenomena. Understanding depends entirely upon just what one “adds” to the phenomena, and the individual can only understand for her-/himself!

However, there is a further form of reason that is not only imperceptible to the senses but grounded in a capacity that we can neither prove nor disprove precisely because the capacity itself is a causality and causalities can only be experienced through their effects -- whereas a proof or disproof requires empirical verification that confirms the judgment (or falsification - an empirical example that contradicts the judgment). This reason can be called “practical” reason because it consists in precisely the ability *consciously* to initiate a sequence of events in nature that nature’s causal system on its own could never accomplish.⁵

With this conscious capacity and not merely by instinct to do things that physical nature on its own could never accomplish arises an extraordinary issue: what *should* be done? Only an animal that can consciously change nature in ways that nature on its own could never do possesses the capacity to confront itself with the question of what it *should* do. As a consequence, humanity is capable of being (but not required to be) a *moral* species that assumes responsibility for its actions and doesn’t reduce all of its capacities and actions to instinct or genetic programming. We are a moral species not because we act morally or because we must act morally, but because we can act morally if we so choose.

The whole bailiwick of capacities here in practical reason constitutes a *conscious* creative freedom to a degree *autonomous from nature* that is complementary to, but not reducible to,

⁵ See for example the video of lowering the subway line in Tokyo in 2013: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s_ysTCD1wo. The workers may give the impression of being ants, but what they are accomplishing is nothing comparable to the functioning of an ant hill).

nature and is able to self-legislate a principle to give itself permission to exercise its creative freedom.

Here we confront the precariousness of “practical” reason that complements the “precariousness” of theoretical and instrumental reason: In the case of “practical” reason, its precariousness is that it is grounded by a causal capacity that, by definition, is incapable of proof or disproof, but whose effects confront us wherever we find a human being. Furthermore, its precariousness depends upon the individual acknowledging *categorical imperatives* that are not derived from one’s external circumstances as in the case of *hypothetical imperatives* because they are not given by or reducible to physical phenomena.

Categorical imperatives are autonomous (auto-nomos, literally: giving oneself the law), self-legislated (not self-created any more than physical laws are a human creation) universal, moral principles that guide actions analogous, but not reducible, to the universal, physical laws of nature that are heteronomously imposed upon us. Furthermore, the only genuine motivation for self-legislating a universal, moral principle.⁶ to guide the exercising of one’s creative freedom can come from the individual or else the individual is not genuinely free. This is the proper meaning of humanity’s autonomy: not that we can act independently of social institutions but that we can impose this law on ourselves. Finally, only the individual can know what the principle s/he applied to govern her/his decisions and actions was because no one has access to this internal dimension but the individual self.

What both theoretical reason and practical reason share is their dependence upon universal laws: respectively, universal physical and universal moral laws. Neither set of laws is capable of absolute proof or disproof, and, therefore, inadequately understood they appear to be

6. For those appropriately concerned that it appears to be unclear how we know that we are self-legislating a universal (and not merely a particular) universal moral principle to govern our decisions and actions, see the discussion of the three forms of the categorical imperative in Section ii of *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* AA IV: 421, 429, 434 and the three maxims of the understanding in the *Critique of Judgment* AA V: 293-294. See as well, Kant’s *Logic* AA IX: 57 and in *Anthropologie* AA VII: 200 and 228.

“post-factual” and “post-truth.” However, the assumption of universal laws is a *necessary* condition of possibility for the establishment of any and all understanding both theoretical and practical, and, as we have seen, the assumption of universal laws is required for us to escape the illusions and dangers of assuming that “life is but a dream.”⁷

In any event, the antidote to the popular notions of “post-factual” and “post-truth” is not to insist that there are absolute facts and absolute truths but by embracing humanity’s precarious factual and moral position and assuming personal moral responsibility for our individual creativity.⁸

7. For those concerned that all this talk of “reason” means the neglect of feeling, see the posting “Reason Suppresses Feelings? Or Moses Mendelssohn’s Influence on Kant’s Project of Three Critiques” at <https://criticalidealism.org>.

8. Necessary for a functional social order is not only the recognition of the precarious factual and moral position of humanity but also a sense of solidarity among us all that is grounded in the trust that we all are aware of just how extraordinary and precarious our situation actually is. Without these insights, humanity turns into an agency of short-sighted destruction. For a discussion of Kant’s philosophy of history and the centrality of cosmopolitanism as a moral agenda, see “Historical Point I: A Kantian Philosophy of History” and “Historical Point II: Humanity as Ultimate End of Nature and Cosmopolitanism” in the posting “Was Kant a Racist?” at <https://criticalidealism.org>.

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