



Modesty and Circumspection: Epistemological Virtues for the Era of “Post-Truth”¹

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“But,” says one, “I am a busy man. I have no time for the long course of study which would be necessary to make me in any degree a competent judge of certain questions, or even able to understand the nature of the argument.” *Then he has no time to believe.*²

Nowadays, we’re told, we live in the era of “post-truth.” By 2016 the phrase was so ubiquitous that it was chosen as the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s “Word of the Year.”³ According to the *OED*, the expression was coined in 1992: “We, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world” (1992).⁴ Other, later examples of usage given include “in the post-truth era we don’t just have truth and lies, but a third category of ambiguous statements that are not exactly the truth but fall short of a lie” (2004); and “[s]ocial media ... has [*sic*] become a post-truth nether world in which readers willingly participate in their own deception because it feels good” (2016).⁵ The same dictionary tells us that the phrase denotes “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping political debate or public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”⁶

Truth doesn’t matter any more; it’s *passé*—that’s the general idea. But neither the phenomenon to which “post-truth” refers, nor the meaning of the phrase itself, is straightforward. In fact, as it is presently used, the phrase seems to refer to two quite different ideas: first, that lying, economy with the truth, spin, and other forms of misleading and deceptive speech and writing are becoming ever more common; second, that the whole idea of truth is somehow misconceived, defective, or maybe somehow plain out of date. But of course these ideas are mutually incompatible; for unless there really is such a thing as truth,

¹ I shall draw here on two earlier papers, Susan Haack, “Credulity and Circumspection,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 88 (2014): 27-47 and Susan Haack, “Post ‘Post-Truth’: Are We There Yet?” *Theoria* 85 (2019): 258-75. I also touch on themes developed in Susan Haack, “Epistemology: Who Needs It?”, *Kilikya Felsefe Dergisi* 3 (2015): 1-15 (first published, in Danish, in 2012).

² W. K. Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief” (1877), in *The Ethics of Belief and Other Essays*, eds. Leslie Stephen and Sir Frederick Pollock (London: Watts & Co., 1947), 78 (my italics).

³ Oxford Dictionaries, s.v. “post-truth,” accessed March 23, 2020, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/post-truth>. The phrase seems to have been modeled on “post-racial”—except, of course, that being “post-truth” is not, like being “post-racial,” supposed to be a good thing.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.



there can be no such thing as lying, partial truth, *suggestio falsi*, and so forth. As I have argued elsewhere,⁷ the first idea of these ideas—that lying and other forms of unconcern for truth are now ubiquitous—may well be true; but the second—that the concept of truth is illegitimate—is most definitely false. There *is* such a thing as truth, even if these days many people seem less and less concerned about whether what they hear, believe, say, or pass on *is* true.

If the idea of truth were illegitimate, it would be a mystery why anyone would be upset by the ubiquity of lying, etc. But I won't return to defending the legitimacy or the objectivity of the concept of truth, a matter on which I have already written at length.⁸ What concerns me here is the social phenomenon of increasing carelessness with and unconcern for truth; and my goal, as my title signals, is to articulate the epistemological virtues needed if one is to cope adequately with this disturbing situation—i.e., to be a responsible consumer of the torrent of information and misinformation that, these days, seems inescapable. These are the virtues I call *modesty* and *circumspection*.

I

For as long as it has been around, probably, people have deplored political speech as often outright deceptive and even more often misleading. Certainly complaints about politicians' lies are nothing new, as this inimitable passage from Jonathan Swift, writing in 1710, reveals:

There is one essential point wherein a political liar differs from others... : That he ought to have a short memory, which is necessary according to the various occasions he meets with every hour, of differing from himself, and swearing to both sides of a contradiction, as he finds the persons dispos'd, with whom he has to deal.⁹

It's useful, Swift continues, to have an example before one's mind; he is thinking of:

⁷ Haack, "Post 'Post-Truth': Are We There Yet?"

⁸ See, e.g., Susan Haack, "Reflections on Relativism: From Momentous Tautology to Seductive Contradiction" (first published in 1996), in Susan Haack, *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate: Unfashionable Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 149-66; Susan Haack, "The Unity of Truth and the Plurality of Truths," *Principia* 9, nos.1-2 (2005): 87-110, reprinted in Susan Haack, *Putting Philosophy to Work: Inquiry and Its Place in Culture*, 2nd ed. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2013), 53-68 (text) & 271-73 (notes) (first published in 2008); Susan Haack, "The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 31, no. 1 (2008): 20-35; Susan Haack, "Nothing Fancy: Some Simple Truths about Truth in the Law," in Susan Haack, *Evidence Matters: Science, Truth, and Proof in the Law* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 294-324.

⁹ Jonathan Swift, Untitled Essay, *Examiner or Remarks Upon Papers and Occurrences*, XV (Nov. 2-9, 1710), 2.



[A] certain great man famous for this talent [whose] genius consists in nothing but an inexhaustible fund of political lies, which he plentifully distributes every minute he speaks, and consequently contradicts the next half-hour. He never yet consider'd whether any proposition were true or false, but whether it were convenient for the present minute or company to affirm or deny it.... [Y]ou will find yourself equally deceiv'd, whether you believe him or no. The only remedy is to forget that you have heard some inarticulate sounds, without any meaning at all.¹⁰

“Falsehood flies,” Swift continues, “and truth comes limping after it.”¹¹

Of course, it's not just politicians who lie and mislead, though they surely have a notable predilection for it—and for half-truths, quarter-truths, strategic vagueness, and the like. But for as long as there have been advertisers, probably, or public-relations people, or self-protective bureaucrats in universities, or—well, I'm sure you can continue the list for yourself—they too have lied, concealed inconvenient truths, and misled in one way or another. But nowadays the sheer scale, and the sheer brazenness, of unconcern for truth is sometimes truly staggering.

In just *one day*, as I was starting work on this paper, headlines on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal* signaled two startling revelations: that the Federal Aviation authority had known of the risks of the 737 MAX, but allowed it to keep flying even after the first fatal crash;¹² and, even more shocking, that the Vatican had been using donations from the faithful to “Peter's Pence”—a fund supposedly devoted to the desperately poor—to meet shortfalls in its own administrative budget.¹³ These examples are particularly appalling; but of course concealment of inconvenient truths is commonplace, in fact ubiquitous. I recall how Merck, and even the *New England Journal of Medicine*, concealed what they knew of the cardiovascular dangers of Vioxx;¹⁴ and how the Immune Response Company even took legal

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Andy Pasztor & Andrew Tangel, “Internal FAA Review Saw High Risk of 737 MAX Crashes,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 11, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/internal-faa-review-saw-high-risk-of-737-max-crashes-11576069202>; David Gelles & Natalie Kitroeff, “Boeing Hearing Puts Heat on F.A.A. Chief Over Max Crisis,” *New York Times*, December 11, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/11/business/boeing-faa-737-max.html>.

¹³ Francis X. Rocca, “Vatican Uses Donations for the Poor to Plug Its Budget Deficit,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 11, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/vatican-uses-donations-for-the-poor-to-plug-its-budget-deficit-11576075764>; Dan Mangan, “The Vatican is using donations for the poor to fight its budget deficit, report says,” *CNBC*, December 11, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/12/11/vatican-uses-donations-for-poor-to-fight-budget-deficit-report-says.html>.

¹⁴ The story is told in Susan Haack, “The Integrity of Science: What It Means, Why It Matters” (first published in 2006), in Haack, *Putting Philosophy to Work*, 121-40 (text) & 283-88 (notes).



action to try to prevent the publication of study results unfavorable to its AIDS therapy, Remune.¹⁵ And as I recently learned, many product recommendations turn out to have been written not, as innocent consumers may imagine, by satisfied buyers, but by robots.¹⁶ But I won't bore you by piling up more examples; there are just too many.

Still, you might ask, what's so different about now, what's different enough to warrant the claim that this is the era of "post-truth"? The reference to "social media" in one of the *OED*'s examples provides a clue. In our so-called "age of digital information," there is simply so much more communication and so much more information available than there was in earlier times—and hence, so much more *misinformation*, and many more avenues by which the unscrupulous and the careless may spread misinformation more quickly than ever before.¹⁷ Politicians, PR people, universities, advertisers, drug companies, etc., have more ways to lie, fudge, cheat, and spin at their disposal than they used to. Moreover, their lies may well be more egregious than they once were; and, I suspect, the audience for these lies may well be more credulous than it once was. For as a result of this overwhelming flood of information and misinformation, nowadays many people seem to have *given up trying* to distinguish the true from the false or misleading; and some, jaded by the deep and bitter political disagreements we hear about every day, seem even to have *given up caring* whether an idea they hear is true, only whether it fits with their own prejudices. And as more people repeat and pass on what they have swallowed uncritically, the more the flood of untruths swells.

Lies fly, Swift observed, while truth comes limping after; "a lie can be around the world before the truth has got its boots on," it is often said.¹⁸ With social media, a lie can be around the world in no time flat. A recent scientific article claimed that "[p]olice killings of unarmed blacks substantially decrease the birth weight and gestational age of black infants

¹⁵ The story is told in Susan Haack, "Scientific Secrecy and 'Spin': The Sad, Sleazy Story of the Trials of Remune," (2006), in Haack, *Putting Philosophy to Work*, 141-52 (text) and 289-93 (notes).

¹⁶ Shane Shifflett, Alexandra Berson, & Dana Mattioli, "'Amazon's Choice' Isn't the Endorsement It Appears," *Wall Street Journal*, December 22, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/amazons-choice-isnt-the-endorsement-it-appears-11577035151>; Jason Murdock, "'Amazon's Choice' Badge is Being Exploited by Fake Reviews and Could Mislead Millions of Customers, Researchers Say," *Newsweek*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/amazon-choice-badge-misleading-customers-fake-reviews-which-research-claims-1485826>.

¹⁷ Newley Purnell, "WhatsApp Users Spread Antivaccine Rumors in India," *Wall Street Journal*, April 13, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/whatsapp-users-spread-antivaccine-rumors-in-india-11555153203>, tells us that this one app alone has an estimated 300 million users in India.

¹⁸ This observation is often attributed to Mark Twain. But apparently he never said it; and I have been unable to discover who did.



residing nearby.”¹⁹ Shortly after publication, the paper was retracted²⁰—the data about unarmed black victims of police shootings on which it relied was wrong. But a month later, a Google search for “police shootings black” *still* brought up a press report of the original claim, with no qualification or warning, as the first item.²¹

As this example reveals, the problem isn’t simply lying; that’s just one of a whole raft of the many kinds of carelessness with and unconcern for truth. Other forms include:

- Lying by omission—otherwise known as “being economical with the truth”; i.e., telling only the part of the truth that it suits you to have known, and omitting the rest. The concealment of obviously relevant facts, as in some of my examples, falls in this category.
- Trafficking in partial truths, i.e., claims which are true in part but also false in part,²² in hopes that your audience will swallow the bad with the good.
- Hiding behind plausible deniability; i.e., speaking or writing in a way so vague or so ambiguous that you can always claim that you *did* reveal that so-and-so, or that you *never* said that such-and-such—even though your words will likely have conveyed just that impression.
- Fudging the truth. “Definite terms are unmanageable,” wrote Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1802, “and the passions of men do not readily gather round them.” And as he went on to say—in words that sound almost as if they could have been written yesterday—“[p]arty rage, and fanatical aversion, have their birth place and natural abode in floating and obscure generalities.”²³ Vague and ambiguous words and

¹⁹ Joscha Legewie, “Police Violence and the Health of Black Infants,” *Science Advances* 5, no. 12 (December 4, 2019), accessed March 23, 2020, <https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/5/12/eaax7894>.

²⁰ Joshscha Legewie, “Retraction of the Research Article: ‘Police Violence and the Health of Black Infants,’” *Science Advances* 5, no. 12 (December 12, 2019), accessed March 23, 2020, <https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/5/12/eaba5491>.

²¹ Editorial Board, “Police Violence in Utero,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 30, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/police-violence-in-utero-11577752464>; Amina Khan, “Police shootings of unarmed black people linked to health problems for black infants,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 5, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/science/story/2019-12-05/police-shootings-black-people-babies-health>; Amina Khan, “Study linking police violence and black infants’ health is retracted,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 16, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/science/story/2019-12-16/police-shootings-black-babies-health-retraction>.

²² Susan Haack, “The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth.”

²³ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Once a Jacobin Always a Jacobin,” *Morning Post*, October 21, 1802, reprinted in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Essays on his Own Times* (London: William Pickering, 1850), 542-52, 543. “Jacobin” referred initially to persons who believed in egalitarian democracy and engaged in terrorist activities during the French Revolution; but eventually, apparently, became a vague generalized term of abuse by political opponents (something similar seems to be happening now, both with the term “progressive” and with the term



phrases offer the opportunity to win the support of voters, consumers, jurors, etc., by engaging their emotions and prejudices while dulling their critical faculties.

- Spinning the truth; i.e., saying something that, strictly speaking, is true enough, but dressing it up in such a way as to convey a more favorable impression than it would do if it were stated plainly.
- Talk or other communication with no concern for truth—otherwise known as bullshitting; i.e., saying things that may be true, or may not, with no concern for whether, in fact, they *are* true—simply speaking to hear the sound of your own voice, or to be thought to know something or to have an informed opinion about an issue of which you really know nothing.

II

I am of course writing for those who *haven't* given up, who *do* want to distinguish the true from the false in what they hear or read, and who *do* care that what they believe be, so far as possible, true—in short, for those who want to deal responsibly with this flood of information and misinformation. What are they—what are we—to do? The first thing is to get clear about the goal, which is, I take it, to believe only when, and only in the way and to the degree, that your evidence warrants belief: more specifically, to believe only tentatively, especially when you are aware that what you take to be all the relevant evidence may not be, and anyway to believe only to whatever degree the strength of your evidence warrants

What this requires of you is, first, that you resist the impulse to believe anything and everything you read or hear, without serious thought—that you resist the credulity that is so natural to human beings, especially when we are very young, but that the intellectually mature must learn to temper.²⁴ This requires the virtue that contrasts with the vice of credulity: circumspection. Since I take it that both evidential strength and belief come in degrees²⁵ I see:

“conservative”). See Oxford Dictionaries, s.v. “Jacobin,” accessed March 23, 2020, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/100556?rskey=L633gO&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

²⁴ As Alexander Bain wrote, the unmistakable test of sincerity in assertion is preparedness to act on what you affirm. Alexander Bain, *The Emotions and the Will*, 3rd ed. (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1875), 505 (first published in 1855).

²⁵ Some may resist the idea that belief comes in degrees; but the point is not crucial. The essential point here could be restated readily enough in terms of how close you come to believing whatever-it-is, rather than of the degree to which you believe it.



- being *too ready to believe*, or being *ready to believe more strongly than your evidence warrants*, as the vice of credulity;
- being *too ready to dismiss ideas*, or being *ready to disbelieve, or to believe only less strongly than your evidence warrants*, as the vice of closed-mindedness;

Circumspection is:

- *proportioning the degree, and the firmness, of your belief to the strength of your evidence.*²⁶

So circumspection, roughly speaking, is a disposition to believe to the degree that, and as firmly as, the evidence warrants, neither more nor less. Since believing something itself involves a multiform disposition to speak and to act in certain ways and not others,²⁷ circumspection is a second-order disposition to form, or to avoid forming, such first-order multiform dispositions. Some may raise their eyebrows at this idea; but there is really nothing puzzling about second-order dispositions: think, for instance, of the disposition of paper, or of bones, to grow brittle with age.

My conception of circumspection is quite akin to the Aristotelian idea that virtues lie at the mean between two undesirable extremes, i.e., two contrasting vices—but has been adapted to allow that neither belief nor the quality of evidence is categorical, but both come in degrees. Circumspection is the virtue at the mean between credulity, at the one extreme and, at the other, closed-mindedness—under which I would include unwillingness or inability to come to any conclusion, outright skepticism, *and* a lazy readiness to dismiss new ideas rather than thinking them through and checking out whether there might be evidence that they are true.

²⁶ “A wise man ... proportions his belief to the evidence.” David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*, in David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 110 (X.I) (first published in 1772).

²⁷ “Involves,” not “is,” because a proper understanding of belief has three layers: dispositional, neurophysiological, and socio-historico-linguistic. See Susan Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry*, expanded ed. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2009), chap. 8 (first published in 1993); Susan Haack, “Belief in Naturalism: An Epistemologist’s Philosophy of Mind,” *Logos & Episteme* 1, no.1 (2010): 67-83; Susan Haack, “Brave New World: Nature Culture, and the Limits of Reductionism,” in *Explaining the Mind*, eds. Bartosz Brozek, Jerzy Stelmach, and Łukasz Kwiatek (Kraków: Copernicus Center Press, 2019), 37-68.



The first thing circumspection requires is that you be as clear as possible what the claim is that you're considering: in particular, whether it is simple or, rather, compound, and hence possibly a mixture of truth and falsehood; and whether the claim is precise, definite, or vague or ambiguous, and hence possibly true in one understanding and false in another. And when it is vague or ambiguous, you'd be well-advised to ask yourself whether the vagueness or ambiguity may be deliberately evasive or inadvertently misleading, and whether this may be engaging your emotions and disabling your critical faculties.

The next step is to ask yourself whether the claim is about a matter of fact (whether unemployment rose or fell last year, whether this drug is effective and safe, whether this politician sexually harassed a staffer as he or she alleges), or a matter of opinion (what economic policy to adopt, whether to take the drug, whether to vote for the guy). Claims about matters of fact, at least if they're precise enough, are straightforwardly either true or else false; claims about matters of opinion are arguable, calling for a weighing of expected benefits and expected drawbacks—about which there can be reasonable disagreement even when all the facts are in.

And before you go any further you'd be wise to ask yourself: given what I (think I) know already, how inherently probable or improbable is this claim? If you watch those TV ads for weight-loss pills—ads that claim that you can eat whatever you want and don't need to exercise, *and* that there are absolutely no bad side effects—you should remember the old saying, “if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.” If you read that the economy grew 4% last year, the claim isn't inherently *so* grossly improbable as immediately to raise your suspicions; if you read that it grew 40%, however, you should surely suspect that this is a typo, perhaps a misplaced decimal point.

And you'd be wise to ask, too—particularly if the claim is politically or otherwise highly charged—whether this is the kind of thing that could be known, even if it *were* true. “Only 2% of claims of sexual harassment are false,” I was once told;²⁸ “[t]he world's eight richest billionaires [control] as much wealth as the poorest half of the planet's population,” I read, “a disparity of resources and political power unknown to any previous generation.”²⁹

²⁸ Think how different this claim is from, say, the claim that in only 2% of cases of alleged sexual harassment brought against male faculty and students in universities is the eventual finding in favor of the accused person; *that* really could be verified.

²⁹ Jeff Sparrow, *Trigger Warnings: Political Correctness and the Rise of the Right* (Minneapolis: Scribe Publications, 2018), 9.



How, I wonder, could anyone possibly know such claims to be true? Even if I understood exactly what the author meant by “controlling” wealth, even if I had some sense of how the wealth controlled by the “poorest half of the planet” might be assessed, I couldn’t even begin to imagine how to figure out what level of inequality there might have been between rich and poor at the time of the pharaohs, say, or in the Dark Ages. Neither can I begin to imagine how, short of Big Brother’s having cameras everywhere, we could assess how many claims about what happened between x and y when no witnesses were present are true, and how many such claims false.

Next, you need to ask yourself what you know about the source of the claim: is it a claim made at first-hand (by a witness to the event, the scientist(s) who conducted the study, the archeologist who made the find), at second-hand (a journalist’s report of the witness’s statement, a press summary of results, a manufacturer’s or trade association’s bulletin), or at third-hand (a friend’s report of the journalist’s report, press summary, trade bulletin, etc.). The more layers of informants there are, the more places where things can go wrong: eyewitnesses can certainly be mistaken, but if you rely on a secondhand report of an eyewitness statement, that secondhand report may be false or misleading even if the original claim was not; scientific articles can certainly be mistaken or misleading, but if you rely on a journalist’s report of a scientific article, that secondhand report may be false or misleading even if the original article was not. And so on.

In any case, you’ll need to assess how likely it is that the source really knows what he claims; how likely it is that he has reason to deceive, fudge, or spin; and whether he is really passing on what he takes to be knowledge, or is just talking so as to be sociable or to chime in with whatever’s fashionable or exciting, with no concern whether what he says is true or is false. (As this reveals, for present purposes it really doesn’t matter whether a source is being deliberately deceptive, or is sincere but himself deceived or misled, or is simply unconcerned with the truth of what he repeats or passes on. Either way, what he says poses the same problems for the consumer.)

Suppose, for example, your source of information is a press report of a scientific article. The first step would be to locate the article, and make sure—if it isn’t so technical you can’t read it—that it says what the report says it says; the next, to check where the article is published (is it in a long-established and reputable journal, or in a recently ginned-up journal of last resort for those desperate to publish something to get tenure, whether it was peer-



reviewed before it was accepted) who the authors are, and what body funded the research. This is not to say, however, that even an article by highly distinguished scientists, based on work funded by NSF [National Science Foundation] grants, and published in a top-notch journal may not be mistaken or even dishonest. Of course it may. Most scientific “discoveries,” probably, eventually turn out to have been wrong, or right only in part.

You’d be wise to remember that, even in the sciences, the peer-review process is by now often circumvented; everywhere under severe strain; and always vulnerable to reviewers’, and editors’, biases.³⁰ You’d also be wise to remember that certain fields, especially in the social sciences, where research is quite often, consciously or otherwise, politically motivated or skewed, and in the medical sciences, where very large sums of money may be involved and powerful interests engaged, are especially liable to mistake and, yes, even to outright dishonesty; and to bear in mind that drug trials conducted by the manufacturers of the drug concerned are markedly more likely to come up with results favorable to the product.³¹ You’d also be wise to check to make sure that an article on which you’re relying hasn’t been retracted and, if you can (though this is much harder), that the other work on which the work on which you’re relying in turn relies hasn’t been withdrawn or been the subject of an editorial “expression of concern.” And you should never forget that, however careful you may be, you might still be caught out and fall for something false or misleading.

When it comes to the claims made by politicians, PR people, advertisers, etc., the need to distinguish fact from opinion, and the precautions against being taken in by ambiguity, vagueness, emotively-laden language, and the like, are more important than ever, as is giving thought to the source of information. One elementary precaution is to check out sources of different political complexions, not restrict yourself to those that cater to your pre-existing views or prejudices. Another is to be alert to whether what you read or hear is reported first-hand or is dependent on secondary sources such as spokespersons for this or that party or candidate, etc., or on other political actors, commentators, or protesters. Another, with

³⁰ See Susan Haack, “Peer Review and Publication: Lessons for Lawyers,” in Haack, *Evidence Matters*, 156-79 (first published in 2007); see also Charlotte J. Haug, “Peer-Review Fraud — Hacking the Scientific Publication Process,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 373, no. 25 (December 17, 2015): 2393-95.

³¹ See, e.g., Mildred Cho & Lisa Bero, “The Quality of Drug Studies Published in Symposium Proceedings,” *Annals of Internal Medicine* 124, no. 5 (March 1, 1996): 485-89.



political promises, platforms, and the like, to listen carefully to what's *not* said: how these desirable-sounding programs will be paid for, for example, or whether those rosy-sounding figures really mean that employment is booming, or only that many people have simply given up seeking work, and so forth.

And, as with political discourse, so with advertisers, PR people, and the like, you can't remind yourself too often that if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Read the small print, especially in drug ads, listen to the rapid-fire list of potential side effects at the end of those direct-to-consumer drug ads on TV; and never forget that advertisers always aim to sell, and PR folk often aim to whitewash. And here too, listen to what's *not* said; and pay attention to what's said with perhaps deliberate vagueness.

III

"Well, yes," you may be saying by now; "this is all fine and good; but it's *so much work*! How could anyone possibly do all the checking you recommend?—life's just too short!" Quite so, I reply—no one can check out *everything* they read or hear. But this is just where the bracing words of Clifford's that served as my opening quotation come in, and just where the epistemological virtue of modesty assumes such importance.

Precisely because so many will try to persuade you to their opinion about this political event, that proposed policy, etc., you need to be prepared to say, when it's true: "yes, I grant there's a problem, and I understand the proposed solution; but it would take me much more thought, and perhaps much more information, to decide whether the pros of the policy outweigh the cons."³² And precisely because there's so much purported information available and because it's so much work to sift the wheat from the chaff, you need to acknowledge that, on many questions, you simply don't know, that you aren't in a position to arrive at *any* informed conclusion.

³² In the U.S. the increasing burden of debt that students take on to attend college has become a real problem, and as I write this paper some candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination propose "free college for all" as the solution. The problem is real; but whether the proposed solution is likely to help is, rightly, much contested, in part because it's so vague. Is *everyone* to be entitled to attend college? *Any* college? Or are only those of the usual college age and suitably qualified to be supported? How, moreover, are we to weigh the benefits of lessening the burden of college debt against the danger that we will encourage colleges to raise their fees irresponsibly, or that college degrees become worthless when everyone has one? And how will those who scrimped and saved to pay for college feel when others who instead borrowed the money have their loans forgiven?



Every responsible consumer of information has to be selective not just in what they give credence but also in *what questions they deem important enough to dig into*, and what they will have to set aside and remain agnostic about. Doing this will doubtless make you unpopular with those whose minds are already made up, especially those whose minds are immovably made up not after careful consideration, but simply out of prejudice—“the blind and furious bigots,” to borrow a phrase from Coleridge.³³ That’s too bad; you will just have to find the moral fortitude to resist falling in with the crowd.

Even when you think the issue *is* important enough (whether in itself or to you in particular) that you need to explore the evidence carefully, and even when you *have* put in the work, *have* checked so far as you are able, you should believe only tentatively. Be ready to change your mind if new evidence turns up, and believe only to the degree such checking as you have been able to do warrants. Again, you will doubtless find yourself unpopular if you are tentative where others are dogmatic, if you find yourself obliged to change your mind while others cling obstinately to their now-too-solid belief, if you think new evidence less weighty than others do. But again, that’s too bad; again, you will just have to find the moral fortitude to resist falling in with the crowd.

The epistemological virtue of modesty, then, amounts to a readiness to acknowledge your cognitive limitations, your susceptibility both to ignorance and error. Of course, “acknowledge,” here, means much more than just a willingness to say, when it’s true, “I don’t know,” “I have no idea,” “I was mistaken,” “I was taken in.” It’s not a matter just of what you’re disposed to *say*, but of what you’re disposed to *do*: to decline to write a letter of reference (or vote to appoint a job candidate) if you aren’t able, or haven’t time, to look seriously into the person’s work, to refuse to referee an article you realize is beyond your competence, not to support a candidate if you haven’t looked seriously into his proposals; and where possible and appropriate, to take precautions in case new evidence should show that you were wrong. Above all, perhaps, it involves a disposition to withhold judgment when the evidence is weak, and to change your beliefs when new, or newly considered, evidence goes against them.

Isn’t this, you might ask, just fallibilism under another name? Well, yes and no. A virtue is a disposition, and an epistemological virtue a disposition to believe when, and as,

³³ Coleridge, “Once a Jacobin Always a Jacobin,” 543.



your evidence warrants; but fallibilism is an epistemological thesis about our cognitive fallibility. So, no: intellectual modesty isn't the same thing as the epistemological *thesis* that any of our beliefs may be mistaken. But, at the same time, yes, there is a deep connection: intellectual modesty *is* closely related to the epistemological *attitude* Peirce averred when he described himself as “a contrite fallibilist, always ready to dump the whole cartload” of his beliefs should experience turn out against them.³⁴

Like circumspection, then, intellectual modesty is a matter of a complex of second-order dispositions, including dispositions to belief-formation, belief-change, and belief-suspension. And, also like circumspection, though perhaps less obviously, it lies at a mean: the mean between being obstinacy, being too reluctant to change your beliefs in the light of new evidence, and flightiness, being too ready to give up a belief if there's even the slightest, weakest reason to do so. To be sure, the virtues of modesty and circumspection overlap somewhat; which should not occasion surprise—virtues often *do* overlap in just this way,³⁵ as intellectual honesty requires courage, or prudence requires patience.

IV

“Well, yes,” you may be saying by now, “but even if you're right that circumspection and epistemological modesty are what's needed, it's not much help to someone who lacks these virtues just to be told that this what they need. Isn't this idle advice, of no practical use?” “Far from it,” I reply. It's not a matter of one's simply *having* or *not having* those virtues. Virtues are dispositions, i.e., habits, and *habits can be cultivated*. Just as you can build physical muscle by exercise and weigh-lifting, so you can build intellectual muscle by training yourself, for example, to make a habit of checking the sources of an important press report,

³⁴ Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers*, eds. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss and (vols. 7 and 8) Arthur Burks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-58), 1.55 (c.1896). In fact, Peirce realizes that's it's impossible to give up *all* one's beliefs (as Descartes pretended to). What he really means is that he's ready to give up *any* of his beliefs “the moment experience is against it.” See Susan Haack, “From the Chain to the Cable: Peirce's Theory of Inquiry through his Metaphors,” *Estudios filosóficos* (forthcoming 2019) (first published in Portuguese in 2019). See also Mark Migotti, “Brazen New World: A Peircean Approach to Post-Truth,” in *America's Post-Truth Phenomenon: When Feelings and Opinions Trump Facts and Evidence*, ed. C.G. Prado (Santa Barbara, CA: 2018), 178-88.

³⁵ Though not quite to the point of what Plato called the “unity of the virtues.” See Gregory Vlastos, “The Unity of the Virtues in the ‘Protagoras,’” *The Review of Metaphysics* 25, no. 3 (March 1972): 415-58.



reading beyond the abstract of a scientific paper to make sure the text really shows what the abstract said it does, and so on.

This will be hard at first: I still recall how shocking it was, when I first published an article in a U.S. law review,³⁶ to discover that the editors of such journals check every footnote to make sure it's accurate, and ask you for better sources if what you have is inadequate—but I'm glad to report how much I have benefited over the years from having got into the habit of avoiding embarrassment by getting the references right the first time. Of course, it's not just a matter of getting the references accurate (and precise) enough; it's also a matter of being discriminating about what sources are appropriate to rely on and what more dubious; of not making claims beyond what your evidence supports, and of not succumbing to vague generalities, etc.

All this is true for everyone; but academics, and indeed teachers more generally, have both the opportunity, and the duty, to do everything they can to develop the habits of modesty and circumspection in their professional lives. And we all, I hope, also encourage modesty and circumspection in our students: talk to them about choosing their sources wisely and citing them accurately, about keeping clear the difference between fact and opinion, and about the need to be aware how emotive language, vagueness, etc., can impede their judgment. And those of us who are philosophy professors who teach epistemology, I hope, also try to get our students thinking about epistemological virtues and their importance.

But long experience has taught me that the most important way of instilling modesty and circumspection is to manifest those virtues yourself in your own intellectual life; for students often learn far more from what their teachers practice than from what they preach. And this makes it doubly important that we cultivate those good epistemological habits in ourselves, and that we not neglect them, take them for granted, or allow them to atrophy. It's fatal to think that just because you're the professor, or indeed just because you're a specialist in epistemology, even in "virtue epistemology," that you're immune from those natural, lazy habits of intellectual arrogance, credulity, and closed-mindedness. You're not. No one is.

³⁶ These law reviews are published by law schools and edited by their students (law schools in the U.S. are professional schools, and their students all have undergraduate degrees before they begin). There is no "peer-review" at law reviews, as with other academic journals; but there is, as I said, double-checking of references. This by no means always ensures accuracy; but it probably means that footnotes are at least *more* accurate than the often-mistaken and often-second-hand references that I keep finding, now that I've learned to check, in philosophy papers.



This leads me to my concluding, regretful thoughts: that, as I have argued elsewhere,³⁷ the present condition of our profession, and indeed the present culture of universities more generally, is gradually eroding these much-needed epistemological virtues and positively encouraging epistemological vices. At present, the culture of universities is downright inimical to the sort of concern for truth that they *should* be fostering. Instead, however, it may be *something* of an exaggeration, but surely not a *gross* exaggeration, to say that the universities now manifest much the same unconcern for truth that infects public discourse more generally.

At least in the U.S., universities are now “managed” almost exclusively by professional administrators—who naturally tend to be focused on prestige, on “rankings” of departments, programs, and institutions, on the amount of grant money raised, on how many students apply to their programs, and on attracting donors—for these are the kinds of thing by which their success or failure will be judged, both by their peers and by the advisory boards that hire (and occasionally fire) them.³⁸ Naturally enough, even if they were working academics at some earlier time in their lives, by the time they become academic “managers” most of them have forgotten, if they ever knew, what the life of the mind really involves. They have come to think of faculty as “employees,” to be judged by their “productivity” — the word itself reveals how perverted universities’ values have become—not by the quality of their intellectual work. Indeed, these managers, just like Clifford’s imagined “busy man,” have neither the time nor the ability to judge for themselves.

At this point, academic managers’ assessment of faculty productivity depends entirely on deferred judgments; i.e., on the judgment of the (usually unknown, and usually unanswerable) third parties who referee grant proposals and submissions for publication, and rank journals, schools, departments, and programs, and so forth. This seriously damages working academics’ morale, and significantly changes their priorities. At first, perhaps, while

³⁷ Susan Haack, “Out of Step: Academic Ethics in a Preposterous Environment,” in Haack, *Putting Philosophy to Work*, 251-68 (text) & 313-17 (notes) (first published in Chinese in 2012); and the last section of Susan Haack, “Expediting Inquiry: Peirce’s Social Economy of Research,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 54, no. 2 (2018): 208-30.

³⁸ For example (at my university at any rate), we are routinely told when a department or team or individual has landed a big grant—which, however, means only that they wrote a proposal that impressed some grant-giving committee; but we are never told what they actually *found out* using all that money.



professors do what they can to please their bosses, *privately* they recognize that jumping through those hoops has little or nothing to do with the seriousness of their work; but inevitably and inexorably they eventually end up internalizing administrators' distorted values—caring more about getting into the “right” journals, making the necessary contacts, learning to write plausible grant proposals, joining a citation cartel, and tirelessly monitoring, and if necessary massaging, their department's or school's ranking.

I can only imagine the effects on professors of medicine if, as I have been told, they spend *half their working time* applying for grants to support their work, and need to be acutely aware of the relative prestige of this and that grant-giving body, the ranking of this and that medical journal, the importance of citation counts. And I can't speak with first-hand knowledge of the effects on professors in other areas of the humanities. But I can say with some confidence that the effects on professors of philosophy have been disastrous—both on the professionally modest who hope only to do a decent job and to survive, and especially on the more ambitious, those who hope to thrive or even to become a “Big Noise,” a “Name.”

Most of us are under some pressure to publish to get tenure, promotion, a raise; most of us can't afford, if we want to succeed, not to care what journals are deemed “prestigious,” nor to refuse to make the changes to our work that are recommended by referees—not even if we suspect, perhaps with reason, that these suggestions are self-serving or ill-informed. Perhaps we join some little clique of specialists in this or that tiny area of virtue ethics, social epistemology, or whatever; certainly this will make publication easier than following your own path.

Almost none of us, understandably enough, has the strength of character to resist editors who insist on that horrible social sciences style of references³⁹ by parenthetical name and date (which encourages people to “argue” for a point by reference to a long list of people who have said whatever-it-is already; and, by insisting on the most recent date of publication, discourages them from keeping track of the history of the idea they are discussing). Almost none of us, understandably enough, has the fortitude to resist the demands of carnivorous publishers that we give up all rights to our own work; after all, publishing in that supposedly

³⁹ See, e.g., *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 7th ed. (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2019).



“prestigious” Taylor & Francis, Elsevier, Springer, Oxford, etc.,⁴⁰ journal may make the difference between getting tenure and losing your job.⁴¹

Our profession’s reliance on the judgment of anonymous and unanswerable “peer reviewers,” on hardly-objective listings of supposedly “prestigious” journals, on citation counts,⁴² and, even worse, on the judgment of those unknown and unanswerable contributors to the ranking of philosophy graduate programs—has left all of us torn, to some degree, between doing the best work we can, and succumbing to the nearly-irresistible temptation to do what is likely to lead to our professional advancement. Recalling that the word “virtue” is etymologically related to “strength,” I’m tempted to say that, instead of building vital muscles, we are getting flabbier by the day. And if we can’t muster the necessary modesty and circumspection in our professional work, what hope is there of our mustering it elsewhere in our lives, let alone of our passing on these virtues to our students?⁴³

Looking back, I realize that, while some of the points I’ve made here are age-old, some, like the role of social media, the management of universities, and the over-professionalization of philosophy, are distinctive of our times; looking forward, I can only hope that in another fifty years it won’t be truth, but post-truth, that is *passé*.

⁴⁰ The publishers like to suggest that these journals are “prestigious” because they are peer-reviewed. I am skeptical: the peer-review process is a weak reed, and in some instances may even serve to “legitimize” dubious fields. This is probably why COPE (the Committee on Publication Ethics, dominated by those big, highly profitable publishers) reacted so strongly when it was revealed that their journals had accepted a bunch of hoax papers. See Peter Boghossian, “Idea Laundering’ in Academia,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 24, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/idea-laundering-in-academia-11574634492>.

⁴¹ See Susan Haack, “The Academic-Publication Racket: Whatever Happened to Authors’ Rights?” *Borderless Philosophy* 2 (2019): 1-21.

⁴² One way to get numerous citations, as I suspect many have noticed, is simply to say something so outrageous that lots of people jump in to refute you. Another is to work with numerous co-authors, so that your citation count is increased along with theirs. And so on.

⁴³ My thanks to Mark Migotti for helpful comments on the draft, and to Nicholas Mignanelli for his help finding references and editing footnotes.