The Decay of Truth in Education

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The Decay of Truth in Education:

Implications and Ideas for its Restoration as a Value

By

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I have been blessed in this life with wonderful parents, family, friends, and last but certainly not least, my wife, Allison. I dedicate this book to my children, Audrey, Ethan, Sophie, and Ava, in hopes that it provides a testament to the efforts of former generations to remain committed to the ideals of truth. While people often erroneously look back on earlier times with nostalgia, this book is not a wishful desire to turn back the clock. I am excited about the future, the possibilities for better lives, and the potential for liberty to expand across the globe. However, I firmly believe that a future in which truth is not considered a virtue is not one that will allow people to live freely and honourably. As G. K. Chesterton said of God: "when people stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing; they believe in anything." The same can be said of truth: when people stop believing in truth, they don't believe nothing; they believe anything. The power of lies is one that must be met head on. I dedicate this book to my children as my contribution to that battle—for if truth is not relevant in education then little else matters.

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INTRODUCTION

Oxford Dictionaries selected "post-truth" as the international word of the year for 2016, defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."[1] The editors noted an approximately 2,000 percentage point increase in its usage over 2015 in terms of frequency within news articles and social media in the United States and United Kingdom. So, how did it come to this?

Throughout this book I intend to build a case for the idea that much of the popular malaise towards truth in the Western world today is grounded in a long-standing trend of moving away from viewing truth as a virtue in education. Before going into the specifics of this book, I want to distinguish what this book is and what it is not. First off, this book is not a philosophical treatise. If you are a philosopher who reads extensively on conceptions of truth and the corresponding arguments for and against such conceptions, do not expect to see these as central in this book. Second, this book is not intended to be a definitive take on this issue. So, if you are hoping that this book can serve as the extent of your library on this issue I think you will also be mistaken. Actually, I hope to ignite your curiosity and leave you wanting to look further into these issues. Finally, this book is not going to hit topics that are of peripheral importance, and thereby being "comfortable" to all readers. While the focus of the book is on truth in education, the impacts that it has on society will inevitably connect to political topics. As such, I will deliberately bring in these issues that some people in today's society find it uncomfortable to discuss. I think that it is among the greatest of shames to our society that we avoid conversations that matter—regarding politics and religion, for example. So, be forewarned: I will look at the relationships between the issue of truth and education, which will inevitably bring in political and religious issues. However, they are not the primary focus of the book, but will serve as important (I might argue necessary) venues through which the impacts of this truth decay have manifest.

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[1] The Oxford Dictionaries write-up on this decision can be found online at https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016.

Having outlined some of the aspects that this book is not concerned with and their implications, let us move to what it is. This book is intended to present fundamental issues regarding the concept of truth and the impact that attitudes towards truth have on education and society at a practical level. As such, specific emphasis has been placed on widely held beliefs among educators with the intent of honing in on how they relate to the concept of truth. In addition, a good deal of the book will look specifically at the implications for education and society in an environment where truth is not valued in and of itself.

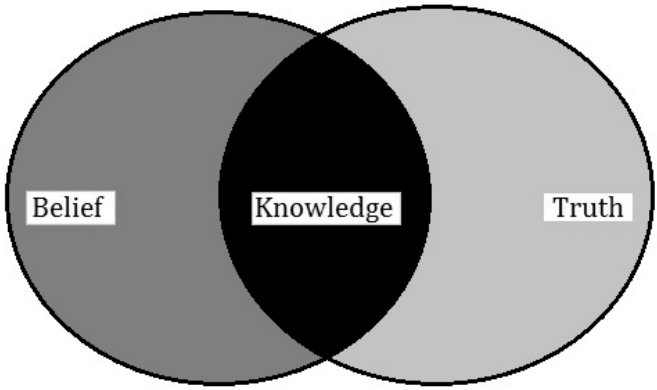
Some extremely influential authors have commented on similar issues in the past, and it is worth briefly exploring their preceding contributions and how they relate to the thesis of this book. Allan Bloom, in his widely renowned book *The Closing of the American Mind*, explored how the expansion of relativism among college youth and the professoriate has ironically led to a retracting of what is viewed as acceptable for inquiry. Robert Bork, the controversial near-Supreme Court justice, slammed American culture and society as speeding on a path towards cultural decay in *Slouching Towards Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline.* The political scientist J. Martin Rochester highlighted the inadequate emphasis on excellence in academics in K-12 public education in *Class Warfare: Besieged Schools, Bewildered Parents, Betrayed Kids, and the Attack on Excellence*. Professors of sociology Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa offered an important contribution in their sobering book *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, in which they documented the shockingly low empirical levels of actual learning that take place during four years of college.

The Decay of Truth in Education relates to each of these insofar as we are looking at the same problem: education has lost its purpose and in many cases is not affecting society the way that it should. I am, however, making the claim that each of these books looked primarily at the symptoms of this educational malaise. It is my contention that the root cause for the rise of relativism (as documented by Bloom), in terms of cultural trends towards hedonism (as documented by Bork), in terms of the move towards equity over excellence (as documented by Rochester), and in terms of the limited amount of actual learning gains made by students (as documented by Arum and Roksa), is the educational devaluation of truth.

This book ambitiously proclaims that while all of these contributions have been spot on, the root cause behind all of them is a steady decay in how

education and society value the concept of truth. This truth decay, which uproots the real aim for learning—a lighthouse, you might say—leaves educational institutions at the mercy of the ebb and flow of popular opinion. Consequently, educational institutions without that "lighthouse" follow many divergent paths that distract from the primary aim for learning—getting one's understanding of things to be as close as possible to what is actually true about those things. Fig. 1 below illustrates this overlap and how truth is related to what we believe and what we learn as knowledge.

Fig. 1. Belief, truth, and knowledge



It is in the zone of overlap where actual knowledge resides—the intersection of belief (one's personal understanding of a phenomena, event, etc.) and truth (the actual reality of the phenomena, event, idea, etc.). If someone believes that they know something—say, for instance, they believe that the Holocaust was a hoax—that is *not* knowledge because it is not in accord with reality, or the truth. In this case, the person holds "false knowledge," a belief that is not true. This person is very likely to delude themselves by reading cherry-picked sources and then using their prior belief to explain away any information that doesn't fit with their belief. Imagine this same person encounters an image shared with them depicting a mass grave from the death camp from Auschwitz-Birkenau. The person might suggest the picture was hoaxed, and justify this by pointing out how many images are manipulated by people today. They may further show you how they can, on their phone, manipulate a photograph thinking they have delivered a *coup de grâce* to this piece of evidence. Since these justifications affirm

his or her earlier belief, the person is likely to leave the engagement resolved that such camps never existed and hold to the initial belief. But keep in mind here that this person believes that he or she "knows" that the Holocaust is not real. As a result, this person has a competing claim to knowledge. If you do not believe that knowledge can be objectively true you cannot dispute this. How are we to proclaim that Holocaust denial is nonsense on one hand and affirm that all things can be relative to a person, place, etc. on the other? The simple answer is we cannot. These contradictory ideas, discouragingly, are affirmed today by many ostensibly educated persons. Knowledge in the sense that it matters in education, teaching, and learning cannot include perceived knowledge of things that are false.

Throughout this book I will seek to demonstrate the absurdity of various perversions of truth and their subsequent implications. In an environment where truth is not considered as among the highest of virtues, such irrational reason as that displayed by our Holocaust denier proliferates. Why? Because if there is no consistent standard, then anything goes so long as it can be explained to some extent. And thanks to the advent of the internet, you can find "evidence" to support just about any idiotic claim. In such a relativistic environment a person can *experience* decades of "learning" without building a sense that their knowledge is only true knowledge insofar as it relates to reality rather than that which they have "experienced" or been exposed to. So, in education specifically, aligning one's beliefs as closely as possible to the truth of things truth must be the ultimate goal.

My purposes in writing this book are three-fold: first, I want to make it evident to the reader that how educators understand truth has significant implications on their practice. Second, I intend to establish that in education and society today, truth is treated inconsequentially. Third, I want to offer reflections on the implications this waning respect for truth has had and opportunities to change this in one's own sphere of influence. Having laid out my case for these three foci, I will reflect on specific steps and ideas we can take to turn back this assault on truth in our schools.

It is important to note that, given these purposes, this book is not written to engage in debate with philosophers where we drive away many readers with big words like epistemology, ontology, and so forth. However, these concepts are important so, when addressed, they will be presented in a straightforward manner so that readers understand them and their relationship to the topics at hand, and can use that to further consider my

argument. I will work to provide what information is needed for the common intellectual reader to make sense of the ideas so you can consider them in connection to your situation. Additionally, given the three-fold purpose of this book, you will notice that I have deliberately placed a large emphasis on the implications of this truth decay. This is important in that it demonstrates the ripple effect this devaluation of truth in education has already had on society, and allows us to consider with specific examples where such a view of truth leads.

The structure of the book is intended to accommodate this three-fold purpose. Chapter one will provide a brief exploration of the concept of truth and provide a justification for the importance our view of truth has. In doing so, this first chapter will provide a basic foundation from which the remainder of this book can build. It will, in turn, help you to build a framework so that you can see that the way people hold truth impacts their behaviour, and consequently impacts educational practice. Chapter two will present the assumptions and viewpoints that dominate the educational landscape today, paying particular attention to their implications for truth. This chapter seeks to underscore examples in which contemporary education does not hold truth as a value in and of itself. Chapter three will expand on this demise of truth in educational circles and consider specific illustrations of the implications of this truth decay with regards to teaching and learning. Chapter four will then take a slight shift of focus and explore, in greater depth, one particular educational construct—constructivism. In the chapter, I will delineate between divergent variations of constructivism and consider how misconceived representations and applications of this idea promote the teaching of relativism. Having focused thus far on the educational side of the issue, in chapter five I will turn to illustrations of this decline in truth as they manifest in culture and society. In doing so, I hope to provide specific examples of the impacts these beliefs, widely held in educational circles, are having across the larger scope of society. Then, in chapter six, I will provide a series of ideas that should be implemented or supported from your context to thwart this decay of truth and seek the restoration of truth as a virtue in education. Finally, the conclusion will summarize the major arguments of this book, revisit its purposes, and offer some musings on where to go from here.

Since the book is intended to speak to a popular audience I will write to be concise, clear, and coherent in my message and to build a case herein that is aimed at having a practical interest for and connection to its readers. Throughout the book I will utilize footnotes to point readers to relevant

academic references and popular sources, and also add commentary for those interested in going into these conceptual issues at a deeper level. If you are not interested in diving into these footnotes you will be able to capture all that is intended within the main narrative, but I strongly encourage all readers to check the footnotes out.

I am deeply indebted to the many people—academics, editors, colleagues, friends, and family alike—who have offered valuable insight, critiques, and considerations for the continued revision of this book. In particular, I want to thank my wife, Allison, and my children Audrey, Ethan, Sophie, and Ava, whom I have spent countless hours away from, reading, writing, revising, and reflecting on this issue. I dedicate this book to my children, for the pursuit of truth is something that I hope each of you will grow to revere, as it will be something that will be fought over for years to come. I hope that my contribution to this struggle opens up the minds of those who have not considered it before, and while I do not anticipate that this book will settle these issues, I intend to lay a path that will promote continued engagement on this issue of paramount significance. Finally, I hope that readers will find the book compelling and challenging while at the same time filled with many opportunities for personal and systemic reflection on where we should go from here.

CHAPTER ONE

WHY TRUTH MATTERS

Truth, like gold, is to be obtained not by its growth, but by washing away from it all that is not gold.

—Leo Tolstoy

Leo Tolstoy was a prolific Russian author who penned many short stories and contributions to philosophy, and is best known for *War and Peace*. He experienced great changes in his lifetime and his work is no doubt a product of the circumstances and experiences of his life. He witnessed the Crimean War, struggled with moral issues, and authored many words of wisdom in the midst of those challenges. Tolstoy went from a man who dropped out of his university studies to joining the army, converting to Christianity, and then, completing his transformation, he became a radical pacifist. His story and the opening quote serve as a nice illustration for the introductory words to this book.

Like Tolstoy, each of us experience a good deal of transformation in life. In the world in which we live, our lives have no doubt been changed in many ways we had not anticipated. The information and communication revolutions of the late twentieth century have led to the dizzying pace of the ceaseless pursuit of anything new. And it is against this backdrop that the events surrounding the decay of truth in our society have unravelled. In this rapid pace of seemingly new growth in what we know there is an increasing sense that knowledge is being created so fast that past knowledge is becoming obsolete. Such a claim is a myth that is sadly very commonly propagated in education. It is a myth because it assumes the new things we know seem to somehow make the knowledge of past things no longer relevant.[1] This is not accurate. Focusing on the intentions for this book, as Tolstoy notes in the opening quote, the growth of truth is not

[1] For a fuller exploration of this myth (along with many others) check out Pedro DeBruyckere, Paul Kirschner, and Casper Hulshof, *Urban Myths in Teaching and Learning* (2015) (I will address a few of these commonly held myths within this book, but it is a wonderful book anyone interested in education should own).

so important as the washing away of all that is not true but that gets passed for it. In our age, this is perhaps the central challenge we must deal with, for it undergirds almost everything else we do. We live in a society marked by deception, delusion, and massive implicit efforts that tend us towards a heightened sense of narcissism. Each of these characteristics—deception, delusion, and narcissism—will be explored in this book because they make the belief of untrue things easier. If truth is to be held by people across society as insignificant then anything goes, and we are well on a path towards nihilism.

A Personal Anecdote

During my career as a K-12 history teacher I consistently dealt with students' inevitable naivety about history and, quite frankly, their utter ignorance with regards to knowledge of history within its appropriate historical context. So, let me begin with an example of a lesson I used to share with my class early in the semester. This activity was intended to set the stage for what was to come, to help prepare students to look for a nuanced understanding of the past, and to help them appreciate the hard work and value of historical inquiry. In sharing this personal example, I hope it will help situate you as we dive into this book.

At some point during the first week of classes, I would open up by writing the following on the board:

Woman without her man
is nothing

Once it was written, I would ask students to look at it silently and be prepared to respond to some questions about it. After fifteen seconds or so of silence, and some giggles, I would call on someone. "What does this mean?" I would ask? I would get a variety of interesting replies from the students. Some would say, "well … since man is in woman, it is simply saying that without man, wo-man is incomplete!" Others would read it more literally and say, "Well … I guess it means that whoever said it was a sexist and he is saying that women are nothing without having a man." The conversation would continue for a while and then I would punctuate it to change the discussion. I would now adjust it on the board so that it read:

Woman, without her, man is nothing

Now, some of the students who were timid earlier at the wording were hooting and hollering with excitement. With two commas I had completely flipped the interpreted meaning of the passage, and this was not lost on the students. Once we had discussed how this was different from the first one we would typically close with a commentary about how important it was to recognize that history is the historian's best attempt to explain the past based on the evidence that is available. Consequently, since there are different perspectives, properly interpreting history requires interacting with frequently divergent perspectives to build a historical argument. This lesson was universally received positively by students and observing educators alike.[2] Furthermore, it provided a wonderful segue into an analysis of an early course historical issue by looking at a few carefully chosen and seemingly conflicting primary sources.[3] Unfortunately, because I left the activity at that point, I left my students with a tacit, and inadvertent, support for a relativistic view of history, and of knowledge in general. The point that they took away was that language could mean multiple things, whereas I had hoped to convey something different. While things could mean multiple things, authors intend for them to mean something specific. My intended outcome was to instil in the students a sense that we needed to put in hard work to accurately understand what something means in its original intent, first and foremost.

This became more obvious to me over time as I noticed that students were becoming increasingly relativistic in their responses. However, I have come to realize that this relativistic attitude goes far deeper than simply my lesson and its consequences. The students have been fed various activities such as this one which fostered a growing belief that knowledge is less important than skill. And with the increased emphasis on student-centred learning there comes a frequently used—and erroneous—approach whereby students are asked to opine what something means *to them* first and foremost. Increasingly over my lifetime, the combination of these factors has led to a presumed "best practice" where students are asked to apply everything they learn to their own life and through their own perspectives as the ultimate goal for learning. Such an attitude works directly against a commitment to the pursuit of truth, however, as we will see throughout this book.

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[2] If you are a teacher being evaluated, feel free to steal this and use it as a go-to lesson—I have received lots of high marks for it ☺.

[3] I used this lesson most often while teaching American history, given it typically began with emphasizing the arrival of Columbus and the impacts of his voyage, which was the usual topic for this opening primary source activity.

I noticed this in my own reflections as a teacher, and so, over time, I expanded the lesson to focus on the reality I wanted the students to face. Getting as close to objective truth as possible was the primary focus of ethical and good historical inquiry. The problem was—and is—that getting as close to objective truth as possible is hard work! Indeed, in many cases we are not going to be one hundred percent certain of what is true, but does that mean that truth does not exist? No. Furthermore, anyone who has worked with students knows that when a learning experience requires relevant and broad background knowledge, a strong comprehension of the situation's full context, careful attention to detail, and hard work, it is far less appealing to students than a request to share their perspective or feelings. But let's not pin the blame on the students alone, for to whom among us does that not apply? Sharing your feelings is easy. Sharing your perspective is easy. Taking the time and hard work necessary to obtain an accurate understanding of reality is difficult. And this is, without a doubt, one of the great challenges that education faces; I may argue the greatest challenge, but that is for another book.

Truth and Education

The pursuit of truth is a lifelong endeavour. It is not one that ever relinquishes, nor can we expect to achieve total understanding because we are finite creatures. This pursuit is always predicated upon the information that one has available. It requires the deliberate sorting through of the available information, the careful discernment of what is relevant and what is not with regards to the specific question one is seeking to answer, and constant attention to authorial intent. This has become increasingly difficult in our technologically infused society. We used to live in a world whose greatest learning obstacle was the problem of information scarcity. In such an environment, access to information was controlled by educators who were (hopefully) trained in identifying appropriate sources to use and integrate into the learning environment. Of course, there were countless instances in which an educator could skew what they presented, but a well-trained educator who cared about whether their students' understandings were close to reality kept much of that in check. However, that is no longer the great challenge. Now this has been flipped on its head, in that we have rapidly transitioned to an environment in which our greatest learning obstacle is no longer information scarcity but the problem of information overload. Filtering through the cacophony of voices that are readily at our fingertips in today's climate is increasingly difficult. The sifting of sources into what is meaningful and meaningless, what is consequential and trivial,

and what is true and false, is the most important challenge we all must deal with in this new environment.

This challenge is exacerbated by the fact that we have to keep at bay some natural tendencies within us by which we seek to make reality fit with our preconceived notions. Blaise Pascal said of people several centuries ago that we "almost invariably arrive at [our] beliefs not on the basis of proof but on the basis of what [we] find attractive." His quote is illustrative of so much we experience in interacting with others with whom we disagree. More importantly, this tendency is becoming increasingly established in empirical research on how we learn. We have a tendency to confirm what we already believe.[4]

This tendency has significant consequences for teaching and learning. What is attractive to someone may or may not be attractive to another. As such, we are very often left with beliefs that are utterly contradictory to one another. So, how are we to resolve such differences? The traditional answer to that question is that we must seek out the truth of the matter using logic. That is to say that one would evaluate the claims as they are made and on the basis of the evidence provided in support of them. Those claims would then be compared to the way things actually are and competing claims. In the scientific realm this pursuit of truth within the natural world has ushered in a massive expansion of our knowledge of the universe and the planet. Things get muddy when we wade into philosophically questionable areas, such as whether one is to assume nature is all there is and whether that begs the question regarding what the evidence points to. Even in those "muddy" areas an airtight, logical argument that has more supporting evidence than its negation can be held as true by a reasonable person. But in any account, this pursuit of truth, and accurate understanding, has certainly been a positive for humankind on the whole.

Unfortunately, in our contemporary world there has been a degradation of respect for truth as a virtue that is having catastrophic effects on schooling and society. In particular, within educational fields students are not taught that truth is a goal for learning. Indeed, they are often taught that truth is meaningless or that truth is a tool used by the powerful to oppress others. In many cases they are taught that everything is relative and thus that

[4] This is referred to as confirmation bias. I will explore it more throughout this book, but a good resource for an introduction is Daniel Willingham's *When Can You Trust the Experts?* (2012).

nothing can be known with any certainty. Others are taught that there are no facts, only interpretations. Are these assertions warranted? Before we dive into the implications of truth in education and society we must begin by presenting a concise and clear account of truth as a concept and how humans have interacted with it.[5]

A Brief Overview of Truth

Throughout time, humans have pondered on what is true, what is right, and what is worthy of being done. Because of our human condition, it is unsurprising that there has been an ongoing exchange in the philosophical arena that has provided a range of theories of truth. In this brief overview I will capture just the basics of these issues to equip readers with a frame of reference. From this frame of reference you can cross examine my reflections and render a judgment of my argument on the merits of its alignment with what is true.

A theory of truth is supposed to tell us on what basis we are to say a belief held or claimed by someone is correct. There are also subsidiary questions of "how one comes to know what is true?" versus questions of "the nature of truth." These diverse types of questions fall into different realms of knowledge (the former epistemology, the latter ontology). In what follows in this section, I hope to clarify common views of truth and also equip readers with enough philosophical foundations that they can understand parallels and divergences across these topics and in their relationship to the pursuit of truth. The reason it is important to distinguish between epistemology and ontology is because most research that is done on teaching and learning studies how we come to know what we do (epistemology), and in most cases does not address the ontological foundation of truth but rather takes it as a presupposition.[6] As such, it is

[5] I would like to note that this topic is something worthy of an entire book itself and this contribution is intended to be more on the practical side, so our exploration will cursorily highlight important philosophical aspects of truth and reflect on why they matter. For a more comprehensive look into truth through a philosophical lens I recommend Marian David's "Theories of Truth" (2004), and for a specific exploration of the correspondence theory of truth consider Joshua Rasmussen's "Defending the Correspondence Theory of Truth" (2014).

[6] A presupposition is something that one affirms but does not seek to establish. Rather, it is assumed as true and from there the exploration moves but its legitimacy is never questioned. Everyone has presuppositions; they are not bad in and of themselves, but if we don't mention them they are often taken for granted.

important to understand some of these notions so that they can be appropriately connected and disconnected given the specific context of what is being referred to.

In terms of ontological questions of truth—the nature of truth—there have been a variety of theories for what is true. I will begin with the most commonly held, historically, and the one to which I subscribe—the correspondence theory of truth. At its simplest formulation, the correspondence theory of truth asserts that truth is to be explained in terms of its relation to reality. For instance, take the following statement that I am making about what I am doing right now:

I am typing my thoughts on a computer

According to the correspondence theory of truth, the truth of that statement is to be weighed against whether or not there is a machine (a computer in English), which I am using in the real world (assuming I am a real person and we do not live in the Matrix[7]), that I am typing on (a physical action) to narrate my thoughts. If I am instead using some sort of software that takes my oral narration and types it in for me then my statement would have been false. It would require some qualification such as: "I am using software to record my thoughts on a computer."[8]

Now, some have criticized the correspondence theory on the grounds that what I call a computer may vary from location to location, but this argument is utterly irrelevant. In order for this criticism to hold, translation of any language to another would be rendered completely impossible. However, languages *are* translated from one to another, and it is precisely

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For instance, virtually everyone I know has a presupposition that they are a real, independent mind who is able to make his or her own decisions. However, we could be living in *The Matrix* and literally be a program that makes us think we are real! I think that is absurd but I cannot prove it scientifically, so it is an assumption/presupposition.

[7] If this does not make sense please check out the movie *The Matrix* (1999). In effect, the movie plot unfolds so that the entire world we inhabit is an illusion and that we really live in a "matrix" or network that we are plugged into (this is woefully inadequate but hopefully provides enough explanation that the context makes sense. Check out the movie and its sequels, they are interesting to say the least!)

[8] Not that it is of importance, but I am indeed typing on a computer and not using some form of speech recognition software, so any errors in typing are mine and not the fault of technology ☺.

because humans all use some form of language to describe an external reality that we all experience that this is the case. So, what we call it does not matter in this case; what matters is that we have a consistent name with which to refer to things in the real world—this allows translation across languages.

Another theory of truth is that of the pragmatic theory, which holds that truth is utility. William James, an influential pragmatist, often liked to say that truth is what works, what is useful, and what is expedient. The pragmatic theory is an important view with regards to education in particular, because it is adopted by John Dewey,[9] who is very likely to be the single most influential historical educator/philosopher on contemporary education.

The pragmatic view, however, faces a rather significant problem in that the utility of a belief is obviously neither necessary nor sufficient for its truth, and furthermore if utility is equivalent to truth it leads to absurdities. Marian David (2004) offers a description of an important critique of this idea, an excerpt of which follows:

> Even if it so happens that all and only useful beliefs are actually true, the pragmatic definition is still unacceptable because it has the wrong modal consequences. It *might* be useful to believe that A exists, even if A did not exist; and it *might* be useless to believe that A exists, even if A did exist. If truth were the same as utility, it would follow, absurdly, that it might be true that A exists, even if A did not exist, and *vice versa*. The pragmatic definition divorces truth from the facts …

That last element is particularly important because when truth is divorced from the facts it creates an environment in which knowledge becomes subservient to skills. The skills we use in the pragmatic view are of immediate utility, however, the knowledge we acquire is incidental and often considered irrelevant. This belief has had widespread impacts as educators have debated over the twentieth century time and time again about why we should teach "x" body of knowledge instead of "y" body of knowledge. "What the students really need are practical skills for the workforce!" Many other similar assertions have been offered up by educationalists, including the contemporary strain of these Deweyite pragmatists: the twenty-first century skills advocates. This will be revisited

[9] I should note that he modifies it slightly, but not enough such that he is not typically referred to as a pragmatist.

and expanded on later in this book, but for now note that pragmatic views of truth are troublesome in that facts are rendered irrelevant except insofar as something seems to work.

Another offshoot of these utilitarian views of truth is the one most popularly known through the work of Michael Foucault.[10] Generally speaking, these can be classified as critical theory and are inspired by Marxist ideology, which hold tightly to Foucault's famous assertion that power and knowledge are inextricably intertwined. These critical theorists believe that all knowledge is a social construct and leveraged by those in power to perpetuate their power status. In other words, in this view truth is simply what society constructs. In general, the various groups who adopt this theory are advocates for social-justice, gender-justice, environmental-justice, and so forth.[11] Because of their commitment to this understanding of truth, such scholars are activists first and researchers second. Their purpose is to use knowledge—their own version of it—in the guise of truth so as to wean its ways into positions of power to compel society to adopt their views. Their rationale for doing so is that they are advocating for those who have been historically oppressed, disadvantaged, etc. This approach to truth is odd, to say the least, in that they seek to use "truth" to co-opt others to agree with them, but they deny that "truth" is objectively real. You might say it is a very utilitarian approach to truth!

As Doug Groothuis observers, "properly speaking, Foucault's observations on truth and power say nothing about the nature of the definition of *truth* but concern the sociology and psychology of *beliefs*" (2000, 100). And this is the central issue that they deal with—those who deny the objectivity of truth do not deal with the nature of truth, which is, in philosophical terms, an "ontological" discussion. Instead, they *assume* that truth is constructed by humankind and then turn to how it is disseminated, which moves into what philosophers refer to as "epistemology." I hope to have not waded too far into philosophical waters for you but do hope that you see that it is crucially important that all of us have a basic framework through which we can distinguish between these concepts. Once we move to how we come to know something—the arena of epistemology—the

[10] One could look at Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, although his work is highly philosophical—enjoy if you wish!

[11] If you read up on educational philosophy in graduate school, or if you had robust qualitative action research training, you will have read critical race theory, queer theory, etc. mirroring these positions of activism.

questions we ask ignore the objectivity of truth: they simply presuppose an *a priori* belief held about it.

Table 1 below provides a distinction between these two philosophical frameworks. Following it is an extended discussion so as to situate the different approaches for dealing with truth and their connections to education.

Table 1. Epistemological and ontological truth issues in education

Philosophical Field	What It Deals With	Educational Connections
Ontology	The nature of reality	An ontological question in education might be: what do students need to know?
Epistemology	How we come to know reality	An epistemological question in education would be: what is the best way to get students to know?

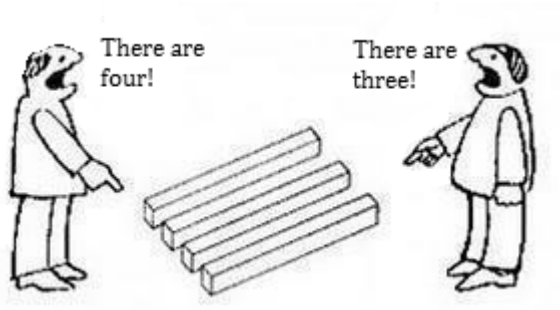
You will notice that both deal with an aspect of reality. In our case, consider "truth." An ontological question is: "does truth exist"? An epistemological question is: "how does one come to know truth"? In today's world there is also the widespread influence of the so-called postmodernists. Postmodernists typically *assume* that since we are finite and are the agents who write down what is true, we cannot distinguish truth from a social construct. As a result, they do not really deal with ontological issues; they simply take it as a brute fact that truth is unknowable, or hopelessly subjective, and move on. Hopefully, the previous discussion should help you recognize that there is a substantive set of problems for those who wish to simply affirm that truth is relative, unknowable, or a mere social construct.

In addition to these main theories there are also solely epistemic theories of truth, which aim to account for truth in more nuanced words such as warranted assertibility, verifiability, etc. One form of these theories is the coherence theory of truth. This view conceives of truth as something that coheres with a system of beliefs. Such a view seems to make all truth

subjective—that is tied to the individual and their system of beliefs, with truth being determined as affirmed only if the beliefs cohere with each other. But that would then lead to problems because, of course, people have conflicting systems of beliefs, and if such a view were correct then it would necessarily endorse relativism—a view that I will critique next. The key point here is that coherence theories of truth affirm a particular view of truth that renders all truth as subject-dependent. In doing so it would lead to absurdities where you and I may have completely contradictory views and yet both would be "true" in the sense that they were coherent with our own particular system of beliefs.

Additionally, there are *relativistic* views, which believe that all truth is perspectival. What is true for one person may not be true for another as it is conceived of being only a matter of perspective. This is particularly popular in our increasingly pluralized society because, as Marian David comments, "any apparent conflict between two parties … can be dissolved by relativizing truth so that both parties can be said to be 'right'" (2004, 375). This is commonly seen in educational circles with common slogans like "there is no truth, only perception," along with interesting imagery alongside it causing the reader to wonder whether or not that is true. An example of such imagery is displayed in Fig. 2. A picture is not, however, an argument—it is decoration. It may perhaps be interesting, or perhaps valuable, but an image should not be the sole basis for determining what is true. Such relativistic theories of truth, then, like the epistemic theories, seem to permit contradictions within what is deemed true.

Fig. 2. Relativistic imagery to devalue objective truth



Source: https://www.nicolelhvaughn.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/All-a-matter-of-perspective.jpg

Table 2 highlights the basic assertions of these various theories of truth as well as the guiding questions that drive their interest in terms of "truth." You might notice that the coherence theory is not included—this is because, since it renders all knowledge subject-dependent, it fits neatly with relativistic theories. Aside from the correspondence theory, however, each of these faces a significant internal challenge because they violate the law of non-contradiction at one level or another; that is, they affirm that a particular thing can be both true and not true. Without adding many qualifiers[12] to illustrate how one thing can be both one thing and not another thing, such views become completely internally contradictory.

Table 2. Theories of truth overview

Philosophical Theory	Main Assertion Regarding Truth	Guiding Questions
Correspondence Theory of Truth	*Truth = What is in accord with reality* All truth is only true insofar as it reflects what is real	➢ What fits with the facts?
Pragmatic Theory of Truth	*Truth = Utility* All truths are those things accepted because they are useful	➢ What works? ➢ What is useful?
Critical Theories of Truth	*Truth = A social construct used by those with power* All truths are constructs of society used to perpetuate circumstances	➢ What furthers my agenda? ➢ What can change power relations?
Relativistic Theories of Truth	*Truth = Relative* All truths are subject-dependent and equally valid	➢ What is your perspective? ➢ Does your perspective make sense for you?

[12] A qualifier might be that a chicken can be both yellow and not yellow, in that it is yellow when it is a chick and yet, when it grows up, it may not be. This qualifier, however, indicates distinction. A chick that is yellow at 10:37 AM on Wednesday is always yellow at that day/time, independent of what happens one year from now. Such examples do nothing to deny truth; they merely affirm that truth is difficult because each truth is context-dependent.

Is the Law of Non-Contradiction a "Western" Construct?

Having surveyed very briefly some of the general theories of truth, let us now shift to an allegory that forms the foundation of an argument against any conception of truth that permits internal contradictions. Each of the theories of truth, aside from the correspondence theory, must deal with their denial of the law of non-contradiction as a necessary aspect to truth. The famous speaker and Christian evangelist Ravi Zacharias tells an entertaining and enlightening story, which I will share in my own narrative here with regards to this problem of contradictions.[13]

Zacharias was born and raised in India as an orthodox Hindu and later in life converted to Christianity, and he has become a prolific author, speaker, and defender of the Christian religion. A professor invited him, after negotiation of the topic, to his class to speak on why he was a Christian. When presenting why he was a Christian he grounded his position on the law of non-contradiction, which states that you cannot have both A and not-A in the same sense at the same time. The law of non-contradiction can be understood as an either/or system with regards to the objectivity of truth. A simple illustration of this can make this either/or system clear. Suppose you approach my wife and me at a party and you say, "I understand you are going to have another baby!" And at the same time that she responds "yes" I say "no." What are you going to think? You will probably think, oh dear she hasn't told him yet; or that Kevin has an odd sense of humour; or perhaps that we need marital counselling. But you will never say thank you for my answer because you know that both cannot be true. This is a good illustration of the law of non-contradiction. It is constantly at work in our daily experience and guides us in making sense of the world.

However, the professor (Zacharias's opponent) argued that there are two kinds of logic—one of which is the law of non-contradiction, the either/or system; the other, he claimed, is the both/and system. This view proclaims that it is not either/or, but both/and. His central claim was that, in this "Eastern" (both/and) way of thinking, contradictions are not a problem, and the only problem was that Zacharias had erroneously chosen to

[13] This comes from a speech delivered at Penn State University entitled, "Secularism and the Illusion of Neutrality," contained in four podcasts available from his website (www.rzim.org) if you wish to hear his words. It is also found in his book, *Can Man Live Without God?* (1994, 126). My recasting and use of it in my book are with permission.

analyse Eastern worldviews through an ostensibly Western lens. At the conclusion of much pontification on this point, Zacharias replied to him: "what you're telling me is when I study these worldviews of the east I *either* use the both/and form of logic *or* nothing else—is that right?" He comments that, upon hearing the question, his opponent put his silverware down and slowly replied "the either/or does seem to emerge, doesn't it …?"

This is the point I wish to emphasize. With these pragmatic, critical, relativistic, and solely epistemic approaches to truth we face the insuperable challenge of internal contradictions. The professor who was criticizing Ravi Zacharias was doing so by using the either/or system to defend his view that the both/and system was correct. The point is that, in the real world, the correspondence theory of truth is constantly verified and never falsified—when I cross the street I look both ways because I want to live. It is either the truck or me, not both of us!

Truth Matters

I acknowledge that finding objective truth is not an easy task.[14] However, that does not in any logical way support the various postmodernist notions that argue that since it is difficult to know objective reality we should simply deny it is possible to find! If truth is merely "utility" then objective facts are irrelevant—what matters is solely what works. Once a person comes to believe that truth is only relevant so long as it works, they are only interested in the practical and relevant. Such a view perpetuates a highly narcissistic student but also renders one woefully ill-equipped to deal with the real difficulty we all face in overcoming confirmation bias.

If truth is simply a tool leveraged by the powerful it becomes a weapon used by those who wish to compel others to agree with their view of things. Such a view then leads to subversive efforts to simply use positions of power to force others to accept the activists' preferred vision of reality. This renders truth as irrelevant unless it supports one's preconceived notions. Again, this poses major problems for the education of people in a system guided by this approach. Such an attitude towards truth leads to indoctrinating students, not educating them.

[14] I will do so throughout this book because it is, quite often, one of the reasons why many abandon it. Our feelings and opinions are easy; the truth requires great diligence, commitment, and openness, all of which are hard.