# The Indispensability of Truth

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**Abstract.** Humanities scholars often hesitate to declare something true, but truth is indispensable. This essay surveys possible accounts of truth in analytic philosophy, before looking at the functioning of truth in everyday life and the place of truth in the work of two leading theorists often thought to question or deny truth. Jacques Derrida critiques assumptions about truth but embraces a drive towards truth and Bruno Latour's work is devoted to showing how truth is produced through complex systems. Truth is not simple but functions as both foundation and a goal.

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Although I am not a philosopher and have only an amateur's expertise in the philosophical debates about truth that have occupied the tradition of Western philosophy since the Greeks, it seems to me that today the problem of truth is too important to be left to the philosophers alone. My principal claim is that truth concerns all of us—more than ever today with the rise of would-be authoritarian rulers who attempt to create their own truth—; and that if there is a solution, the problem it is not to be solved by narrowly technical arguments that leave aside the many important ways in which truth functions in our daily lives.

I say this in full awareness that in the academic humanities today, at least in the West, people are often uncomfortable claiming that the things they are saying are true. This is, first, because we have learned that truth claims are dependent on historical contexts and particular perspectives, and that often structures of hegemonic power prevent people from recognizing the contingency of their own situations, perspectives and methods. Yet even if we hesitate to say that what we are asserting is "the truth," as teachers and scholars we are always saying or writing things that we think are true, and in our daily lives we not only constantly say things we think are true but act on what we deem to be true. And so long as we remain open to other perspectives, curious about other assumptions, and willing to engage in processes

of investigation and verification, we must not allow our modesty about the scope of our understanding to lead us to abandon the idea of truth.

But let me first review what I take to be the implications of the Western philosophical debates about truth, before turning to the ordinary ways in which the notion of truth functions, and then, finally, to some examples from the field in which I have some expertise, that of recent critical theory. The treatment of truth in contemporary critical theory is diverse and complicated but not, I think, without lessons for us in the present political conjuncture in the United States, which, unfortunately, risks affecting the rest of the world in one way or another—mostly bad.

Philosophers are skilled at discovering and articulating the difficulties with various accounts of truth, but they have not succeeded in producing a satisfactory solution. The philosopher Paul Horwich, begins his book entitled simply *Truth*,

> It will be widely agreed that hardly any progress has been made towards achieving the insight we seem to need. The common-sense notion that truth is a kind of 'correspondence with the facts' has never been worked out to anyone's satisfaction. Even its advocates would concede that it remains little more than a vague, guiding intuition. But the traditional alternatives –equation of truth with 'membership in a coherent system of beliefs', or 'what would be verified in ideal conditions,' or 'suitability as a basis of action' have always looked unlikely to work, precisely because they don't accommodate the 'correspondence' intuition… Hence the peculiarly enigmatic character of truth: a conception of its underlying nature appears to be at once necessary and impossible.[1]

The most common-sensical theory of truth is the correspondence theory of truth, which claims that the belief or proposition expressed by an utterance is true if it corresponds to a state of affairs. So, "I am in Kerala now" was not true when I wrote it but when I pronounced this sentence in Kerala, I have no hesitation in calling it true. This is common-sense realism. The world is relatively independent of our dealings with it, so to decide whether it is true that there is food in the refrigerator, I open the door and look in. But can this be expanded to a general theory of truth? That seems doubtful. As soon as we go beyond simple assertions about easily determinable states of affairs, problems arise. For example, suppose we wonder about the truth of some proposition about quarks, elementary particles that are said never to exist freely in nature. There are two principal difficulties here. The first is that there are no simple, independent, ascertainable facts about quarks because quarks seem to exist only as a function of the theories of particle physics and experimental

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1    Horwich, *Truth*, 1–2.

techniques.[2] There are not facts out there that could be compared to propositions. The second difficulty is that to determine whether something a physicist says about quarks is "really true" or just an apparent effect of some procedure, we would need to have an independent vantage point—let us say a God's eye view of the world—which would enable us to compare the state of affairs with our propositions about them.[3] We can't step outside our own skins to judge whether modern particle physics finally has everything right. Philosophers disagree about which of these conditions is the more serious difficulty. Donald Davidson claims, for instance, that problem is really that there is nothing for true sentences to correspond to. "The correct objection to correspondence theories is not, then, that they make truth something to which we humans can never legitimately aspire, the real objection is rather that such theories fail to provide the entities to which truth vehicles may be said to correspond."[4] Facts don't, in general, exist independently of conceptual frameworks: they are not simply given; this is true of a cat sitting on a mat (a favorite example of analytical philosophers), as well as of quarks. To say this is not to deny that there exists a world out there, with creatures sitting independently of us, for instance; only that the specification of a state of affairs to which a proposition is said to correspond is a matter of conceptual frameworks, descriptive categories, perceptual or experimental procedures.

If correspondence theories of truth are philosophically inadequate, others have proposed Pragmatic theories of truth: truth is what works. The attraction of this is that it seems to deal with the objection to a conventionalist account of truth, that it is needs to account for the fact that in general modern science works. We understand how to treat some diseases; miraculously, information can be sent through the ether, over what is called the internet, which certainly suggests that some people have understood rather recondite facts about energy, electronics, information, etc.; airplanes fly—which implies that modern science's understanding of fluid dynamics must be largely correct. If it were not correct, then planes would not be able to take off or stay up.

The trouble with the pragmatist theory, critics object, is that it gets the relation backwards. Something is not true because it works but rather, it works because it is true. This seems not to be in itself an insuperable objection, but one can imagine situations in which scientists and engineers just got lucky: they did not actually understand the underlying processes or mechanisms, but something they designed nonetheless happened to work for quite different reasons. It is certainly possible to imagine that a process might work yet for the propositions describing its mechanism

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2     Tomlinson, "After Truth," 43–5.

3     Blackburn, *Truth: A Guide*, 56.

4     Davidson, *Subjective, Intersubjective*, 184.

not to be true. (There must be cases where modern medicine can prescribe remedies which work for reasons we don't really understand.) Moreover, it is very easy to imagine cases where the understanding of physical laws and properties might be true but where the experiments or devices would not work, because of the clumsiness of experimenters, designers, or builders (this happens all the time in school and college science labs: the failure of students to get the right results in their lab experiments is not taken to put in question the truths of basic chemistry or show that the underlying science is wrong), so the equation of truth with what works is too hasty and crude to serve as an adequate theory of truth.

A coherence theory of truth, the third option explored in philosophical debates, starts from the wholly defensible notion that in general the truth of propositions depends on conceptual frameworks. The truth that water boils at 100 degrees centigrade depends upon agreement about a scale of temperature, how it is to be measured (at sea level, for example), and what counts as boiling. "Russia has an authoritarian regime" is a statement that depends on other propositions about what counts as authoritarian, what qualified observers can agree about governmental procedures in this country, etc. Often the way you test the truth of a belief or proposition is by seeing how it relates to other beliefs or propositions that have already withstood critical examination: it coheres with a system of beliefs.

One again, there seem two kinds of objections to this account of truth. The first is that there are propositions which do not cohere with any set of beliefs or propositions but which, according to objectors, must be true or false: for example, "Napoleon dropped his razor on the morning of the battle of Waterloo." I take it that there are no relevant verified propositions that support or infirm this. Coherence theorists would reply that this begs the question: that this objection presupposes the common-sense correspondence idea of truth, that a proposition either corresponds or does not correspond to the facts, but in their account, propositions that do not cohere with other propositions are not true. The second objection is that beliefs that *once* cohered with other beliefs have later been deemed not to be true—e.g. Newtonian physics has allegedly been superseded—so that a coherence theory must extend beyond the beliefs that people actually have at a particular moment to some larger set of beliefs, such that at no point is coherence actually a test of truth.

These considerations, about various theories of truth, yield a strange result: analytic philosophers are good at identifying problems with extant theories of truth yet are inclined enthusiastically to defend the notion of truth against a straw man: some sort of relativism that they associate either with a general skepticism about knowledge or with a post-modern constructivism alleged to deny the existence of truth and alleged to claim that there are only opinions derived from ideology and historical situations. Few thinkers actually say anything like that—the American

philosopher Richard Rorty is notorious for saying that truth is what your colleagues will let you get away with—but Rorty is a defender of collaborative institutional frameworks and of modern science, as a model for cooperative discussion, so not really the skeptic he is alleged to be. He just thinks truth-talk is misleading.

A better approach to the problem might be to think about how the notion of truth actually functions. So, let me begin with ordinary uses of "truth." For example, if I should say, at Christmas time to my wife, "We had better send a gift to your aunt, otherwise we'll feel guilty if she sends us one," she might well reply, "That's true," or "Very true." But she could just as well say, "I guess so," since in such a context to say something is true is not really to make serious epistemological or ontological claims, but to signal general approbation of or agreement with something someone has said. Or "true" can be used causally as concessionary—what you say is not wrong but I have a different view. My wife could reply, "True, but she didn't send us a gift last year, so maybe we don't need to think about it." These casual uses of "true" seem unproblematic and suggest that truth is not always something so momentous that we ought to be wary of it.

The British philosopher, J. L. Austin, often called an exponent of ordinary language philosophy, because his approach was to examine closely our uses of language and to debunk philosophical arguments that went against our ordinary linguistic behavior, observes in his groundbreaking *How to Do Things with Word*s that "it is important to realize that 'true' and 'false,' like 'free' and 'unfree,' do not stand for anything simple at all but only for the general dimension of being the right and proper thing to say, as opposed to the wrong thing, in these circumstances, to this audience, for these purposes and with these intentions."[5] Indeed, Austin notes that whereas philosophers sometimes speak as if any proposition must be either true or false, it is often pointless to insist on deciding in simple terms whether a statement is true or false—that the galaxy is the shape of a fried egg, that France is hexagonal: "There are various degrees and dimensions of success in making statements: the statements fit the facts always more or less loosely, in different ways on different occasions for different intents and purposes."[6] We could say that for some purposes –indicating a vague shape – these might be appropriate things to say, but for others, they are too rough, too inexact, to count as true. Frustrated at the difficulty of producing an adequate philosophical account of truth, and cognizant of the often-casual way in which the term is used, a number of philosophers have developed what they call a minimalist or deflationary account of truth, insisting that the term "true" does not add anything to an assertion: If I assert that *The cat is on the mat*,—strange example dear to analytic philosophers! —I don't add anything by saying "It is true that the cat is on

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5      Austin, *How to Do Things with Words,* 145.
6      Austin, "Truth," 158–59.

the mat." The expression "is true" is just a convenient way of granting or approving things that have been said without having to repeat them. These philosophers may be right that we do not need a philosophical theory of truth, but I cannot accept this minimization of the notion of truth, which plays important roles in our lives.

There is a rather different use of "truth," as aspirational or as indicating the goal of inquiries. W. H. Auden wrote an amusing poem "O Tell me the Truth about Love," which begins:

> Some say love's a little boy,
> And some say it's a bird,
> Some say it makes the world go round,
> Some say that's absurd,…

The poem concludes:

> When it comes, will it come without warning
> Just as I'm picking my nose?
> Will it knock on my door in the morning,
> Or tread in the bus on my toes?
> Will it come like a change in the weather?
> Will its greeting be courteous or rough?
> Will it alter my life altogether?
> O tell me the truth about love.[7]

There are often things—such as love—about which we would like to know the truth, even though we generally know that there is no way we could actually come to know the truth, the whole truth. Truth in this sense is a goal that we assume will never be reached. For example, speaking of literary criticism, Paul de Man writes that "understanding is an epistemological event… This does not mean that there can be a true reading, but that no reading is conceivable in which the question of its truth or falsehood is not primarily involved."[8] This is important. Interpretations are attempting to be true—humanists who may hesitate to call what they say the truth, nevertheless proceed by proposing what they take to be true rather than false and of course very frequently proceed by challenging previous interpretations as incomplete or wrong in various ways. Certainly, we do not believe that there is one true reading, but this does not eliminate the notion of truth. The truth of the text is something we aim at, something that gets elaborated in discussion with others, but not something we believe exists independently of our readings: something there to be recovered or actually to be reached once and for all. This seems to me a complex but significant aspect of our notion of truth.

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7     Auden, *Selected Poems*, 69.

8     De Man, "Preface to Carol Jacobs," xi.

But one of the more paradoxical aspects of the problem of truth is that there are innumerable truths that we depend on every day, just to get through life, but where the use of term truth doesn't arise, because it does not occur to us to doubt them. For instance, if I am going home from the university, there is no doubt whatsoever for me that I live on Wyckoff Road, in Ithaca, NY. This is a fundamental truth. But this is a truth to which the term would only be applied if someone else were misinformed and doubted me. "Do you really live on Wyckoff Road?" In which case I could say, "Yes, it's true." We depend on the accuracy of maps to get us where we are going, on the truth of directions about how to make our many devices work. But in such cases, we do not often speak of truth, or wonder whether something is true or not, unless, for example, we discover to our annoyance that a map is inaccurate, wrong, or out of date. Although we don't often invoke truth, except in argument, truth is indispensable. We depend on engineers and manufacturers to grasp the truth about how the machines to which we entrust our lives will work. We expect our doctors to tell us the truth about our ailments. There are also innumerable truths it never even occurs to us to recognize or mention but that structure our world. For instance, I am firmly convinced that none of my readers are Martians who have somehow gained access to this text—I take that to be true—and I know it is true that none of my readers are ten feet tall. Ridiculous examples, to be sure, but our lives in the world are structured by innumerable truths that never get articulated, never need to get articulated. It is only when the question of truth or falsity of one of them is posed that we are likely to speak of the truth of this or that belief or proposition. But that does not make truth any less important—indeed, it indicates just how much we generally rely on truths that are taken for granted.

We might say that the hesitation in the humanities about calling what we say "true" comes from considering the notion of truth in something of a vacuum—the truth, with a capital T—universal, eternal truth. Whereas we operate all the time with a lowercase notion of truth, what we take to be true as opposed to what is false. If I have no hesitation in saying that I live on Wyckoff Road, it is because I know that is not false, and hence true, not because it partakes of some universal Truth.

But if I have been invited to reflect on truth, it is not for my take on hoary philosophical debates but because I have written about contemporary critical theory, where there have occurred the critical developments that have made humanists uneasy about making claims to truth. Let me take up two examples from recent theory before focusing, in conclusion, on the notion of truth that seems to me actually operative in the humanities and that it is urgent to sustain, in the face of political developments that distort for their nefarious purposes what they take to be the consequences of recent debates about truth.

I shall say something about the case of Jacques Derrida, which has been of great interest to me, but I should note that there are disagreements among Derrida experts

about his dealings with truth, which would require extensive and rather technical arguments to try to sort out, and I don't think his example will be of much help to us. I will stress just three things. First of all, there is in Derrida's writings, from the early works such as *Grammatology* and "Plato's Pharmacy" in *Dissemination* on, a critique of what he presents as the notion of truth dominant in the Western tradition: He writes, "All the metaphysical determinations of truth are more or less immediately inseparable from the instance of the logos, or of a reason thought within the lineage of the logos."[9] The logos, from which comes the Greek root that represents knowledge in all those *-ology* words (biology, zoology, psychology, geology), is in theological discourse the word of God, the divine truth, or in more secular terms, what we seek to know, the rational principle that governs the universe. In these works of Derrida's, it is through an analysis of the notion of writing, which is classically conceived as just a means of expression, which ought to be as transparent as possible to permit direct access to logic, reason, truth, that Derrida unsettles the hierarchy that makes writing a mere external accessory to speech, thought, truth. An expanded, radicalized notion of writing inaugurates, he declares, "the de-sedimentation, de-construction of all the significations that have their source in that of the logos. Particularly the signification of truth."[10] But Derrida shows that in Plato, or Husserl, and elsewhere, it is writing as iterability that creates the possibility of meaning and truth. And the very possibility of traditionally opposing speech to writing on the basis of presence/absence or immediacy/representation is an illusion, since speech is already structurally dependent on difference, as much as writing, and thus can be seen as a species of a generalized writing as a system of differences. The notion of an expanded writing, an *archi-écriture*, is a dramatic way of putting the case that truth claims always depend upon a structure or system of representation.

The second point is related to this: philosophy, Derrida argues, has been a metaphysics of presence, in which representation is treated as secondary or inessential: "It could be shown that all names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated the constant of a presence."[11] Philosophical attempts describe what is fundamental, a ground, involve oppositions in which one term belongs to the logos and a higher presence and the other marks a fall, as complication, negation, or manifestation of the first: meaning/form soul/body, literal/metaphorical, nature/culture, intelligible/sensible, transcendental/empirical. Analysis thus becomes a matter of "returning 'strategically,' in idealization, to an origin or to a 'priority' seen as simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, in order *then* to conceive of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident. All metaphysicians

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9    Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* 10.

10   Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* 10.

11   Derrida, *Writing and Difference,* 279.

have proceeded thus, from Plato to Rousseau, from Descartes to Husserl… This is not just one metaphysical gesture among others; it is the metaphysical exigency." [12]

The critique of logocentrism or of the metaphysics of presence undoes truth as phenomenal presence—truth is never given as such—yet, and here we come to the third and crucial point, Derrida's analyses, his readings of philosophical texts, always make truth claims about what happens in these texts; they are carried out in the terms of a bivalent logic of truth and falsity, pursued to the point where that logic confronts a blockage of some kind, a contradiction or aporia. His arguments are always making truth claims, even if the words "truth" and "true" seldom appear. As Christopher Norris writes, "His point is not at all the obsolescence of truth-talk or the need to replace it with a Nietzsche-inspired genealogy of power-knowledge. Rather it is the failure of logocentric thinkers from Plato on down to make good on their express or implicit claim for a pure, unimpeded access to truth through a range of candidate items (concepts, ideas, primordial intuitions, sense data and so forth) that might ideally be relied upon to grant such access by reason of such transparent rapport-à-soi or intrinsic self-evidence." [13] Derrida's readings involve a commitment to the pursuit of truth in analysis that is in no way vitiated by the fact that rigorous analysis frequently highlights a logical impasse. In *Limited Inc*, responding to the claim that deconstructionists do not believe in meaning or truth, he replies, "The answer is simple enough: this definition of the deconstructionist is false (that's right: false, not true) and feeble; it supposes a bad (that's right: bad, not good) reading of numerous texts, first of all of mine, which therefore must finally be read or reread. Then perhaps it will be understood that the value of truth (and all those values associated with it) is never contested or destroyed in my writings, but only reinscribed in more powerful, larger, more stratified contexts." [14] In the case of truth, the expanded context would include, Derrida indicates, performative dimensions of language which make truth-telling a particular case of linguistic activity. Elsewhere he insists on his commitment to truth, as emerging in the context of possible untruth:

> To have the possibility of the authentic, sincere and full meaning of what one says, the possibility of the failure, or the lie, or of something else, must remain open. That's the structure of language. There would be no truth otherwise. I insist on this because if I didn't say this I would be considered someone who is opposed to truth or simply doesn't believe in truth. No, I am attached to truth, but I simply recall that for truth to be true and

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12    Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, 236.

13    Norris, "Truth in Derrida," 28.

14    Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, 146.

for the meaning to be meaningful, the possibility of a misunderstanding or lie or something else must remain, structurally always open. That's the condition for truth to be truth.[15]

Truth is inescapable. And occasionally, particularly in polemical contexts, he does permit himself an explicit articulation: Giorgio Agamben's central claims about Foucault are "literally false," he declares.[16]

Finally, whereas Norris's point is that Derrida's readings, as arguments, necessarily involve questions of truth and falsity, in a late conversation with Evelyne Grossman, Derrida expatiates on what she has called "a passion for truth."

The paradox that you yourself noted is that this passion, I wouldn't say that it is not a passion for truth—I am in a certain sense passionate about truth—but it is at the same time accompanied by, and probably motivated by, the belief that truth infinitely withdraws itself from interpretation. Not that it doesn't exist. I never said, "There is no truth," but I would say that the concept of truth does not answer what I am looking for, what we are looking for in decoding. That is to say, at the end of the decoding, there is no access to a true and established meaning.[17]

Later, he continues,

There is consequently a need, I would say a drive for truth, that fuels all my work of interpretation and that is compatible with a certain mistrust, a certain suspicion of what is generally called truth as final meaning. There is a drive for truth, but I dare not present it that way, it would lead to too many misunderstandings. I would add as an aside, in a more familiar, empirical way, that when I try to think, to work or to write, and when I believe that something "true" must be put forward to the public sphere, to the public scene, then there is no force in the world that can stop me… One can call it "passion," as you say, a "passion for truth."

I think Derrida's is an extremely interesting case, but it is rather complicated and difficult to sort out. The major lesson is that this deconstruction of metaphysics does not lead to a jettisoning of truth. We are left with a broader sense of truth, which includes notions of accuracy and demonstration yet is also aspirational, aware of the contingency of any stabilization.

A case that is, I think, more useful for our purposes in thinking about truth today is that of Bruno Latour a sociologist and historian and philosopher of science,

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15    Derrida, "Following Theory: Jacques Derrida," 44.

16    Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign,* Vol. 1, 329.

17    Derrida, "The Wounding Truth."

who studies the ways in which scientific practices in a range of fields produce their results and generate truth. How is truth actively produced through processes of interaction, revision, and so on? His work led to the development of what is called actor-network theory, which attempts not to "overcome" the opposition between subject and object, mind and nature, that underlies most approaches to the problem of truth, but rather to set it aside, leaving it untouched: in brief, adopting a different picture of the world as networks of human and non-human agents interacting with each other.[18] Traditional accounts of truth set the subject, or mind, over against the object, the world, and then the problem for the realist is how to claim that the mental representations of mind accurately capture reality, whereas the anti-realist argues that it is the categories, conceptual frameworks of the mind that make reality what it is. Within this framework, for science, there is always the question, did the scientist discover something that was there all along, just waiting to be discovered, or did his or her group's procedures bring into being the conditions that they then describe. Latour writes, "Most philosophy of science since Hume and Kant consists in taking on, evading, hedging, coming back to, recanting, solving, refuting, packing, unpacking this impossible antinomy: that on the one hand facts are experimentally made up and never escape from their manmade settings, and on the other hand it is essential that facts are *not* made up and that something emerges that is not manmade."[19] Both realist and anti-realist attempt to bridge the gap or overcome the distance, but if we recognize that the humans are not minds in a vat but actors in a world that is also acting, responding to or resisting the investigative procedures, then the properties of the world develop in the interaction with actors in networks. Latour writes,

> "The idea of an Isolated and singular mind-in-a-vat looking at an outside world from which it is thoroughly cut off, and trying nonetheless to extract certainty from the fragile web of words spun across the perilous abyss separating things from discourse, is so implausible that it cannot hold up much longer, especially since psychologists themselves have already redistributed cognition beyond recognition. There is no world outside, not because there is no world at all, but because there is no mind inside, no prisoner of language with nothing to rely on but the narrow pathways of logic. Speaking truthfully about the world…is a very common practice for richly vascularized societies of bodies, instruments, scientists, and institutions. We speak truthfully because the world is articulated, not the other way around."[20]

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18    Latour, *Pandora's Hope,* 294–95.

19    Latour, *Pandora's Hope*, 125.

20    Latour, *Pandora's Hope*, 296.

How is truth produced? In classical epistemology, we have two ways of talking about the scientist's work. Either they have discovered something that has always existed, out there in nature, or else they have invented, fabricated something; we have truth or illusion. But Latour is interested in the elaborate processes, endless experiments, the struggles, debates, explorations of interconnections with other results and established knowledge, that end up with a stable result that is accepted, that acquires the character of truth: eminently social, tested, verified, in part the result of actions of the non-human agents. Once you study in detail how scientists work, you come to appreciate the elaborate network formed by the interaction of scientists, instrumentation, the physical or biological materials with they are experimenting and the scrutiny of others who interact with the results of these experiments.

The most salient feature of actor-network theory is its insistence that anything that modifies a state of affairs by making a difference counts as an actor.[21] For instance, given a set of conventions and the purposes for which a map is to be made, a landscape dictates how it is to be mapped. Latour offers a simple but instructive example concerning agency from the realm of public debate about gun control in the United States. The National Rifle Association, resisting any gun control measures, insists that "Guns don't kill, people do." The only agents here are the people —the gun is just an inert metal device—so any control measures need to be directed at people, punishing bad people and rewarding the good. The partisans of gun control insist, on the other hand that guns kill people. The gun is a crucial actor in these scenarios: no gun, no mass shootings. This dichotomy mirrors the way we think about subjects and objects. But obviously, just as a gun without a shooter is merely an inert device, so a person without a gun is not a shooter: the person makes the object a lethal weapon and the gun activates the person as shooter. The reality is that it is the combination of gun plus person that results in the shootings, in complex networks where there are also many other factors, including the discourses that stigmatize certain populations and create situations in which shooting them becomes more likely. The gun is a crucial actor or actant in this network.[22] We acknowledge non-human actors in saying that kettles boil water, hammers hit nails, locks close rooms, soap takes the dirt away, the remote zaps the TV. In each case the non-human agent makes a difference, figures in a network, and once you accept this your task becomes describing the interactions that occur in the intricate ecologies in which humans and non-humans are engaged. "The only realistic way for a mind to speak truthfully about the world is to reconnect through as many relations and vessels as possible."[23]

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21    Latour, *Reassembling the Social,* 71.

22    Latour, *Pandora's Hope*, 176–78.

23    Latour, *Pandora's Hope*, 113.

The scientific case studies Latour has pursued—in such diverse areas as neuroendocrinology, soil science in the Amazon, French atomic science prior to World War II, and Louis Pasteur's discovery of microbes—are more elaborate than the shooter with a gun or a carpenter with a hammer, but involve science in the making: the messy process of attempting experiments and interpreting the action that follows, in elaborate collaborative processes that may eventually yield results that secure wide acceptance and become scientific truth.[24] They are of special interest because they have produced what is accepted as truth. In the case of Pasteur, Latour traces the process by which Pasteur moves from a purely chemical explanation of lactic fermentation to the explanation in terms of the action of a living organism, a yeast that causes the fermentation. The yeast is scarcely detectable under a microscope, nothing indicates that it is a separate material.[25] Yet he comes to conclude that this yeast plays the principal role in lactic fermentation. This conclusion results from elaborate interactions between the scientist and this mysterious, practically undetectable substance, which others see as some minor and accidental contaminant. Pasteur subjects these spots of grey substance to numerous operations, or trials, adjusting proportions of chalk and sugar, adjusting temperatures, ultimately, Latour writes, designing an actor, something that can be said to produce effects in various circumstances. "Most of an experimenter's ingenuity goes into designing devious plots and careful staging that make an actant participate in new and unexpected situations that will actively define it."[26] And the new truth will depend on the success of this agent in convincing others of its reality: in his reports of the experiments Pasteur has to display to other scientists that the action of the ferment occurs independently of his own imagination. The independence of the yeast as actor in turn makes Pasteur a successful scientist, as the person who has shown to the satisfaction of his peers that the fermentation is the result of a living organism and not a purely chemical decomposition. It is crucial to the operation that no matter how artificial the setting, something new and independent of the setting can be seen to emerge.

What is striking here is that there is not an opposition between the action of the scientist and that of the substance. As Latour notes, Pasteur does not try to pretend that his work played no role in creating this entity: "he is extraordinarily proud of being the first in history to have artificially created the conditions to make the lactic acid ferment free to appear, at last, as a specific entity."[27] If Pasteur makes the agent appear, the ferment as actor makes Pasteur's experiments a success and leads others to confirm the truth of the process of lactic fermentation.

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24    Good sources are Latour, *Pandora's Hope,* and Latour, *Science in Action.*

25    Latour, *Pandora's Hope*, 116.

26    Latour, *Pandora's Hope*, 122–23.

27    Latour, *Pandora's Hope*, 137.

While in some quarters science studies are held to have debunked science, showing that alleged scientific truth is socially constructed, Latour notes that the correspondence account of truth is so unsatisfactory that no philosopher would seriously defend it; but no one can be convinced by a purely social construction-ist account for more than three minutes, he says, because the unpredictable action of non-human agents is crucial.[28] When Latour was asked in an interview "what themes do you look upon as most important?" when you look back on the many topics you have written about, he replied:

> I think I never had any other interest than the exploration of the many ways there are to find the truth of a situation. So, in that sense, my project is fully rationalist. What makes it different, is that I have been interested in the diversity of those forms of reason. This is why I have been led to the study of science, of technology, of law, of religion, of fiction, etc. to find, in each situation, how the differences between truth and falsity are being carried out.[29]

I stress that for this thinker associated with contemporary theory and post-modernism, and often treated as a social constructionist, the point is to see how people work through their different frameworks and assumptions to modify them and produce truth.

In many cases the difference between truth and falsity is the result of complex negotiations in the elaborate networks that connect human and non-human actors with institutions, procedures, and past knowledge. Ultimately, the point is that truth is complex and multidimensional. In the case I have been discussing we are not deal-ing with a simple correspondence between some proposition and reality; rather, we seem involved with more of a coherence theory of truth: the various constructions of Pasteur's experiments and the behavior that reveals the ferment, become integrated with other scientific observations as other scientists become convinced by claims tested by others; but, as he stresses, there is not just coherence, for the assent of oth-ers depends on their conviction that the appearance of this agent is an independent event. The processes by which scientists determine truth are complex, recursive, and involve considerations of coherence, referentiality, and pragmatic success. No single traditional account of truth will capture this adequately.

In fact, I think there is an analogy here with notion of meaning. Truth is like meaning: sometimes we say the meaning of an utterance is what someone means by

28    Latour, *Pandora's Hope*, 125.

29    Latour, "To Find the Truth of a Situation." https://www.holbergprisen.no/bruno-latour/inter-view.html Accessed 20 January 2019. Archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20160703102304/ https://www.holbergprisen.no/bruno-latour/interview.html.

it, as though the intention of a speaker determines meaning, and what we need to do is to check our understanding against what the speaker says he or she had in mind. At other times, we say the meaning is determined by the language itself—you might have intended to mean X but you actually said y, which by the conventions of the English language means something else. Sometimes we say context is what determines meaning: to know what this particular sentence means you must look at the context. And sometimes people even say that the meaning of a text is the experience of the reader. Intention, text, context, reader: Meaning is inescapable because it is not something simple or simply determined. It is both what we understand and what we try to understand. And I believe that *truth* is much the same: a fundamental notion but not simply determined and that functions differently in different contexts. Sometimes—in many everyday matters—correspondence seems to work, if we are not too concerned with philosophical adequacy; sometimes it is coherence that seems essential, and at other times pragmatic criteria are at work, and often all three. In many cases, as I have stressed, we have no difficulty at all determining truths and in the conduct of our lives depend on many truths. The commonsensical view of truth as correspondence with reality is not, as I have indicated, a satisfactory account from a philosophical point of view, but in appropriately specified contexts, which are common domains of experience, it is highly functional. Given our number system and accepted ways of counting, it is false and not true, for instance, that the crowd at Donald Trump's presidential inauguration was larger than Obama's, as Trump keeps claiming. Philosophical doubts about the nature of truth do not create an alternative fact.

To come back to humanists' feeling of embarrassment about claiming something is true, I believe that we need to overcome this inclination; we need to recognize that our practices, like those of Derrida and Latour, constantly involve implicit or explicit truth claims about the matters we are discussing, and it is our practice, and that of scientists, rather than the philosophical conundrums that ought to guide us. The fact that we can come to be convinced that something we believed was true is false is indication that we operate in a domain of distinctions, with criteria, and that we understand about the public nature of testing for truth.

It is especially imperative for politics today that we not hesitate to adjudicate truth claims and not allow our modesty and our embarrassment before Truth with a capital T to forestall our engagement; that we cultivate what Derrida called a passion for truth. It is important to recognize that to make a truth claim is not to deny human fallibility. Fallibility, the possibility that I have a belief that is not true, does not mean that for any belief of mine it might be false, that for no belief of mine can I claim truth. Taking oneself to be fallible is entirely consonant with recognizing that there is no possibility that some particular belief is false. The whole idea of fallibility, that something we took to be true turns out to be wrong, indicates our involvement

with distinguishing true from false and a certain commitment to truth. If in this skeptical day and age we cannot be animated by a passion for truth, let us at least acknowledge that we rely on truths in our everyday lives and continually aim at truth, that it is both a foundation and an aspiration, a goal to be pursued.

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