WHAT IS TRUTH?
RELATIVISM, POSTMODERNISM AND BEYOND?

Dr. PETER VARDY
Alternative Facts

- President Trump was inaugurated as President of the United States in January last year. President Obama was inaugurated four years previously.

- There was some dispute over the number of people attending both inaugurations. The Media reported that the crowds for Obama were larger than that for Trump but President Trump said that this was false and his crowds were larger. His view was supported by Fox News and other right wing media outlets in the U.S.

- His spokesman, when confronted with conflicting evidence, said that Trump has been reporting ‘Alternative Facts’ which were just as valid as those of the media.
Oxford Dictionary 2016 international word of the year: Post-truth
Most Americans would accept this without question.

Is it true and, if so, what would make it true?
A Time Magazine with Trump on the cover hangs in his golf clubs. It’s fake. wapo.st/2thpoYg
In the western world, many today hold that all ethical theories are relative to culture. This is RELATIVISM.

There are no absolutes.

- Slavery?
- Genocide?
- Paedophilia?
- Deliberate cruelty?
- Cannibalism?
- Number of wives?
- Sexual morality?
- Abortion, euthanasia, surrogacy....?
In Australia relativism dominates. Many claim that there are no absolutes.

Everything depends on culture, gender and sexuality.

The days of absolutes, it is held, are past and instead we have to live in a world where ethics is radically relative...

HOW DID WE GET TO THIS POSITION??
Six doctors each received more than a $1 million dollars for testifying that smoking does not cause cancer.
“Truth is so obscure in these times, and falsehood so established, that, unless we love the truth, we cannot know it.”

Blaise Pascal
The rise of modern atheism

▪ Modern atheism arose in the C19th, partly due to advances in science but also due to it becoming more acceptable to follow reason alone without any religious faith.

▪ ‘Biblical Criticism’ which started in Tubingen in Germany in the 1840s showed that the Bible was far more complex and less straightforward than had previously been supposed.

▪ The Bible, therefore, as a source of ultimate authority began to be questioned and science seem to be providing more and more of the answers previously provided by religion.
SOME KEY INFLUENCES ON ATHEISM IN THE C19th

FEUERBACH 1804 - 1872

BENTHAM 1748 - 1832

DARWIN 1809-1882

COMTE 1789-1857

MARX 1818 - 1883

NIETZSCHE 1844-1900

FREUD 1856-1939
Key figures in C19th atheism

▪ Ludwig Feuerbach – who saw human beings solely in material terms.

▪ Auguste Comte – who effectively invented sociology and showed the sociological function of religion in society. Religion was a primitive stage in human development that has to be transcended through science.

▪ Jeremy Bentham – The Utilitarian philosopher who argued that morality was grounded in a search for happiness and God was not needed.

▪ Charles Darwin – whose influence was immense through his discovery of natural selection explaining the variety of species and the lack of fixed natures.

▪ Sigmund Freud – the founder of psychology who explored the function of the human mind and how it was formed with a strong emphasis on sexual development.

▪ Karl Marx – whose political writings were foundational for communism and who saw religions as ‘the opium of the masses’. He had a profound effect on political thought and subverted traditional power structures.
The slaughter of the First World War led many to stop believing in God. How could one hold onto belief in an all good, loving God when events like Passchendaele or the Dardennels occurred?
DADAISM

- Dadaism represented art denying art. Art rejecting the traditional values of art.

- It began as an anti-art movement or a movement against the way art was appreciated by the civilized world.

- The Dadaists shared a nihilistic ethic. The word 'Dada' was intended to be childish and nonsensical.

- The revolt was against the senselessness of the first world war; the hypocrisy of those who saw art creating spiritual values. Civilization had broken down when thousands died in the trenches. The person 'of sensibility', one of Dada's early targets, could not take refuge in beauty.

- The first step was to make negative points - to attack the icons of the old culture. Marcel Duchamp in 1917 put a moustache and beard in black crayon on a reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa. 

  *(Mark Harden Artchive)*
EXERCISE

▪ What is this art intended to convey?
▪ Estimate its value?

▪ **Fountain** 1917

▪ *Marcel Duchamp 1887-1968*
  "Fountain is the most famous of Duchamp's so-called ready-made sculptures - ordinary manufactured objects designated by the artist as works of art. It epitomises the assault on convention and accepted notions of art for which Duchamp became known."
EXISTENTIALISM

ANDREW WYETH

Christina’s World (1948)
Humans create themselves

- Existentialism rejects any essence of what it is to be human.

- Human beings CREATE THEMSELVES by their free choices. Their choices are determinative and there is no external standard to which they have to conform.

- Nietzsche referred to Christian morals as a slave morality and called for people who were capable of doing so to live ‘beyond good and evil’.

- The existentialists developed this idea.
Human life is absurd.

- Human life is absurd. There is no meaning.
- There is no answer to questions such as ‘Why am I here?’ or ‘What is the purpose of life?’
- Jean-Paul Sartre called people to be authentic to themselves. To avoid ‘bad faith’ by conforming to society’s expectation or to someone else’s demands.
- He effectively says DARE TO BE FREE. Dare to create yourself.
Nausea, dread and anxiety

MAN RAY Les Larmes (Tears)
• THE SCREAM
• Edward Munch
Richard Tarnas expresses this well. “The situation recognized by John Dewey at the start of the century, that "despair of any integrated outlook and attitude is the chief intellectual characteristic of the present age," has been enshrined as the essence of the postmodern vision, as in Jean-Francois Lyotard's definition of postmodern as "incredulity toward metanarratives."” (cf Peter Vardy’s ‘What is Truth’ 2003)

Postmodernism claims a position of superiority from which it rejects all the hard striving of philosophy and any idea of a search for truth. It makes seriousness in living and seriousness about truth to be something to be derided - ideas whose time has passed and which are not worthy of serious discussion.
‘Truth’ has gone….. All that remains is ‘truth’.

- Existentialism emphasised the importance of the individual and had little idea of community.

- POSTMODERNISM arose from the Paris riots in 1968 and recognised the importance of context, culture and – perhaps above all – sexuality and gender in determining perspective.

- It, also, denied meaning and any idea of absolute truth. It also rejected any SINGLE meaning of art, literature or music.
POST-MODERN ART

- Effectively some forms of modern art say that all absolute meaning has gone – all absolutes of morality, truth or beauty are now discredited. All we have is the world in which we live and art seeks to force us to relate to the reality of this and to recognise that there are multiple realities.

- Truth and meaning is something we construct so the idea of ‘A MEANING’ of a painting is discredited. Meaning depends on the observer.

- Post-Modern art will, therefore, seek to shock and surprise us – to deconstruct our automatic reading of the art and thereby to show us alternative perspectives.

- There is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way of understanding art - every reaction is legitimate.

- There is an energy and enthusiasm about Post-Modern art but, perhaps, little idea of meaning.
Winner of the bicentennial Sydney Contemporary art exhibition prize outside the Sydney Opera House.
Slavoj Žižek (b. 1949)

- Žižek is one of the most influential modern, European philosophers. He challenges the use of ‘ideologies’

- Ideologies foster ideas that are believed by their subjects to be true – therefore reinforcing the existing status quo, in an instance of what Umberto Eco dubs “the force of the fake.”

- To criticise ideology, according to this position, it is necessary to unearth the truths that ideologies conceal from the subject’s knowledge. Then people will become aware of the political shortcomings of their current regimes, and be enable and motivated to improve them.
The divide today..

- Continental philosophers are far more engaged with art, music, politics and economics than are those in the Anglo-American schools who have become pre-occupied with linguistic analysis and definitions of terms.. As well as historical analysis..
Are there some truths that one can only learn by experience rather than being told about them? For instance what beauty or love is?

VERIFICATIONISM was an influential philosophic movement in the 1930s – 1950s. This argues that, in order to be MEANINGFUL, any statement must be capable of being verified by sense experience – e.g. by scientific means.

Any statement that cannot be verified like this is MEANINGLESS.

So statements about ethics, God, aesthetics are all MEANINGLESS. They have no content.

Few people today are verificationists but...
Throughout the Harry Potter books, Snape remains an ambiguous figure.

Harry is sure Snape is in on the side of Voldemort. He is head of Slytherin house, he dislikes Harry...

Dumbledore trusts Snape – but all the evidence is against it.

There is no way Harry can KNOW the truth, but there is a truth at stake...
We live in a ‘post-truth’ world.

- Truth depends on what is accepted as true.
- What is accepted as true depends on which media outlets you choose to inform you.
- The days of absolutes are post – we live in a ‘post-truth’ world where ‘culture’ has fragmented into multiple sub-cultures framed, informed and created by media outlets.
- What news outlets are on your smart phone?? What news sources do you access? Do you care what is True of what is not?
- For much Anglo-American philosophy, the idea of a search for truth as gone. Metaphysics is no longer studied and philosophy has become pre-occupied with linguistic analysis.
TAKE POLITICS..

- There is a tendency for most people to read newspapers and to access media outlooks which confirm their own views of the world.

- In the U.S. the millions of supporters of President Trump and the NRA rely very heavily on Fox News, Breitbart and Murdoch owned newspapers.

- Opponents of President Trump will access for instance CNN, the Washington Post and The New York Times.

- THESE ARE EXAMPLES OF CONFIRMATION BIAS.

- Children are brought up to see the world through the eyes of their parents and peers – they tend, with rare exceptions, not to seek objective knowledge...
Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands
The cause of the next world war?
Senkaku/Diaoyu islands
Claimed by Japan, China, South Korea and Taiwan
The Senkaku Islands dispute concerns a territorial dispute over a group of uninhabited islands known as the Senkaku Islands in Japan, the Diaoyu in China and Tiaoyutai Islands in Taiwan.

The islands have been controlled by Japan since 1895. Between 1945 and 1972 the islands were administered by the U.S. China disputed the US handover of authority to Japan in 1971 and has asserted its claims to the islands since that time. Taiwan (Republic of China) also claims the islands.

Japan argues that it surveyed the islands in the late 19th century and found them to be uninhabited.

China accepted Japanese sovereignty until the 1970s. China and Taiwan argue that documentary evidence prior to the 1895 indicated Chinese possession and the territory was seized by Japan (as was much other territory in the Second World War) so should be returned to China as other territory was.
In September 2012, the Japanese government purchased three of the islands from their "private owner', prompting protests in China.

On November 23, 2013, the China PRC set up the “East China Sea Air Defence Zone” which includes the Senkaku Islands. China now requires all aircraft entering the zone to file a flight plan and submit transponder information.

The Chinese and Japanese do not like each other! This pre-dates the Second World War although Japanese treatment of China (which it invaded) in the second world war was appalling. The present Japanese P.M. has visited the war graves of some of those responsible for the worst war crimes...

In April 2018 three Australian warships challenged the claims of China by sailing close to the disputed islands.
Hovering in the background is the USA...

▪ The U.S. has a formal defence treaty with Japan, Taiwan and South Korea obliging the USA to come to the aid of any of these countries if they are attacked.

▪ The U.S. has confirmed that this treaty covers the Senkaku islands.

▪ Australia would probably come in on the side of the U.S..
In an encyclical ‘Fides et Ratio’, Pope John Paul said in 1998 that Postmodernism and Relativism were the biggest challenge facing the world in the modern era.

The ‘post-truth’ era of Trump has confirmed that he was right..

We are claimed to be in the era of ‘fake news’ – but the word ‘fake’ implies there is something true, and maybe this is not the case!
Pontius Pilate’s question when confronted by Jesus was ‘WHAT IS TRUTH?’

The Christian claim is that the paradox of this question was that it was put to Jesus who, Christians claim WAS THE TRUTH. Truth was represented in a single human life – that of Jesus of Nazareth.

This is not something that can be proved by science – it had to be recognised.

Jesus asked his followers ‘WHY DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?’ and there were many answers – some said he was mad, some a Hebrew Prophet come again, some the Messiah. BUT THERE IS A TRUTH AT STAKE.
‘Science can provide a total explanation’

The argument is that science can in principle explain everything – it is just a matter of time.

Some things, of course, cannot yet be explained but this is not because they are in principle inexplicable by science but because we have not yet discovered the correct scientific explanation.

It is important to recognise that this is an assumption. It may be true – but it is a faith assumption that cannot be proved.

It also fails the verificationists own test since no empirical evidence can prove it to be true or false.
Until quite recently, many scientists have considered their understanding of the world to be right. Newton is a good example – he and his followers considered that Natural Laws were absolute. Indeed at the end of the 19th Century, some physicists were forecasting that soon there would be nothing left for them to do.

Then came Einstein, chaos theory and quantum mechanics. The old understandings had to be rejected.

YET Newton’s laws still function very effectively at the macro, every day level. It is at the micro level that problems arise.

Science does NOT advance by steady progress. Rather a paradigm is developed and then explored and then a sudden shift of paradigm takes places which is generally resisted.
It was Thomas Kuhn who developed the crucially important idea of paradigm shifts. Scientists, he held, work within a given paradigm which is generally accepted and explored. A new paradigm represents a rupture of the understanding. It challenges many of the old ideas. It is not a development but a total shift of perspective and understanding.

The shift from one paradigm to another comes suddenly – as a result of an insight or intuition rather than progressive development.

Both paradigms can make sense of the observations, but one will come to command wider acceptance and therefore will be adjudged ‘true’.

**SCIENCE PROGRESSES AS FOLLOWS:**
- PRE SCIENCE (here there are no agreed theories)
- NORMAL THEORIES (here a paradigm has been established)
- CRISIS (here the paradigm begins to break down)
- REVOLUTION (here the old paradigm is rejected)
- NEW NORMAL SCIENCE (here the new paradigm is established)
- NEW CRISIS
- NEW REVOLUTION
- NEW NORMAL SCIENCE
- Etc.!
THE HEAVY HAND OF THE PAST

SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND ‘ESTABLISHED WISDOM’
Paradigm shifts

- Thomas Kuhn suggested that science advances by ‘paradigm shifts’ – shifts from one way of doing science to another. This means a shift of conceptual framework.

- The trouble is that supporters of the old framework will tend to resist any challenge to ‘received wisdom’

- Scientists gain recognition by their papers being cited in refereed journals – but acceptance by these journals is not easy if ‘received wisdom’ is questioned.
The causes of ulcers...

- As a junior doctor in 1984, Barry Marshall was sure the medical establishment was wrong about the cause of stomach ulcers.
- People believed that ulcers were due to stress, bad diet, alcohol and susceptible genes.
- Marshall believed ulcers were due to bacteria – but received wisdom was that no bacteria could live in the stomach.
- Working with a pathologist he found a bacterium called ‘Helicobacter pylori’ in all duodenal ulcer patients and in 77% of gastric ulcer patients.
... The causes of ulcers

- Marshall swallowed the bacteria. He did not consult the ethics committee nor tell his wife.
- Within three days he was in pain, was nauseous and developed gastritis. Shortly after ulcers developed.
- He published his research but no-one took any notice. He was not a gastroenterologist and had no established track record. His research was ignored. Gastroenterologists knew nothing about microbiology in those days...
- Watson cured people with chronic ulcers in weeks but it took until 1989 for ‘The Lancet’ to use the word ‘cure’.
- It took another eight years before the results were accepted – meanwhile millions suffered.
- Marshall considered it immoral that established doctors refused to listen...
The ethics of ‘pathological disbelief’

▪ Brian Josephson was awarded a Nobel prize for work on superconductivity as a 22 year old at the University of Cambridge.

▪ He came to find superconductivity uninteresting and switched his research. He said

▪ “I went to a conference when the French immunologist Jacques Benviste was talking about the discovery that water has a ‘memory’ of compounds which were once dissolved in it – which might explain how homeopathy works. His findings provoked irrational strong reactions from scientists and I was struck by how badly he was treated. I was struck that when science is done by consensus it can get things badly wrong. I feel its important to try and correct the errors that scientists are making.”

▪ “I call it ‘pathological disbelief’. The statement “Even if it were true I would not believe it.”
▪ The motto at the top of Josephson’s web site is ‘TAKE NOBODY’S WORD FOR IT’.

▪ The evidence for telepathy is considerable yet scientists don’t take it seriously. They move from:
  ▪ Hard to reproduce, to It is false

▪ Scientists who believe telepathy exists are therefore forced to keep quiet about it. “If most scientists denounce an idea, this should not be taken as proof that it is false.”
  ▪ “If you say that you accept the reality of the paranormal, this automatically affects your reputation.”
  ▪ “People have vested interests, and their projects and reputations would be threatened if certain things were true (such as cold fusion!!)”
In Geography, does one’s perception of the world depend on the projections one is using?

In English, is there any way of reading a piece of literature that is not dependent on culture, sexuality and gender?

In Music, does beauty depend on the culture of the listener?

In Science, does truth depend on what is agreed within the framework that ‘everyone’ accepts?

In Economics, does the truth of economic theory depend on the basic assumptions that are made and, therefore, that can be equally valid rival theories dependent on different assumptions?

In Psychology, does sanity depend on agreement within a culture as to who is sane and who is not?

In History, does what is true depend on who is writing the history?
Many today hold that relativism rules. There are no absolutes, everything depends on perspective – on culture, gender and sexuality.

This view stems from POST-MODERNISM which rejects the idea of any ‘meta narrative’ – any single reading of a text or understanding of a piece of literature, music or art.

Many today hold that the days of absolutes are past...

BUT...
“I have wished to understand the hearts of men. I have wished to know why the stars shine. And I have tried to apprehend the Pythagorean power by which number holds sway above the flux.”

Bertrand Russell
What is reality?

▪ Only the naive now think that reality is just what we see and experience – it is far more weird and complex than that.

▪ Our language and concepts are adequate for medium size physical objects but they are inadequate when we change the scale.

▪ Lets start with a normal scene – a picnic – but then go outwards from the surface layer by ten times the distance every ten seconds.
Reality?

- We take reality to be reality as it appears to us.
- However Immanuel Kant showed that this is wrong.
- We are prisoners of our senses and our language.
- The world we experience and the only world we can know is the PHENOMENAL WORLD.
- The world as it really is, the NOUMENAL WORLD, is in principle unknowable.
Most people take ‘reality’ to mean ‘reality as we perceive it to be’. Epistemology is the study of knowledge – but knowledge of WHAT REALITY?

Once one looks at the universe as a whole, reality is rather different and we are only dimly beginning to comprehend ‘reality’.

There may now be NINE or more dimensions – the ‘reality’ of our four dimensions is, mathematics shows, clearly only part of the picture of the universe.
Accessing reality...

· SO... If we are to talk of ‘reality’ we need to recognise that:
  · We are partly prisoners of scale... We see the world that we would expect on the scale with which we are familiar
  · We are partly prisoners of our senses – We see the world through out sense organs and are limited by them
  · Reality as a whole is something much broader than that.

· HOW MIGHT WE ACCESS IT??
Plato

- Plato and the cave.
- Plato argued that we are limited by our senses and all we see is shadows.
- We need to use our reason and intelligence to try to pierce through the shadows to understand the ‘Forms’ – absolute ideas which exist beyond time and space.
- Mathematics provides the best route to try to access this broader reality.

“LET NO-ONE UNSKILLED IN MATHEMATICS ENTER HERE”
"LET NO-ONE UNSKILLED IN MATHEMATICS ENTER HERE"
Pythagoras was a Greek philosopher and mathematician.

He discovered the relationship between mathematics and harmony in music. All these illustrations show the relationship 4, 6, 8, 9, 12 and 16.
Most mathematicians are realists..

- Almost every major mathematician in the top Universities are realists about maths (cf Professor Roger Penrose and his surveys)
- They consider that when we are doing maths, we are discovering something – the universe is, essentially, mathematical and obeys mathematical laws.
- Maths is NOT something created by human beings...
- The human body, almost everything in nature seems to obey mathematical rules.
- Plato held that mathematics, beauty AND MUSIC are directly linked.
Challenging what everyone accepts...

- Order and Mathematics seem to underpin the whole universe. IF THIS IS THE CASE NOT EVERYTHING IS RELATIVE!

- We are fed stories that suit those who have an interest in us thinking in a particular war – it is very hard to work out what is really true from what we are told is true

- We need to question the motives behind stories we are told
  - For instance about smoking and cancer in the past or, today, about global warming – or Iran!
DIVIDING FIBONACCI NUMBERS

▪ If two successive numbers in the Fibonacci series are taken (1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34..) and the higher is divided by the number before it then a ratio emerges which gets closer and closer to the golden number.

▪ This has a value of approximately 1.618034.
The Fibonacci spiral
- The Fibonacci spiral
Cyclone
NOT EVERYTHING IS RELATIVE

- Order, meaning and potential seem to be built into the very fabric of the universe.

- At the quantum level, reality may really be random and, in principle, impossible to measure or predict (since measuring an electron changes it) but at a higher level there is order.

- NOT EVERYTHING IS RELATIVE!

- Once this is accepted, then the post-truth idea is seen to be nonsense.

- Plato argued, starting from maths., that beauty, harmony, meaning, ethics and the structure of the universe itself are absolutes – the reverse of randomnesss.
PLATO’s CAVE

- Plato argued that we live in a ‘shadow universe’ and, behind it, is true reality – which is timeless and spaceless.
  - Which is why this session started with moving clouds

- Through mathematics we can get in touch with this timeless reality which is the foundation for harmony in music, for justice and for beauty – these are not merely relative.

- Immanuel Kant made a similar point – the world we experience is the world seen through our human framework. We cannot help experience the universe as we do (the phenomenal world) but the world as it really is in inaccessible (the noumenal world)
  - As we begin to understand Quantum reality, we understand that this is the case.
The idea that all truth is relative is nonsense.

- EITHER Captain Cook ate an apple when he landed in Australia OR he did not.
- EITHER the moon is made of green cheese OR it is not.
- EITHER there is life on Mars OR there is not.
- EITHER Israel has nuclear weapons OR it does not.
- EITHER Trump had a sexual relationship with Stormy Daniels OR he did not.
- EITHER an archangel dictated the Qur’an to Mohammad OR he did not.
- EITHER there is a life after death OR there is not.
- EITHER life has meaning and purpose OR we are simply animals that have evolved by natural selection and the only meaning we have is to reproduce.
Fake news and Fake truth are powerful and influential because most of us are too lazy to challenge what conventionally appears to be the case.

This has been the same throughout history – most people do not think or look beneath the surface and, because of this, they fail to see the deeper meaning or deny meaning and truth completely.

TRUTH IS HARD.. It is not easy to arrive at and we are surrounded by approximations and the constant possibility of error – but that does not mean that there is not truth to be found!

We are constantly fed ‘fake news’ – and our task is to separate the stories we are told from what is really the case.
Philosophy...

- Philosophy means a love of wisdom – philosophers are seekers of truth.

- Most people cannot be bothered to think deeply (or at all!).
  - ‘Let’s just be happy’
  - ‘Let’s just have a barbecue or go surfing’
  - ‘The only aim of life is to have a bigger car/house/more attractive partner/better job before we die.’

- Philosophy says there is more to life than this and that TRUTH MATTERS.

- Human beings are not simply robots to be programmed by our parents, our schools, our peer groups and the media – we have the freedom to think independently...