

Post-Truth as a Procrastination of Enlightenment

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In recent years the cultural pessimistic position has become known, according to which we live in an “age of post-truth.” This thesis is supported by the observation of an increasing use of *argumenta ad passiones* in politics. In contrast to this view, I believe that “time” and “representation” play a more decisive role in individual post-truth arguments than the appeal to *passiones*. By analysing typical post-truth arguments, I arrive at a much more positive view on the present age: the designation of individual arguments as “post-truth” is already an expression of a process of enlightenment.

Keywords: post-truth politics, *argumentum ad passiones*, Sweden argument, appeal to emotion, rational representationalism

Usually the term “post-truth” (or “post-factual”) is associated with the concept of emotion: post-truth arguments target the recipient’s emotions and are supported by the fact that they are forwarded by authorities or by a broad mass of people. In the classical terminology of dialectics and *eristic*, a post-truth argument conceals an *argumentum ad passiones* (argument to emotion), which is supported by an *argumentum ad verecundiam* (argument from authority) or an *argumentum ad populum* (argument from majority). These definitions are usually accompanied by the culturally pessimistic diagnosis that we are living in an age of post-truth due to the multitude of post-truth arguments, as if the age of post-truth is now dawning after the age of truth.

In contrast to this usual definition, which puts *argumenta ad passiones* in the foreground, I will argue in this paper that emotions play only a secondary role in understanding the concept of post-truth. In my opinion, there are two factors that are more decisive for the effectiveness of post-truth arguments: on the one hand, I believe that time is an essential factor for the effectiveness of post-truth arguments; and, on the other hand, the loss of the

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concepts of truth and reference in modern rationalist epistemology favours post-truth arguments.

Furthermore, I believe that the debate on a post-truth era should not be interpreted as a cultural pessimism. After all, the diagnosis of a post-truth age can only be justified if we know that certain arguments appear more often in a given period of time, and that these arguments later turn out to be “alternative,” untrue or false. But the knowledge of such arguments is, in my opinion, an expression of investigation, revealing and thus enlightenment. Both individual post-truth arguments and the general diagnosis of a post-truth era thus point to a process of investigation, revealing, and enlightenment that follows both in time.

I consider the term “enlightenment” to be the most appropriate for the process described here: it describes both the individual activity of enlightenment (i.e. a process of investigation, research, revealing etc.) and the general tendency (of a society or an age) that individuals or institutions are allowed to pursue this activity. Especially the general epoch designation of the enlightenment-term seems to me to be more appropriate than the expression of an “age of post-truth”: To me, “enlightenment” stands for a general state in which some judgments are true and some judgments are not true (and, of course, with the goal that truth prevails). The expression of an “age of post-truth” implies a general either-or decision: either we live in an “age of post-truth,” in which all statements are doubtful or even untrue, or we live in an “age of truth,” in which all judgments are true and certain. The two either-or expressions, however, seem to me to characterize the current state only exaggerated. At first, I will present a simple model for analysing the post-truth concept in section 1. I distinguish between specific arguments and a general time diagnosis. I also distinguish between the social actors who transmit post-truth arguments and those who receive them. This model will show why emotions are secondary and why the time factor plays a much more decisive role for an epistemological analysis of post-truth. I will clarify why the focus of the epistemological analysis is on those actors who consciously make use of them and who are immune to enlightening processes of post-truth arguments.

In section 2, I will argue for the second thesis, namely that the crisis of the concept of truth and representation in philosophy does not prevent, but rather supports, the influence of post-truth arguments in academic, political and public debates. I will clarify this thesis with a rationalist epistemology, which explicitly opposes the notion of truth and reference of naïve representationalism. This rationalism advocates that reference and truth are concepts that should not play a central role in epistemological models. It follows that this philosophy itself is part of the general post-truth period di-

agnosis. It is striking that the rationalism presented dominates precisely in those areas in which post-truth arguments are increasingly enlightened by non-philosophical actors.

Finally, in section 3, the so-called “Sweden argument” from 18 February 2017 is analysed in particular. I would like to present a proposal for the analysis of such post-truth arguments, which is based on the model of a non-naïve, but rational, representationalism. This rational representationalism advocates that references and representations, which are important for the concept of truth, are already part of rationalism and should therefore not be avoided. The reference (to sensually perceptible reality) is a concept that can only be meaningfully replaced in our epistemological models if one also accepts that post-truth arguments cannot be enlightened.

1. Post-truth and enlightenment

In this section, I will first analyse the post-truth concept and point out that it can be used as a specific argument as well as a general time diagnosis. Both forms of use presuppose the concepts of investigation, revealing, and enlightenment. I will then propose a simple model of the social actors. I differentiate between those who use post-truth arguments and those who receive them. It will become apparent that the concept of emotion does not necessarily have to play a role in connection with those arguments. More important is the period of time between the occurrence of a particular argument and its enlightenment as a post-truth argument. Above all, I will focus on those social actors who deliberately use and receive post-truth arguments. In my opinion, it is primarily the task of philosophical epistemology to provide a model that focuses on these social actors and their arguments.

As I have already announced, I believe that the rhetoric of a “post-Truth era” already implies the process of investigation, revealing, and enlightenment. The rhetoric is part of a diagnosis that an unusually high level of false information, untrue reports or alternative facts, so-called “post-truth arguments” (= PTA), occur within a certain period of time. The meaning is therefore more moderate and relative than the general expression itself. In order to be able to make this diagnosis at all, however, PTAs must have been followed by processes of investigation, revealing, and enlightenment (= PE) through which the individual arguments were exposed as false or untrue. A clear distinction must be made between the individual case and the overall diagnosis: it is only through the individual PE of a PTA that it can be attributed to the post-truth age. From the sum of the individual PTAs and the respective PE results the total diagnosis, according to which one is living in an age of post-truth. However, since this overall diagnosis can only be established through individual cases of individual enlightenment, the realization

that one is living in the age of post-truth is already an expression of a general age of enlightenment.

PTAs are particularly problematic if they have already had an effect on *recipients* (consumers of arguments), either (R1) temporarily or (R2) in the long term. This can happen for two reasons: (R1) there is a time difference between the introduction of the PTA and the PE, so that the recipient has committed a particular act in which she was influenced by the PTA and in which the act could have been avoided if she would have been aware of the PE. These recipients have thus fallen victim to unawareness. In this case, the time between the occurrence of PA and PE plays a major role. (R2) The recipient agrees with the PTA without taking note of PE, even if she had previously had the opportunity to do so. In this case, it is not ignorance but the prejudice that makes recipients receptive to PTAs. As I will argue in more detail later on, it is the time before the appearance of the PTA which is crucial for those recipients.

Speakers (producer of arguments) use the PTAs for two reasons, either (S1) unconsciously or (S2) consciously. (S1) Speakers unconsciously use PTAs in the time span (R1) that extends between the reception of the PTA and the PE. They do not (yet) know that they have endorsed a PTA and therefore continue to disseminate it so that other recipients could also endorse it. (S2) Speakers consciously use a PTA because they expect to gain an advantage from it. However, they are also consciously taking a risk: they know that the validity of their PTA will be enlightened by a PE in a foreseeable future and may therefore have no or even a negative effect on recipients. On the one hand, speakers like to take this risk because they know that a group of recipients (R2) will not be convinced by a PE in the long run. On the other hand, they also take the risk as they hope that the other group of recipients (R1) will endorse a large number of PTAs before they are confronted with any PE. Thus, they try to immunise the one group (R1) by PTAs and make them resistant before any PE occurs. As a result, members of (R1) become permanently to members of the other group (R2). These speakers know that their PTAs are at risk from PEs, but they also know that there is usually a time difference between PTAs and PEs, in which (R1) can become (S1) or in which (R1) can become (R2), or in which (R2) consolidates their opinion. The conscious use of PTA is therefore a postponement syndrome: post-truth is a procrastination of enlightenment.

This procrastination of enlightenment is reflected in various phenomena in which a certain period of time elapses between the expression of the PTA and its rectification by PE: (1) the procrastination of enlightenment becomes evident when recipients of PTAs regret their own actions retrospectively after they have gone through an PE. For instance, some Brexit proponents

regret the election decision to leave the EU; some republicans regret their election decision in the US presidential election campaign in 2016. They feel betrayed by PTAs and therefore usually belong to (R1). (2) The procrastination of enlightenment is also evident in the fact that individual PTAs as such can be clarified by means of so-called “fact checking”: for example, it was shown that the “Bowling Green Massacre” argument of 2 February 2017 or the so-called “Sweden argument” of 18 February 2017 are based on false or so-called “alternative facts.” I will elaborate on this in section 3. (3) The procrastination of enlightenment will also be shown by the fact that PTAs are endorsed, even though the facts speak against these arguments. It is therefore likely that the alleged PTA will turn out to be a deliberate misjudgment: e. g. when arguments and facts are put forward against climate change independently of the prevailing scientific opinion (keyword: march of science). Here, speakers and recipients deliberately procrastinate PE because they either promise a temporary profit of PTA or they will not experience the consequences when PE becomes obvious.

Although the model used so far has not even been worked out in detail, I hope that I have first of all shown that emotions or *argumenta ad passiones* do not have to be an essential part of the analysis of the concept of post-truth. Emotions may be a single means, but they are neither a necessary means nor the goal of PTAs. In other words, *argumenta ad passiones* can be a sufficient reason that (R1) may be convinced of PTAs for a certain period or that (R2) may even be permanently convinced of PTAs; but they are not the necessary condition to understand certain PTAs or the general time diagnosis. If we were to claim that our general time diagnosis is based on the fact that *argumenta ad passiones* alone are becoming increasingly effective, we would also have to explain why people are yet more receptive to emotional arguments than 50 years ago. We could probably only support this by claiming that the nature of man has changed—in contrast to the era of truth. I think it is unlikely that such support can be plausible.

Rather, I believe that the factor of time between expressing and receiving PTAs and PE is more important than the factor of emotion: (R1) and (S1) are to be avoided by immediately revealing arguments as PTAs; (R2) and (S2) can be limited by not immunising themselves against PE for a long time. With regard to the last point, one could perhaps see an analogy between religious indoctrination and enlightenment. Again, enlightenment philosophers of the 18th century have repeatedly pointed out that it is a temporal factor that makes people immune to PE or to better arguments in general (e.g. indoctrination). This aspect can also be applied to today’s political situation.

Which parts of the argument and which actors traditionally fall into the realm of philosophical epistemology can also be explained by the model: in (R₁) and (S₁), there are externalist reasons why PTAs work. It is largely due to the speed of today's communication and not to the emotion that PTAs are increasingly endorsed without a PE taking effect. In my opinion, (R₁) and (S₁) address issues and problems that affect media, communication and political science, as they evoke the question of how to prevent or enlighten PTAs in new media and political debates as quickly as possible. (R₂) and (S₂), on the other hand, touch upon internalist reasons and concern the values and ideology of the actors. The study of (R₂) and (S₂) thus falls into the areas of philosophy, educational science and psychology, since it has to take into account the material correctness and formal validity of arguments as well as the openness of the social actors to arguments.

2. Naïve representationalism and rationalism

To analyse the post-truth concept, I have developed a simple model in the previous section, which does not focus on the concept of emotion. Rather, I have pointed out that it is the factor of time that sharpens the concept of post-truth. Social actors who consciously use PTAs for their own benefit deliberately postpone the PE. I also pointed out that it was and still is epistemology which must contribute to the analysis of PTAs in the field of philosophy. This scientific discipline must be expected to provide a model for analysing and enlightening PTAs. In practice, however, this discipline not only proves to be incapable of acting, but it even unwittingly supports the overall diagnosis of a post-truth age. This thesis will be discussed in this section.

In the history of philosophy, one can put forward various paradigmatic shifts as to why an enlightenment of post-truth arguments cannot be supported by modern epistemology. At this point, I will mention only a few shifts which have led to the fact that modern epistemology has produced a very influential post-truth rationalism in the present, which shows itself to be incapable of acting against PTAs and thus also against the overall diagnosis of a post-truth era.

Whereas Ludwig Wittgenstein and Rudolf Carnap had favored a theory in the early days of the Viennese Circle that depicted all states of affairs in the logic of linguistic propositions, from the end of the 1930s onwards they criticized this picture theory as one-sided and reductionist. In the 1950s, Quine defended the thesis of an "inscrutability of reference," according to which the reference of a proposition or its state of affairs cannot be definitively clarified. In the same decade, Wilfrid Sellars spoke of a "myth of the given" and replaced the idea of extralingual states of affairs or mental states with an

analysis of inferential relations and semantic contexts. In the 1960s, Edmund Gettier showed that in some cases the criteria for the concept of knowledge are generally fulfilled, but that the truth criterion does not necessarily apply to all cases subsumed. In the 1970s, Richard Rorty finally draws the conclusion and declares the project of epistemology and semantic analysis to have failed, since both disciplines are based on the problematic concepts of truth, the given, reference and depiction.

At the end of these shifts there is a very influential post-truth rationalism which (1) laments classical truth theories as components of a naïve representationalism and (2) tries to substitute the concept of truth with logical-syntactic and pragmatic concepts.

(1) An exemplary definition of naïve representationalism states that “A represents B if and only if A appreciably resembles B,” or “A represents B to the extent that A resembles B” (Goodman 1968, 3). However, since resemblance is reflexive and symmetrical, the concept of representation makes no sense. In addition, the assertion of a resemblance between a proposition (A) and a state of affairs (B) leads to a hiatus of the intended unity of resemblance, namely a separation “into what is by nature a representing and what by nature can only be represented” (Brandom 2000, 46). A picture theory must therefore be able to do more than claim a resemblance or unity between states of affairs and propositions. On the one hand, the attempt to point out an extra-linguistic state is already part of the language and, on the other hand, for most of the words we find no extra-linguistic states to which we can refer (cf. Peregrin 2014, 25). The dualist theory of modern epistemology thus necessarily culminates into the impasse of naïve representationalism, which opens a hiatus between world and logic, that cannot be explained (cf. Rorty 1980).

(2) The consequence of rationalism is to reject the dualistic theory of a representation between world and logic and to acknowledge “true” as an intrinsic property of language (McDowell 1994). A statement is true if it is consistent with the given logical-syntactic rules and thus becomes expressible in a specific linguistic context: “‘True’, then, means semantically assertible [...] and the varieties of truth correspond to the relevant varieties of semantical rule” (Sellars 1968, 101). “The root notion of truth is then that a sentence is true just in case, if uttered assertorically, it would have served to make a correct assertion” (Dummett 1994, 166). The strong rationalism speaks not only of semantic rules but also and mainly of logic-syntactical derivability: an assertion is justified if one can deduce it logically from already justified assertions (cf. Peregrin 2014, section 5). The consequence is that truth is no longer shown by a mysterious resemblance or unity that naïve representationalism has declared. Rather, one can speak of “true” when a speaker is

entitled to do so in accordance with the logical-syntactical rules and when the proposition is endorsed by recipients in a dialogue. In other words, in order for a proposition to be declared true, the speaker must not only be authorized for logical and syntactic reasons, but she and her argument must also be endorsed by the recipient: “Taking a claim or belief to be true is not attributing an especially interesting and mysterious property to it; it is doing something else entirely. It is endorsing the claim oneself” (Brandom 2000, 119). This results in a dualism again, but this dualism is inter-linguistic. It consists of a linguistic dialogue between two actors and no longer between a linguistic proposition and extra-linguistic state of affairs. Truth is no longer regarded as a reference to the outside world, but is dissolved into internal language relations and its logical rules (cf. Price 2013).

As a consequence, we can say: not only does the traditional concept of truth of naïve representationalism thus disappear from epistemology, but it dissolves into its constituent parts. The general concept of truth is of course vividly discussed and problematized in contemporary philosophy. But it is precisely through this discussion and problematization that it is not applied there in the representationalist sense in which it is needed: A generally accepted philosophical theory of fact-checking still seems to me to be a long way off. Instead of the representationalist concept of truth, influential post-truth rationalism speaks of entitlement and endorsement. This rareness of an application-oriented concept of truth in epistemology is thus itself a component of our post-truth diagnosis: modern epistemology makes it difficult to deal with PTAs. Even if the philosophical discussions are prolific and valuable, they do not offer a solution for political and public debates and are therefore only a procrastination of enlightenment.

3. Rational representationalism

I have described in section 1 why we should differentiate between specific PTAs and a general time diagnosis when examining the concept of post-truth. The reason for claiming that we live in the age of post-truth is based on the impression of an increased appearance of PTAs in political, public and scientific debates. However, these PTAs are not simply emotionally stained arguments, but they are based on a time delay of the enlightenment, for whose analysis epistemology should provide a suitable model. However, I described in section 2 that modern epistemology itself has entered the state of modern post-truth rationalism through several shifts and crises. Instead of solving the problem of the concept of truth and offering an improved model of knowledge, epistemology has retreated to an influential rationalism that regards truth often as a game of entitlement and endorsement.

In what follows, I will argue that we need an epistemology that neither falls back into the naivety of representationalism nor into the impracticality of post-truth rationalism. I believe that the post-truth diagnosis shows us that epistemology has to do more than to analyse entitlement and endorsement. I will use the Sweden argument as an example to show that speakers can be syntactically entitled to use PTAs and that recipients pragmatically endorse these PTAs. Nevertheless, these arguments are so obviously false or untrue that they must be classified as PTAs.

In the context of epistemology, rational representationalism represents a middle way, which on the one hand takes the criticism to naïve representationalism seriously, but on the other hand does not accept that epistemology without a representational part makes sense if we want to cope with the danger of PTAs. I therefore believe that we should include the syntactic rules of entitlement and the pragmatic reaction of endorsement in our epistemology, without substituting them fully with the concept of truth. Truth should therefore distinguish a dimension that can evaluate arguments independently of logical-syntactic entitlement and pragmatic endorsement.

I would like to give an example of why this is necessary. Let us have a look at the Sweden argument which can be presented as follows:

- (1) All countries that do not vet people are not safe, because something has happened there.
- (2) “All countries” include Germany, Sweden, Belgien (Brussels), France (Nice, Paris).
- (3) We’ve got to keep our country safe and we have therefore to vet people.

It is clear that (3) is the goal of the whole argumentation. Whether (1) and (2) take on the function of the premises and (3) the function of the conclusion depends on the argumentation model we use. With the rationalist model, this argument cannot be exposed as a PTA: (1), (2) and (3) each correspond to semantic as well as to strong logic-syntactic rules; a deductive analysis also shows a formal validity, if we regard (3) as a contraposition of (1); (2) is the backing for (1) and only provides the data at all in order to accept (1) justifiably. If one looks at the emotional reaction of the recipients who were present when the Sweden argument was expressed, it seems that the argument was initially endorsed: the recipients belong at least in the group (R1) and I will still show that some of them also belong to (R2). According to the rationalist model, the substitution concepts of truth, namely entitlement and endorsement, thus seem to be fulfilled.

The original formulation of (2) emphasized that something happened “last night” in Sweden. This part of (2) is emphasized by the speaker and presented in an emotional way. But the day after the argument was put forward, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (Utrikesdepartementet) in Sweden has linked the argument to the term “post-truth” (postsanning) as the proposition (2) is partly false or untrue: the Ministry declares that nothing similar to the events found in the other countries mentioned has happened (last night and in general) in Sweden and that the argument was therefore a PTA. That is also the reason why it finally became known as the “Sweden argument.”

We can regard this statement by the Ministry as a crucial part of the PE to the Sweden-PTA. The explanation that (2) is a PTA implicitly includes a counter-argument that also concerns (1) and (3): if nothing has happened in Sweden, then Sweden is not one of the countries that can be included in (1). It is also true that Sweden does not vet people (any more than in the other countries mentioned). But since nothing has happened in Sweden, it is not true that all countries that do not vet people are not safe. If (1) is not generally true, then the contraposition (3) is also problematic. However, we can only question the inference from (1) to (3) if we also see (1) as problematic. This is made possible above all by the criticism of (2).

The PE thus shows that a part of the argument, namely (1) and (2), cannot be checked deductively, but only inductively and through a representationalist approach. (2) represents a series of facts that can only be checked by referential processes, but not only by entitlement and endorsement. Nor does the validity of the argument depend on the emotional effect, even if such a reaction is accompanied by the speaker and recipient of the argument. The fact that the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs does not endorse the argument, unlike (R1) and (R2), is only possible through a referential “fact check,” but not through logical-syntactical rules or by approving others: (1), (2) or (3) are not questioned as being semantic-syntactically entitled. Furthermore, (2) is endorsed by (R2) even if (R1) has entitled EP. We see this in the fact that a few days after the publication of the ministry’s tweet, recipients (R2) maintain their opinion and claim that the argument had been right all along. If you look at other arguments that are treated as paradigmatic for PTAs, you almost always see that they contain inductive partial arguments that cannot be decided with the help of post-truth rationalism or only with the help of a theory of *argumenta ad passiones*.

I have presented the approach of rational representationalism here using only one example of epistemology. Finally, I would like to give some short comments on what distinguishes naïve from rational representationalism in general: I have already pointed out that rational representationalism, un-

like naïve representation, does not exclude the logical-semantic and pragmatic dimension. In contrast to post-truth rationalism, however, it does not dissolve the concept of representation and truth into semantic-logical and pragmatic dimensions. Rather, it points out that the dualism of the concept of truth is located in linguistic terms, but is not limited to the linguistic dimensions between speaker and recipient. The basic idea of rational representationalism is based on the indication that representations are not a mysterious characteristic, as post-truth rationalists claim, but have always been an essential part of language. This is demonstrated by the fact that in language there are basic expressions such as “depicting,” “conclusion,” “including,” etc., without which we do not understand the arguments we are talking about. Those metaphors are residual elements of representations that have remained contained in the rational expression of human beings. Only by understanding the role of representation in our language we can understand what we mean when we say that rationalism includes representation or that post-truth is a procrastination of enlightenment.

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