

Truth

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Course Description

“Alternative facts” and “fake news” have fueled growing concerns that we are entering a “post-truth” society. But what exactly is truth, and why should we care about it? We will address this question over the course of this quarter by examining contemporary views on the role of truth in meaning and communication; challenges to these views from uncertainty and subjectivity; arguments for and against different conceptions of truth; expressions of skepticism about the value of truth; different categories of non-truth (lies vs. bullshit); and how all of these issues bear on the relation between truth, belief and decision making. Along the way, we will consider whether our claims to know certain things are always limited because they come from a particular perspective, and what value (if any) truth contributes to the well-lived life.

Assessment

The written work for the course will consist of weekly reaction papers, four take-home assignments, a group project and a final project:

- *Reaction papers:* Students must choose one article from the set of readings assigned each week and provide a 1-2 page overview of its core content: what is the main issue that it addresses, what is the main claim/proposal that it makes, and what are the most important arguments that are brought to bear in support of the proposal? *The first reaction paper is due on Thursday, March 30.*
- *Assignments:* Short assignments will be handed out on the Thursdays of weeks 2, 4, 6 and 8, and will be due by the following Tuesdays. These will consist of several short answer or short essay questions based on the readings and the material presented in class.
- *Group project:* Students will be divided into ten groups of five. Each group must identify a case study in “deviation from truth,” and give a 10-minute presentation (plus 5 minutes for questions) that addresses questions of the sort we will be addressing in class: What kind of deviation does it involve? What are its goals? Why/how does it work? Is it justified? Does it tell us something about the nature of truth, meaning, belief or judgment? And so forth.

Each group should submit a proposal (of no more than one page) by email to the instructor for approval no later than **Thursday, May 4** that describes and motivates the case study. Each group's case study must be distinct, and proposals will be approved on a first-come, first-served basis. Potential topics include: climate change, vaccinations, voter fraud, etc.

- *Final project*: Students must put together a final project on a topic of their choice that is related to the material covered in class. The exact nature of the final project is up to the student: it could be a research paper, a quantitative analysis of a relevant body of data, an experiment (or experimental design), an artistic or literary piece, etc. A one-page abstract describing and motivating the project must be submitted for approval by the instructor no later than **Thursday, May 25**; the final version of the project is due on **Thursday, June 8**.

Evaluation

Your evaluation will be based on the reaction papers (20%), the assignments (25%), the group project (25%), the final project (25%), and participation in class and discussion (5%).

The Plan

On the next page are the topics we will cover in the course, in the order that we will discuss them. Readings for each class will be available on Chalk.

Note: Please check Chalk regularly, as I may add or subtract a few readings based on class interest and discussion.

References

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- Davidson, Donald. 1967. Truth and meaning. *Synthese* 17:304–323.
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- Kaplan, Jonas, Sarah Gimbel, and Sam Harris. 2016. Neural correlates of maintaining one's political beliefs in the face of counterevidence. *Nature Scientific Reports* 6.
- Kennedy, Christopher. 2011. Ambiguity and vagueness: An overview. In *International handbook of semantics, second edition*, ed. Claudia Maienborn, Klaus von Heusinger, and Paul Portner, 507–535. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
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- Mercier, Hugo, and Dan Sperber. 2011. Why do humans reason? arguments for an argumentative theory. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 34:57–111.
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- Nussbaum, Martha. 1999. The professor of parody. *The New Republic Online* .
- Orwell, George. 1946. Politics and the english language. *Horizon* 76:252–265.
- Pennycook, Gordon, James Allan Cheyne, Nathaniel Barr, Derek J. Koehler, and Jonathan A. Fugelsang. 2015. On the reception and detection of pseudo-profound bullshit. *Judgment and Decision Making* 10:549–563.
- Russell, Bertrand. 1910. William james's conception of truth. In *Philosophical essays*. Longmans, Green & Co.
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- Searle, John. 1962. Meaning and speech acts. *The Philosophical Review* 71:423–432.
- Searle, John. 1965. What is a speech act? In *Philosophy in America*, ed. Max Black, 221–239. Cornell University Press.
- Turing, Alan. 1950. Computing machinery and intelligence. *Mind (New Series)* 59:433–460.
- Williamson, Timothy. 2015. *Tetralogue: I'm Right, You're Wrong*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Part 1: Truth and Evidence in Meaning and Communication

- 3.28 Introduction “The Only Truth” episode of Errol Morris’ *First Person* documentary series
- 3.30 Truth conditions Davidson (1967), ch. 2 of Chierchia and McConnell-Ginet (1990)
- 4.4 Implicature Grice (1975)
- 4.6 Speech acts Ch. 10 of Austin (1961), Searle (1965)
- 4.11 Assertion MacFarlane (2011)
- 4.13 Evidentiality Chs. 1 and 11 of Aikenvald (2004)

Part 2: Challenges

- 4.18 Uncertainty Kennedy (2011)
- 4.20 Subjectivity Ch. 1 of MacFarlane (2014), Searle (1962)

Part 3: Conceptions of Truth

- 4.25 Correspondence theories Aristotle *Metaphysics*, Russell (2001) [1912]
- 4.27 Pragmatism James (1907), Russell (1910)
- 5.2 Relativism *Rashomon*, Williamson (2015)
- 5.4 Skepticism Nietzsche ‘On truth and lie in an extra-moral sense’ and excerpts from *Beyond Good and Evil*, Lynch (2014)

Part 4: Bullshit

- 5.11 On Bullshit Frankfurt (1986), Cohen (2002)
- 5.13 Varieties of bullshit Orwell (1946), Nussbaum (1999), Butler (1999), Miller (1999)

Part 5: Truth and decision making

- 5.16 Truth and belief James (1919), Kaplan, Gimbel, and Harris (2016)
- 5.18 Truth, reasoning and argumentation Pennycook, Cheyne, Barr, Koehler, and Fugelsang (2015), Mercier and Sperber (2011)

Part 6: Group presentations

- 5.23 Groups 1-5
- 5.25 Groups 5-10

Part 7: Final thoughts

- 5.30 Does the capacity to deviate from truth make us human? Turing (1950), excerpts from *Crime and Punishment* and *The Dark Forest*