

## **Why Truth Matters**

**by Fauzia Rahman-Greasley**

Consider the statement: "I ate muesli for breakfast". That statement could be either true or false. I suspect that whether the statement is true or not is probably of no interest to you and that probably your reaction is: "So what?" or "Why does it matter?" If I am correct, then self-interest seems to trump truth.

On the other hand, the truth of the statement might matter if it provides you with some useful information; for example, if you are a researcher studying breakfast-eating habits. So, pragmatism seems to trump truth.

There are some statements you might prefer to be true, such as: "You are the wittiest, wisest and most charming person in the world." And; there are some situations in which lying might seem preferable to truthfulness, such as when your best friend asks your opinion on her new hair-cut. Lying can sometimes attain one's desires and avoid unpleasant situations. So, preference seems to trump truth.

There are other statements you might prefer to ignore, such as those about millions of starving children or the state of the economy. You might argue: (A) there is little or nothing you can do with these facts; (B) knowledge of the plight of others can be psychologically distressing; and, therefore, (C) it is better not to know.

It could be argued that: (1) Lying trumps truthfulness in terms of usefulness in desire-fulfilment; (2) desire-fulfilment trumps non-fulfilment; (3) if there is no objective Truth then truthfulness does not matter; and, therefore (4) Truth elimination –trumps Truth retention. Furthermore, it is possible to construct arguments for the elimination of Truth such as: (5) No one knows what truth is or where it comes from; so it is unexplained, unanchored and mysterious; (6) Truth is a relative concept; (7) The widespread notion of objective truth can be explained without resorting to mysterianism; (8) The concept of Truth is a human construct; (9) The human construction explanation trumps any other because it is more preferable and useful than the non-testable and non-provable theory of objective truth; (10) Therefore, objective truth is a redundant myth.

The beauty of the human construct theory is that, if truth is merely subjective, then the notion of truth binds us if and only if we allow it to. The problem with these arguments is that, despite Hume's assertion that "Reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions", the world does not conform itself to our wishes.

I accept that there are psychological and political advantages for believing in 'the myth of truth'. However, I will argue that denying objective truth, whilst possibly psychologically protective in the short-term, is in the long-term self-destructive. But first I will present an alternative view for why truth matters and my objections.

In their 2006 book, *Why Truth Matters*, Benson and Stangroom argue that we are the only species for whom truth matters and the only species we know of that has the ability to find it out, and; thus, we have a kind of duty to do so (p.162). I take issue with their claim that the duty is imposed by no one. If it is true that we are the only species for whom truth matters and the only species we know of that has the ability to find it out, no moral imperative logically follows. As Hume tells us: we cannot get from an "is" to an "ought". Benson and Stangroom counter Hume's objection by asserting that we are the kind of creatures for whom matters of morals, of values, of justice, and of 'ought' rather than 'is', are of greater importance than facts. I concur that there does appear to be some evidence in favour of this view. On the other hand, it could be that what passes as moral behaviour is in fact motivated by self-interest rather than concern for others. Either way, I do not think their argument sufficient on its own to overcome the logical problem.

Benson and Stangroom attempt to knock down all the logical arguments for scepticism and relativism by asserting that "just about everybody already knows that they are false; and know it in a visceral, primal, almost physical way that precedes reflection" (p.40). To justify this claim they say: "as we move through our daily lives, we rarely question the epistemological status of those things we take to be more than probably true"; and "We hold beliefs of this kind in a 'they are true all the way down to

the bottom' sort of way"; and "Beliefs that we think really certainly true, rather than just probably true, trump other fuzzy, may-be true, may-be ~~original source text checked~~ ~~there are two x may be~~ false beliefs we hold" (pp.41-42). I concede that it is true that we don't doubt some things, for otherwise it is difficult to explain why we can confidently get out of bed in the morning without worrying about whether or not the floor will hold our weight. However, it does not follow from our natural lack of scepticism in *some* situations that we can *always* readily distinguish between truth and error.

That Benson's and Stangroom's argument is motivated by preference for self-interest rather than preference for truth is shown by the argument presented in their final chapter:

"[W]e have to think that there is something to find in order for enquiry to be genuine enquiry and not just an arbitrary game that does not go anywhere. We like games, but we also like genuine enquiry. *That's why truth matters*" (p. 180).

Surely this is the worst kind of argument? It is an argument justifying their desire for enquiry rather than a careful survey of empirical evidence. It is true that some people do indeed like enquiry; but not everybody does. Hurrah if you are an intellectual: too bad if you're not. This is the kind of emotivism which breeds prejudiced thinking.

Benson's and Stangroom's epistemological 'feeling it in our bones' argument justifies the dangerous kind of fundamentalism which seems to be gathering momentum in our world today. There are many instances of bigoted thinking in their texts, such as that demonstrated by their attack on Philip Blond. They label Philip Blond as a post-modernist theologian and then attack his argument for the absolutisation of science giving rise to the relativism of morality, ethics, aesthetics, etc. Their attack consists of asserting that science does no such thing (p. 176). They fail to provide any reason or evidence to support their point of view. They also fail ~~to adequately to~~ evaluate ~~adequately~~ Blond's argument. Worse still, Benson and Stangroom employ the kind of rhetorical attack they falsely accuse Blond of using. Their argument shows a patent disregard, and lack of respect, for academics involved in religious epistemology. Benson and Stangroom simply dismiss religious epistemology and conflate it with a kind of post-modernist project that seems to be of their own invention in which spooky stories are told about conspiracies, power, regimes, authority, status, elites, Freemasons and illuminati. Their argument lacks rational weighing of evidence.

Theirs is the kind of self-interest-based thinking which can motivate some groups or individuals to kill or oppress others. Given that warfare technology has advanced to the extent of actualising weapons of mass destruction, self-interest-based thinking is more harmful than ever before. Indeed it could result in the annihilation of our species.

It could be objected that I am scare-mongering and that no such threat to our species actually exists. I accept this objection because, when I say 'could result', I do so as a kind of prediction based on my understanding of the available evidence. The truth is that I do not know what will happen in the future and I know beyond doubt that it is true that I do not know. This certainty does not come from feeling it in my bones or from wanting something to be true for preference of self-interest. Instead it is derived from the rational weighing of evidence including the evidence of my personal limitations and of the many false opinions that I had previously taken to be true.

For all my criticisms of Benson's and Stangroom's argument, they raise an important issue: if points of view are given greater consideration than evidence, then injustice follows. They say:

"Too much attention to 'points of view' with too little scepticism can get innocent people convicted of crimes, on the basis of people with points of view but no evidence. A number of US court cases dealing with putative recovered memory, Satanic ritual abuse and child abuse in day-care facilities have achieved just such a result in the past two decades: law-enforcement officials and juries were solemnly instructed 'to listen to the children', and long prison sentences were handed out to people who were not, in fact, Satanists or child-murderers. The dangers seem obvious, but not everyone sees them" (p.173).

This is a well-supported argument based on evidence rather than preference. However, Benson and Stangroom fail to build on the danger they have identified. It is a sad fact of our world that there are

numerous situations in which points of view do trump evidence and injustice follows. Before I present some examples of these injustices, let us try a thought experiment.

Imagine you have been accused of some crime and are now on trial in a courtroom facing a jury. You know that you have not committed the crime you are accused of. You know this with absolute 100% certainty. The jury, on the other hand, do not know whether you are guilty or not. They were not present at the alleged crime scene. They have to return a verdict and, thus, are forced to guess on the basis of the statements presented to them. The jury returns a guilty verdict. You are undeservedly labelled a criminal and punished. Perhaps you are sent to prison and ordered to pay court costs and compensation to those who falsely accused you. How do you feel? Do you feel you have been treated fairly and reasonably? I doubt it. I think you would feel you had been treated unjustly. I think you would feel that you no longer had control of your life and that you had no means of righting the wrong done to you. I think you would feel that your freedom, reputation and assets had been stolen from you. I think you would feel victimised.

You could argue that it is impossible for you to know how you would feel because you have not experienced that situation. Implicit in this objection is the idea that knowledge is grounded in personal experience. I respond that, for my argument, it is sufficient for you to imagine what it would be like. Of course, I am presupposing that humans are the kind of creatures with the capability for empathising via imagination. Art proves the empathic faculty of *Homo sapiens*.

Perhaps you could argue that it doesn't matter what it would be like because you would never be in the situation of being falsely convicted. You could argue that those accused of crimes must have done something to justify the accusation. You could cite the argument 'there's no smoke without fire'. That argument is a fallacy. A survey of cases brought to trial shows that anyone can be accused and found guilty. Consider, for example, the case of solicitor Sally Clark, who was convicted in 1999 for ~~killing murder her two sons~~ after ~~her two sons~~ ~~they both~~ died suddenly within a few weeks of birth. The prosecution relied on the testimony of a professor of paediatrics who stated that the chance of two children from an affluent family dying ~~from sudden infant death syndrome~~ of natural causes was 1 in 73 million. This figure was calculated by squaring 1 in 8500, as being the likelihood of ~~a cot-infant~~ death in similar circumstances. Despite the Royal Statistical Society issuing a statement arguing that the statistical evidence was flawed and expressing concern at the "misuse of statistics in courts", Clarke's conviction was upheld at first appeal. The conviction was overturned at second appeal in 2003 after it emerged that the prosecutor's pathologist had failed to disclose microbiological reports which showed that the deaths could be explained in terms of natural causes. Subsequently, the Attorney General ordered a review of hundreds of other cases of alleged baby murders and other women had their convictions quashed. Sudden ~~cot-infant~~ death syndrome is now a recognised medical condition, ~~and thankfully parents whose babies have tragically died are no longer persecuted~~.

Victor Nealon spent 17 years in prison for attempted rape because he resembled the victim's description of a 'man with a pock-marked face' and could not provide a water-tight alibi. His conviction was quashed after DNA evidence indicated another man was behind the attempted rape.

Thomas Kennedy served 9 years of a 15-year sentence for the rape of his daughter. His conviction was overturned when his daughter confessed to falsely accusing her father in order to cover up her sexual relationship with her boyfriend.

These real-life examples show that it is not necessary for there to be a reason for a conviction. It is sufficient for the jury to believe the accused is guilty even if there is no incontrovertible evidence to support that belief. Would you want this to happen to you? I think not. The probability of being falsely accused might be very low, but it does not follow that it could not happen.

If I am correct, then surely it is in our best interest to stop this from happening? That's why truth really does matter. It matters because the person falsely accused could be you or someone you love. It matters because you would not want others to judge and punish you for a crime you did not commit. It matters because you do know it is true, even if you would prefer it to be false, that you could be falsely accused. You know this because there is clear incontrovertible evidence.

It could be objected that our current system of trial by jury is the best means for safe-guarding society, even if a few innocents are undeservedly punished. I respond that political expediency does not justify concealment of truth. Furthermore, if punishing innocents doesn't matter, then the concept of punishment is undermined. Moreover, the best of the currently available is not the same as *the* best. Improvement is possible.

It could be argued that those who have been harmed by others deserve retribution and that this need trumps the harm inflicted on the falsely convicted. I respond that an 'eye for eye, tooth for tooth' philosophy is self-defeating. Healing does not come from harming another. Two wrongs do not make a right.

Miscarriages of justice result from too much attention to points of view and insufficient scepticism. Miscarriages of justice occur when people believe they know the truth when in fact they do not. We cannot know truth simply by feeling it in our bones. Nor can we get to truth by examining evidence, because when we evaluate evidence we inevitably do so in the light of our personal experiences, preferences and prejudices. It is not that truth is not out there. The person falsely convicted knows that it is true that convictions can be based on mistaken assumptions.

If we want to find truth then we must examine our personal prejudices. We must, as Socrates said, know our-selves. This is the methodology employed by Descartes when he set out to establish firm and lasting foundations for science. Descartes discovered the following: (a) truth can be attained by using a combination of senses, memory and intellect (Descartes, 62); (b) the will extends further than the intellect and can be extended to things not understood (58); (c) errors occur when judgements are made without a clear and distinct understanding, including an understanding of the will as the source of errors (60); (d) humans are habit-forming creatures; (e) from combining a-d: by attentive and often repeated meditation it is possible to acquire the habit of remembering to abstain from making judgements whenever the truth of a given matter is not apparent (62); (g) therefore, it is possible to avoid error (62).

Renée Descartes concludes his *First Philosophy* with the statement: “

“[M]an is apt to commit errors regarding particular things, and we must acknowledge the infirmity of our nature<sup>22</sup>.”

Furthermore, he asserts a moral imperative: “I should never judge anything I do not clearly and distinctly understand” (61).

It might be objected that Descartes' moral imperative is simply asserted rather than argued for. Furthermore, it might be argued that there is ample evidence in support of the view that the human faculty of judgement is selectively advantageous. Moreover, it could be argued that humans are the kind of creatures that make judgements and, thus, it would be un-natural for us to do otherwise.

Perhaps, for Descartes these objections are irrelevant, because what matters for him is establishing something firm and lasting in the sciences (17). In other words, he seeks satisfaction of his ambition. Surely, personal fulfilment is not a good enough reason for justifying the claim that truth matters? I concur that truth probably (but not necessarily) matters for science and enquiry. However, I think the groundwork for science is not the only reason, and certainly not *the* most important reason for why truth matters. Science may have aided our understanding of the natural world, but has failed to provide a better understanding of human nature or to offer protection from the recklessness of other humans.

It is a sad fact of our world that the exploitive and ego-centric side of human nature is not generally acknowledged. This acknowledgement is especially important in law courts, where revenge and the possibility of compensation can motivate false accusations and result in false convictions. Humans judge each other without clearly and distinctly understanding the consequences of their actions.

It may be true that humans gain pleasure from enquiry. However, hedonism is not a sufficient reason for endorsing the view that truth matters. Truth matters because we do not want to be undeservedly punished. Truth matters because we do know that individuals are being unnecessarily penalised.

Truth matters because we are not safe: we know anyone of us could be undeservedly convicted. Truth matters because we could prevent injustices. *That* is why truth matters.

Descartes, Benson and Stangroom are correct to say we have a moral duty to discover and reveal the truth. The duty arises not because we want it, or because we like enquiry and get a biochemical kick from it. Rather it arises because, although we may want to deny it, we do know that we have moral responsibilities towards others. We know this by examining the evidence in conjunction with our faculty of imagination, rather than by feeling it in our bones. We know it is true that there are cases of false convictions. We know it is true that our current ethics are less than perfect because we can imagine a better scenario: one in which everybody is treated fairly and no one is undeservedly punished.

Ignoring truth in favour of personal preference is dangerous for both our ~~selves-self~~ and others. *That* is why truth really does matter.

### References

- Benson, O. & Stangroom, J.** (2006): *Why Truth Matters*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.  
**Descartes, R.** (1993). *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Indianapolis: Hackett.