

## Chapter One

# VALUING TRUTH

To say that democracy is a space of reasons is to say that the practice of democratic politics requires the giving and acting for reasons. That is in a democratic state disagreements between citizens ought to be handled in the arena of reason alone, and arguments legitimizing the uses of state power must be backed by reasons. And crucially, the “reasons” spoke of are reasons for believing what is *true*, as opposed to reasons for what will win us the election, make us rich or damn our enemies. In short, to think of democracy as a space of reasons is to see the ideals of democratic politics as requiring a commitment to the rational pursuit of truth

Michael Lynch

### A LOFTY GOAL AND A PRACTICAL GOAL

This book has two major goals. One is to invite you, no really to implore you, to enter what Michael Lynch calls the “arena of reason.” Lynch’s quote may suggest that politics is where reason and truth are most important. I completely agree with him that democratic politics is *one* area of our lives that requires attention to the ideals of truth and good reason. But I think he would agree with me that lots of other intellectual affairs – science, medicine, the demands of a profession, and the immensely complicated problems of a meaningful personal life, to name just a few – are equally dependent on the standards of the arena of reason.

The other goal is to give you a tool for navigating within the arena of reason. I wish I could give you a magic bullet for discovering the truth, but I think we all know that's only fairytale. What I do believe, however, is that there are some very useful techniques, for approaching, if not discovering, the truth. This book will emphasize one of these methods. It has the technical name ***inference to the best explanation***, but more of that later. Right now I'll simply describe it as a procedure for distinguishing good evidence from poor, weak, or even non-existent, evidence.

There is something almost paradoxical about both of my goals. I'm going to spend the next hundred and fifty or so pages laying out this approach to evidence and truth, and hopefully luring you into the arena of reason by showing you that it's fun, interesting and valuable. The potential paradox lies in my absolute conviction that you are already firmly ensconced in the arena of reason – that you already value truth, and that you are already an accomplished evaluator of evidence.

So why bother writing my book? Consider an analogy. You are skilled at something – playing the piano or playing golf. But you are also frustrated. You are not as good at it as you'd like to be. You decide to go to music teacher or golf pro to improve your playing. If you are lucky enough you'll find someone who can take that skill you already have and hone it, help you break some bad habits, show you some new tricks, encourage you to practice, and voila!, significantly improve your game. I'd be a joke as a golf instructor, and I don't play music at all, but I guess I'm arrogant enough to think I might be a pretty good critical thinking coach.

**THE SKILLS AND VALUES YOU ALREADY HAVE**

Perhaps you abhor politics, or think that history is boring, or that contemporary science is completely beyond you. I hope to change your mind about all of that. But even if I fail, you're still stuck in the arena of reason. You care about the truth, or in less pretentious jargon, what is true and what is not. Someone tells you your lover is unfaithful. Is he right, maliciously lying, or simply misinterpreting quite innocent remarks and actions? You certainly care about the answers to those questions. Your doctor tells you not to worry about the symptoms you describe and that you'll be just fine. You'd be crazy not to care if she's an expert in that area of medicine, or has misdiagnosed your condition. A friend tells you that class is cancelled today, but if a good grade matters to you, you'll care a lot whether he knows what he's talking about.

Consider the case of poor Connie. She thinks her boyfriend is – in the kind of innocent sense of 1950s high school – cheating on her. He claims he's innocent. She cares a heck of a lot whether her theory is true or not. But her suspicions are not simple paranoia, she believes she has some good evidence, and is so sure she's right that she is going to breakup with him. She lays out her case in a poem, well really a corny pop song.

(yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah)  
(yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah)

When you left me all alone at the record hop  
Told me you were goin' out for a soda pop  
You were gone for quite a while, half an hour or more  
You came back and man oh man this is what I saw

Lipstick on your collar told a tale on you  
Lipstick on your collar said you were untrue  
Bet your bottom dollar you and I are through  
Cuz lipstick on your collar told a tale on you, yeah

You said it belonged to me, made me stop and think  
Then I noticed yours was red, mine was baby pink  
Who walked in but Mary Jane, lipstick all a mess  
Were you smoochin' my best friend, guess the answer's  
yes

Lipstick on you collar told a tale on you  
Lipstick on you collar said you were untrue  
Bet your bottom dollar you and I are through  
Cuz lipstick on you collar told a tale on you, boy

Told a tale on you, man

FADE

Told a tale on you, yeah

Connie Francis, *Lipstick On Your Collar*

Connie's no lawyer, no rocket scientist, nor even a college student yet, but she's no fool either. She's smart enough to read the signs, diagnose what's going on, and lay out a persuasive case. Connie's skills are precisely the skills that all intelligent human beings possess, and these are the skills we will be building on in this book.

### **TRUTH AND THE CONTEMPORARY ACADEMIC CULTURE**

The scholarly community sends us lots of signals that we don't value truth, or at least that we should not value it. A lot of serious scholarship in philosophy, the history of science, sociology, literary criticism, and more, tells academics like me that all truth and knowledge is relative to who we are – our race, sex, age, ethnicity, and historical circumstances – and that there's no such thing as the "absolute" (real?) truth. Consider the thoughts of Richard Rorty.

We need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that truth is out there. To say that the world is out there, that is not our creation, is to say, with common sense, that most things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states. To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations.

Truth cannot be out there—cannot exist independently of the human mind—because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world in its own—unaided by the describing activities of human beings—cannot ...

The world does not speak. Only we do. The world can, once we have programmed ourselves with a language, cause us to hold beliefs. But it cannot propose a language for us to speak.<sup>1</sup>

I believe that Rorty is on to something very important, but that his insight is seriously mischaracterized; that he is, if you will, saying something that is both true and false at the same time.

Connie is a human being with a brain, central nervous system, and sense organs. She sees things – the lipstick stain, it's color, and the color of her own lipstick. She hears things – his lame excuse. And she forms a theory about what's been going on. Her theory is, to use some loaded language, "in her head," and the facts that make her theory true or false "are out there." How do we link up the theory (what Rorty calls the "mental states," "sentences," or "descriptions of the world"), with the facts? Things would be bad enough if all we had to do is propose an account of how brains and sense organs can allow us to see and hear things. Philosophers have been working on these problems

for twenty-five hundred years, and I have to report to you that there's still a lot of work yet to do.

But there are other serious problems as well. All Connie's neural occurrences give rise to beliefs – "your stain is red, but my lipstick is baby pink." Some of her beliefs are true, but others are false. Connie's brain and sense organs seem to play a central role in helping her distinguish the true beliefs from those that are false. The story so far is one of nature. But Rorty's central insight is that there is a whole other story to be told in terms of Connie's nurture. All her attempts to discover the truth, to find evidence for what is true, are colored by who she is, and that is both a help and a hindrance. We don't just see and hear the world, we **learn** to see and hear the world. We are endowed with a remarkably powerful central nervous system by natural selection (or perhaps as a gift from God). We all have this simply in virtue of being human beings. But we are also the product of our backgrounds, our learning, our experiences, and our prejudices. It's a sad fact, but still a fact I think, that men and women, blacks and whites, young and old, are doomed to think in somewhat different ways. How can there be a truth about whether global warming is real, or whether universal healthcare is a wise policy, when you and I are fated to see things differently because of our differences in age, ethnicity, gender, to say nothing of political affiliation and religious conviction?

Though once an enthusiastic proponent, I've come to reject this relativistic view for two reasons. Rorty tells his nurture story persuasively, but sort of forgets about the nature story. Connie's central nervous system isn't just there, it's there for a reason. Its whole purpose is to provide her with data about that world out there. And human central nervous systems seem to be doing their jobs pretty darn well. It's not just that we have survived as a species, but that we have survived so successfully that we have become

the only species capable of altering the entire world. So, yes, we have a problem with cultural relativism, and it is a problem we will be forced to deal with for the remainder of this book. But we also have exquisitely designed physical apparatus that allow us to form pictures of the world out there (as it really is?).

All of the very abstract academic stuff also has a very unfortunate spillover. It is sometimes used as a discussion stopper, even among academics themselves. If the only people I can talk with, productively disagree with, and maybe even reason with to some shared view, are exactly like me the world is going to be a pretty lonely place. Connie is certainly a product of who she is. Her age, sex, race, socio-economic class inevitably influence what she sees and what she thinks about. I take that as a given. But what she's thinking about is not just "in her head," even if her sentences, beliefs, and theories are. You and I can think about her theory, make judgments about its cogency, and often times come to agreement about all of this, regardless of the countless differences in who we are, how and when we were born, and our unique social and educational backgrounds. Since there is a world "out there," with boyfriends, best friends, and osculation (even if those descriptions are the products of our shared culture) I think it makes perfectly good sense to ask what *really* happened when he was gone those that half an hour or more. And that's really just another way of asking whether her theory is true or not.

#### **TRUTH AND THE POPULAR CULTURE – THE NEED TO RESPECT DIFFERENCES**

You may well ask what all of the abstract philosophy, social science, and evolutionary biology has to do with our concerns in this book. Well, I've already given you one reason for including it. The problem of cultural expectations

and biases is real and infects evidence evaluation down to its core. Furthermore, lots your teachers and other intellectual authority figures are products of this academic culture, and I think you need to know where they're coming from. Finally, these theoretical considerations have found their way into the popular epistemological culture.

A lot of my students are unapologetic relativists, in two very different ways. One is quite laudable. Many of you embrace diversity. You admire the fact that we bring different perspectives to discussions and investigations. You are loath to disparage those who think differently about religion, politics, or other things that matter deeply to you and your peers. You recognize that lots of thoughtful and decent people see things very differently than you do when it comes to abortion rights, the death penalty, or even global warming. One very understandable reaction to this is to think everyone has a right to his or her own beliefs.

In the sense of a First Amendment right to freedom of thought and speech I completely agree with this sentiment. It's one thing, however, to have the right to think what you think, believe what you believe, it's quite another to have the right to be correct about what you think and believe. My students sometimes say things that I find paradoxical. They tell me that their truth is simply different than mine. Sure, I believe that natural selection is spot-on, so it's true for me. But they believe that it's godless and silly to think that "man came from monkeys," so evolution is false for them. That's just another discussion stopper. It forecloses any real shared dialogue and investigation of which one of us is right. We won't spend much time in this book (though in another book I hope to write it will be central) on purely moral disputes like the pro-life/pro-choice controversy, or the case for and against animal rights. We will spend some time on the constitutionality, if not the morality, of the death penalty. And we will spend a fair amount of time looking at the

evidence for descent with modification by natural selection. Consider the disagreement about global warming. There's a lot of passion on both sides. That's obvious. People certainly have a right to not be persecuted because of their beliefs on questions like this, not to be downgraded by their professors. But do these rights mean that there's no correct answer to ultimate question of whether human cultural and industrial practices are contributing to global warming? Or even whether global warming is really occurring? Being tolerant of others views is a good thing, but being unwilling to seek some common ground, and even sometimes discovering a correct answer is either laziness or intellectual cowardice.

#### **TRUTH AND THE POPULAR CULTURE – “FAKE NEWS” AND “ALTERNATIVE FACTS”**

This leads to my students' second reason for their relativism, if not outright skepticism. None of us are climate scientists so we are reliant on outside sources for most of our information. But outside sources seem to tell us different things. The “liberal” press tells us one story about global warming, while “conservative” media tells a very different one. The President of the United States tells us that mainstream media is guilty of feeding us “fake news.” I believe he is very wrong about this. But whom should you believe, your philosophy professor, or the President? My guess is that the way you answer this question has relatively little to do with who I am, my credentials, nor with even with the President and who he is. It more likely that your confidence in either of us is shaped by the media sources you listen to, who you voted for in the last election, and what your friends and family tell you. In a way this is just the problem of cultural relativism all over again. But something seems to have changed just in the short time between my generation and yours.

I am really nervous about where this discussion is heading. I think it's crucial and that it needs to be candidly confronted. But it is still worrisome to me as a person, a teacher and an author. Every generation seems to look at the younger generation with not just puzzlement, but a funny kind of judgment. They're going to hell in a hand basket! My parents couldn't really understand the music I listened to, or why I opposed the war in Viet Nam. I'm still trying to get my head around hip-hop, and I'm baffled about why climate change is a real controversy. But the cultural change I'm focusing on now is not generational.

Let me see if I can make this clearer by telling you about how I learned to enter Lynch's arena of reason. School played a huge role, of course, but there were other important shared sources that united my generation with that of my parents. My friends, my parents, and my teachers all read the *Los Angeles Times*, watched the evening news on one of the three major networks, and basically shared a common stock of information about what was going on in the world around us. We disagreed plenty about how to interpret this data, but at least we all had the same basic collection of facts to disagree about. Of course there were plenty of critics and skeptics about these sources. Some saw the *Times* and *CBS News* as lackeys of the capitalist corporate culture. Others claimed they were nothing but liberal, anti-religious propaganda. But these complaints were directed more at "editorial policy," what stories to run, how much time and line space to devote to them, and the like. And, yes, to the political views endorsed on the editorial pages. But almost everyone agreed about what the basic facts reported in the stories were. Now I don't want to overstate the confidence we had about all of this. We worried that we weren't getting the whole story about the war, or that the Warren Commission lied to us about the Kennedy assassination. But these were the exceptions, not the rule.

Your generation, however, often gets its information about what going on from very idiosyncratic web-sources. And be they liberal or conservative, they often seem to disagree, not just about how to interpret the facts, but as to what the facts are in the first place. I can't remain neutral here. Some sources are more reliable than others! Some sources are completely unreliable! If you are serious about the truth, if care about reason, you must find some trustworthy sources of information about what's going on around you – the worlds of politics, science, and everything else that matters. I'm perfectly happy to share the sources that most inform my beliefs about what's going on in the country, the world, and other areas that I care about including sports, movies, music, and even science. They are without question *The New York Times* and the Public Broadcasting System, particularly *Morning Edition*. This is partly a matter of habit, preference, and convenience. It's also a matter of trust. Some of you are, no doubt, aghast. Of course those are his sources! He's a liberal, and they're blatantly liberal sources. That's probably true, but my best friend hates both of these sources because he believes that have sold out the search for truth by a false need to appear fair in their coverage. But my sources don't have to be your sources. I'd be genuinely happy if all of my students came into my courses truly informed about what's going on via information they gained from equally conservative sources like the *Wall Street Journal*, or *The Economist*.

### **A PLEA FOR CRITICAL THINKING**

My entire professional life has been dominated by courses in critical thinking. When I began graduate school I had the privilege of working with Professor Larry Wright as one of his teaching assistants in his course on critical thinking. This was truly a life changing experience. It was in his course that I first learned of inference to the best explanation, and

it is this method of evidence evaluation that informs much of my teaching and much of my professional research. I have recreated much of what I learned from Professor Wright in countless critical thinking courses that I have taught, and in some cases created. All of this forms the heart and soul of this book.

As I think about it, however, perhaps the most important lesson I learned was not the details of a particular approach to critical thinking, but just the value of taking a little time out of a busy undergraduate career focused on the details of majors, minors, and career training, and pausing to reflect on the more general questions of reason, truth, and logic. I take great gratification that some of my most satisfied critical thinking customers have been, not marginal students who needed to be taught how to think correctly, whatever that's supposed to mean, but truly excellent students, who already possessed all the necessary skills and tools for academic success. To return to an earlier analogy, even great pianists and golfers benefit from devoted practice, and a little coaching now and then.

So welcome to the arena of reason, which of course, you've been in almost the entirety of your life. And welcome to critical thinking. If you give it half a chance, I can almost promise you that you will find the things we explore together in this book interesting and fun. And, I'm confident that for many of you, you will find the particular approach to, if not finding, at least getting closer, to the truth, personally, academically, and professionally useful.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rorty, Rorty, Richard. 1989. *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 4–5, 6, 27, 51–52.