

IT'S TIME TO STUDY
TRUTH AND TEACH
HONESTY

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Given that so many pragmatists have urged other philosophers to stop getting hung up on matters of truth, it may seem surprising for me to argue here that it's time for us to return our focus to studying truth—what it is and how it operates—and how to pursue and portray truth with honesty. Even more importantly, I believe it's time for us to overtly teach about truth in our schools and universities and to make the cultivation of honesty more overt within citizenship education.

Critics, such as Daniel Dennett, have claimed that too many pragmatists undervalue truth, and others, including Bernard Williams, have argued that pragmatists

encourage us to get beyond fussing about something called 'the truth,' and address ourselves just to technical and social benefits, solidarity, democracy, the discouragement of cruelty, and other laudable ends. It seems not to occur to them that even if the ideals of discovering and telling the truth were in themselves illusions, if the ideas of 'the truth' were itself empty, those illusions might well play a vital

part in our identifying and pursuing those objectives.¹

The January 2021 attack on the Capitol exposes just how much truth matters; democracy and lives are on the line when citizens struggle to discern truth or adhere to misinformation spread by their leaders and each other. And truth plays a significant role in achieving the aims pragmatists like myself have long sought, even as we have distanced ourselves from it.

The United States is struggling from a host of phenomenon related to deceit and post-truth. Increasingly, citizens privilege their own emotions and personal beliefs over objective facts, expert opinions, or scientific evidence. As a result, we have struggled to engage in civic inquiry and arrive at satisfactory solutions regarding many shared problems—from ensuring the security of our elections to determining whether to receive a COVID vaccine to deciding whether global warming is a significant threat

¹ Daniel Dennett, “Postmodernism and Truth,” in *Philosophy: The Quest for Truth*, ed. Louis Pojman. 6th edition. (Oxford University Press, 2006, 233). Bernard Arthur Owen Williams, *Truth & Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002, 59).

worthy of legislative action. To put this in Deweyan terms, we are unable to find our way out of indeterminate situations, form publics to address shared problems, and engage in inquiry to understand those problems and test potential solutions. Without sufficiently understanding the connection between truth, honesty, and a healthy democracy, our civic reasoning will continue to flounder.

Returning with closer attention to the work of Dewey may help us better make sense of our current predicament and offer better visions of an improved democracy. For Dewey, democracy entails institutions and ways of living. As a mode of associated living, citizens work together to engage in inquiry about our world and establish truth as that which works to promote individual growth and societal flourishing. These undertakings are ideally inclusive and collaborative, for our inquiries are improved when we draw upon many sources of evidence and incorporate many perspectives. In Dewey's words, democracy is a "conjoint" and "cooperative" undertaking.²

² John Dewey, "Democracy and Education." *The Middle Works, 1899-1924, Vol 9*. Edited by JoAnn Boydston. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980/1916, 29.

Lying and partisanship are eroding both the institutions of democracy and democracy as a way of life. Citizens are increasingly unwilling to trust experts and organizations traditionally tasked with determining truth, from scientific agencies to Inspector Generals. Instead, they are increasingly drawn into echo chambers where they assert the supremacy of their own feelings and opinions, often aligning themselves with partisan perspectives. At the same time, citizens, who increasingly see the media as biased, doubt whether it is any longer a reliable check on political leaders. As a result, citizens are left unable to attain and agree upon trustworthy sources and reliable information, which breaks down their ability to work together to solve collective problems.

This situation goads us to reconsider how we understand what truth is and the role it serves in democracy. This is an opportunity for philosophers to ponder and explicate, and one I believe that could be guided by Deweyan pragmatist notions of truth. For Dewey and some other pragmatist thinkers, we aim at truth—even while recognizing that it is partial and temporary—as we engage

in inquiry because truth is what helps us to understand our world and fulfill our needs within it. Dewey focuses on consequences to determine whether something is true, seeking what “works” for us by profitably combining our experiences and leading us to further experiences that satisfy our needs. Truth as “what works,” then, is that which helps us to undertake civic reasoning well together and solve shared problems.

Admittedly, such an understanding of truth might appear to slide into modern-day notions of truth decay. But truth is not merely a matter of opinion about what works for one individual or in one particular situation. Deweyan notions of truth are put to the test in scientific inquiry, across populations, and in the long run. And, when placed within a social conception of democracy, citizens must seek out the perspectives of and impact on others in order to verify truthfulness. Placing discussions of truth within this context humanizes them, exposing the relevance and importance of truth in ways that epistemological accounts of coherence or correspondence cannot. So, rather than getting bogged down today in fighting over whose facts are

correct or pointing fingers at leaders suspected of lying, Dewey urges us to look at how truth functions in practice. What matters, then, is not so much whether one is being morally responsible, but whether the consequences of one's actions distort or derail efforts at civic reasoning and our ability to solve social problems. This shift in emphasis may be a helpful way to respond to our current struggles in democracy.

Moreover, when the understanding of democracy that we uphold in our scholarly writing and cultural critiques reflects a wider view of social life and relationships, we may discover new insights into how dishonesty jeopardizes our relationships to each other and, on the other hand, how we might head off the temptation to be dishonest for self-serving reasons. Scholars may benefit from looking more closely at the distinctions between Dewey's social view of democracy and more procedural or moral accounts of democracy. Roberto Frega rightly describes that while a moral conception of democracy explains the meaning of democracy with reference to values (equality, freedom) considered as ultimate ends,

a social approach to democracy is based upon a sociological understanding of human interactions and of how social life should be organized in order to reconcile individual striving toward self-expression and societal constraints relating to social stability. The differences are to this extent major. While moral conceptions are usually introduced with the aim of subordinating politics to a normative ideal, such as that of respect (liberalism) or self-government (republicanism), a social conception integrates moral considerations into a broader picture which also takes conditions of social functioning into account.³

This social view may help us better understand and ameliorate problems of truth decay and deceit as well as changes in how people relate to each other (polarization, tribal epistemology, and the like).

Working with such a renewed pragmatist vision of truth and democracy, educational theorists may make headway in proposing improved citizenship education.

³ Roberto Frega, *Pragmatism and the Wide View of Democracy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 116).

While honesty is often understood in terms of the virtuous behavior of discrete individuals, honesty takes on greater significance when situated within a Deweyan conception of social democracy, which not only highlights *that* citizens are interdependent, but *celebrates* the ways in which those relationships lead to better epistemic solutions and greater civic well-being. Rather than relying on character education or moral urging to “do what’s right,” honesty could be better cultivated through practices which affirm its consequences on our lives and incline us to act sincerely, seek accuracy, and be forthright.

This sort of education is aligned with the cultivation of honesty as a habit in the unique sense upheld by Dewey, where habits are not merely dull routines we repeat unthinkingly, but rather active inclinations and proclivities to certain types of behavior that have proven fruitful. Dewey notes, “Any habit marks an *inclination*—an active preference and choice for the conditions involved in its exercise. A habit does not wait, Micawber-like, for a stimulus to turn up so that it may get busy; it actively seeks

for occasions to pass into full operation.”⁴ Such habits are nurtured when conditions are provided that encourage truth-seeking and truth-speaking. In classrooms, this likely entails immersing students in communities of inquiry that take up real problems, where the stakes for the students are meaningful. Within these deeply social settings, students should learn how to undertake inquiry in inclusive and cooperative ways. These experiences can reveal the epistemic and civic implications of honesty and truth-seeking, while also building trusting relationships and a commitment to mutual flourishing. Educators might then connect those endeavors to complimentary skills, virtues, and habits, such as imagination, criticality, and listening. In particular, educators should focus on teaching intellectual humility, helping students to see their “worldview as open to improvement from new evidence and the experience of others.”⁵ Dewey might have called this “open-mindedness,” a proclivity to engage in inquiry, public reason giving, and

⁴ John Dewey, “Democracy and Education.” *The Middle Works, 1899-1924, Vol 9*. Edited by JoAnn Boydston. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980/1916, 53.

⁵ Michael Patrick Lynch, *Know-It-All Society: Truth and Arrogance in Political Culture* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019, 149).

reflection on how we come to believe something is true. Or, in Dewey's words, to uphold intellectual humility is to assert that "there is no belief so settled as not to be exposed to further inquiry."⁶

In sum, recent struggles in American democracy, especially an insurrection based on lies and self-interest, might be helpfully addressed through a return to Deweyan ideas of truth and social democracy and an updated application of them within citizenship education focused on cultivating habits of honesty.

⁶ Dewey, 1938/1986, page 16. *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, in *Later Works*, 12.