

Unstated.name

So, Truth

The truth. There's the self-evident. The sun comes up in the morning and similar. But what's the truth beyond the obvious? And remember that what's obvious now wasn't obvious once. Flat Earth anyone?

It is odd to find yourself wondering what truth is. After all, we often take it for granted that 'the truth' exists. But we hear so much about the importance of truth, facts, knowledge and so on. And we hear an awful lot of argument about what is and isn't true. 'Fake news' is just one example. So if you step back for a moment it's only reasonable to find yourself wondering exactly what truth is.

And the state we are all in right now, in Britain and many other countries, makes finding some certainty about truth all the more pressing.

It's divided and conflicted out there - and every major development amplifies the clashing views. Covid, war, fuel crises, economic crises, religious views, left-wing views, right-wing views - take your pick or add you own. And with each issue the barricades get ever-taller. And on every side of every barricade there will be people with a belief in a 'truth' that they think is the truth.

But what are those beliefs based on? What is 'the truth' that, in turn, these beliefs are based on and how was it arrived at? And why is the world so bitterly divided, anyway?

Research, Simplified

If you start thinking about it and doing a little bit of research, it's a small step to realising that the question of 'what is truth' has long been asked. Delving into all that knowledge and opinion is time-consuming. It reveals any number of different angles to it, arrived at for different reasons.

Here we go then, with a simplified summary of what I've found (with the necessary cautions about broad brush strokes), to spare you an awful lot of time:

- Centuries ago (in the West at least), even the god-fearing people of that era came to believe that a fundamental role of humans is to rationally discover 'truth'. Which, it was thought, exists as a thing in its own right.
- With that development, the old sources of truth - i.e. the monarchy and the church - were replaced with 'rational thought'.
- The new belief was that this rational thought would guide us all. But, of course, you need people to supply rational thought - to

inform the decisions being made by leaders. (Leaders in all fields of life, but this is to focus primarily on government leaders.) And lo! The era of the expert began - and we're still in it.

- And as time has gone by, from then up until now, more tools have become available that experts can use to guide their rational thought. Extensive written records, easy international communication, scientific discovery, research that is thoroughly and dispassionately reviewed, calculation and so on.
- But expert rational thought is produced by humans. And humans have limits. There's only so much any person can take on board - and thus you get narrower-and-narrower specialisms. And what happens if the experts themselves disagree? And what happens if what experts say doesn't seem to agree with the practical, lived experience of the people 'on the ground'? And who interprets and decides between all this often conflicting information? Who is in charge, so they can make decisions?

The result of all these issues, today, (in the west at least) is what we broadly call elected democracy. We have leaders and they gather in (hopefully rational) expert views and the results of research into what people do and say and feel (and so on and so on) and they make decisions. They arrive at not 'THE truth' but 'A truth'. They lead on the basis of this 'synthesised truth', a truth they think is likely to produce the best course of action, for whoever they understand as the people in society that they need to please.

That gives us a fluid notion of truth that's not what we naturally default to. But, on reflection, it seems reasonable. Allowing for the existence of versions of truth rather than one truth allows for the truth to reflect both developments and increasing knowledge as a result of experience, research etc. It also allows for uncertainties. And a sensibly synthesised truth which is a workable 'compromise-truth' can ensure the people in a society are led well.

And that has, can and sometimes does still sort-of work. But it can work only if enough of the population, both voters and the voted-for, can trust enough of the population in any given society.

And, as ever, that system is only as good as its weakest link.

From Truth To Trust

Arriving at the understanding of truth that's outlined above extends the issue that I started out to look at. It's not just truth that is the issue, but truth and trust.

To put flesh on that:

- You can only lead effectively if the people you are leading trust you.
- As a voter, you only vote for leaders if you trust them and think they're worth voting for.
- As an actual or potential leader, you need to be able to trust that the people you are appealing to are representative of the electorate as a whole - or, at least, a significant proportion of them.
- As a voter, you need to be able to trust that the financial backing, the expert knowledge, the research, the opinions and everything else that your leaders are relying on and are influenced by, are both trustworthy and representative of your interests - those of you, the voter.
- And of course, whoever you are in the process, you have to be able to trust the truthfulness of whoever or whatever goes in to forming your own opinions and judgements.
- And the additional and crucial aspect to add to the last point: if, on balance, you think the truth you are hearing from someone or some institution is *likely* to be right or has in the past been right, you still need to check that that's now the case. That needs to be an ongoing process. You can never take truth or truthfulness for granted.

And the trouble is, in the very conflicted world that now exists, society as a whole finds itself short of widely shared truths we can collectively trust.

Everyone seems very keen to understand issues in simplistic 'you are' or 'you aren't' terms. You are either with me or you are against me; you are with this belief or against it, etc.

Whereas, rather than disagreeing, what we all need to do is appreciate the reality of the world we now live in. We need to remember all those experts, all those specialists, all that specialist knowledge, all that history, experience, all that rational thought. It all makes for a very complex world - but that doesn't make it any less true.

It's Messy Out There

Why is there this drive to embrace the simplistic?

At root, the problem lies in an unwillingness on the part of those making decisions to publicly acknowledge the existence of uncertainty. And that is inevitably accompanied by an unwillingness to explain the reasons why decisions are taken, why views are held, etc.

As a result, we rarely hear an honest explanation of the how and why of how a decision is made. We don't hear what went in to the weighing up of the evidence, nor why the decision that was taken was considered the best choice.

We know we live in a world of specialist knowledge. But these days it is too often the case that we hear a decision justified as 'the science says it is so', as if there's only one science. Similarly, we hear claims that something is being done because it is the 'professional' or 'expert' view to do so, but rarely are these views explained. Nor are they open to testing and nor are the alternative views that are available even acknowledged.

Further, when leaders are faced with information that should lead them to change their mind, they won't for fear of being described as having 'made a u-turn' - with all the falsely negative baggage that that phrase comes with. After all, if I was walking down a road and I saw a sign that said I was going in the wrong direction, I'd turn around. I'd be making a u-turn because it's sensible to change direction if new information is available. U-turns can be the right thing to do - but they are presented as some terrible error.

With that as the attitude of society's leaders you then have to ask why is there this unwillingness to accept uncertainty? After all, (good) scientists and researchers embrace uncertainty and know that all knowledge is always open to change in the light of new facts and new research. (Remember the Flat Earth.) They also know that information and research worth the name needs to be open to testing, and that the results found in researching something can be replicated.

So, why have our leaders gone so wrong?

The Lure Of Certainty

Uncertainty is denied by leaders because of a mistaken belief that certainty is necessary to persuade people. It's not a left wing or right wing thing. It's about what people *think* is the most persuasive attitude to take.

(A key element is the word 'think' in that last sentence. I will come back to it.)

People - the people who want to be leaders, the people who back those who want to be leaders - think that painting the world in very simple terms wins: 'This is the truth. Believe me. Everyone else is wrong.'

And that approach is heard in politics, religion, business, and almost any other sphere of life you care to name these days. And it's a doddle to find some superficial source of supposed expertise or science

or whatever to back-up whatever you want to promote. You can stick pretty well anything into a search engine and find an answer that you like, and that you can trot out as the 'truth'. That someone else can have their own truth, reached at in a parallel and equally unproven way, seems to be neither here nor there.

So, why is there this attitude to truth? Why is there this willingness to have what you might call personal truths - even if they then collectively become in effect meaningless, divisive truths? Why this willingness to do away with a well-researched and tested truth that we both verify and share? Why do we want to do away with the idea of there being a truth that we can adopt, all the while accepting that it will be an ever-evolving, synthesised truth?

The answer lies in basic human behaviours.

All of us - you, me, everyone - are equipped with more-or-less-the-same set of ways of behaving. It's the same set that our ancestors had.

Human behaviours include the capacity to love, to care, to be generous, to cooperate and to be far-sighted.

Human behaviours also include the capacity to be greedy, selfish, corrupt, cruel and short-sighted.

How any person actually behaves is a product of the social and cultural expectations they exist within and which are placed upon them - and how they then respond. That is to say, behaviour is a product of context.

And we have arrived at a context where greed, short-sightedness, corruption and selfishness are widely dominant and, just as importantly, widely tolerated if not actively supported. You might not personally display such negative behaviours to everyone you meet, of course not. But by not actively rejecting these behaviours when you encounter them, they are allowed to persist. And those for whom these behaviours appeal feel reinforced. And so they *think* it is persuasive to be simplistic and dogmatic - 'I'm right and everyone who disagrees with me is wrong'.

I said earlier that I'd return to the 'think' element of this approach to persuading people. The key is that these people only think it works - when in practice it actually doesn't. It divides and fractures society and it doesn't persuade majorities.

And a fractured society has no future worth having - either in the short term or the longer term. The short term is now. And because of the speed of climate change, any notion of the longer term is in reality irrelevant.

If we don't build a cooperative, sustainable future for everyone on the planet, no-one will survive in any kind of desirable way. It will come down to dog-eat-dog. And the dog that wins might have a full belly, but the world they will be living in will be failing all around them. Money won't buy a way out. No-one can spend their riches in their tomb.

So, human behaviour - greed, short-sightedness, corruption and selfishness - are what's creating the grossly unbalanced society that is the UK. With that harsh reality in mind, the best test of any future decision is whether it helps provide a strong and balanced foundation for society as a whole. Because an unbalanced society is a weak society - socially and, indeed, economically. And it is weak for everyone within it, rich or poor, whatever their beliefs.

What I Can Do

It is easy to imagine you're powerless. But that is simply wrong. It is a myth that those who believe they gain from dividing society like to put about in every way they can.

And it costs nothing to take control yourself, to exert your power. Some straight-forward steps, none of which are hard and none of which cost you money:

- Learn to doubt.
- Learn to use search engines so you're finding things out for yourself.
- Find out who owns the media you consume (online, in print, on TV), and investigate who they back, what tax they pay, and to where they pay it. Trust no media that is not invested in and paying tax in the country they are publishing in.
- Question who is promoting negative behaviours, test their reasoning and challenge it. And reject it, if you think it's wrong.
- Fact check claims you hear or read - there are free tools to do so online.
- Always remember that fear is a human emotion, but it is nearly always misplaced. If someone or something is making you fearful it might be your own background and the circumstances you grew up in that's the cause. Stand back and question why you think and feel that way.
- Fear can all too easily mutate into hatred. It is very rarely rational, but it is a feeling that is easily manipulated by leaders. The result is that you have a life polluted by your

irrational hatred, but the leaders benefit from your polluted world-view.

- And underlying everything else in your life, be suspicious of anything you find yourself 'naturally' agreeing with. Habitual beliefs can easily be mistaken beliefs.

As for our leaders, we need to both expect them to rule for all of society, not just their backers - and we need to judge them accordingly. Because if they do not, then they are failing all society, not just those that haven't backed them.

Overall, your approach should be to trust cautiously. Assume nothing, whoever is providing you with information, whoever is providing you with 'a truth'. The truth in question might be right, but it might not be. And that approach applies to yourself too. Try to trust what you hear and what you believe, but always check that it is properly, thoroughly trustworthy.

What's It All For

We need a common goal or we are ALL in life-threatening trouble. And that's now, not some time down the road.

Going back towards where I started with these thoughts:

- We no longer follow monarchs in any meaningful way.
- We live in a society which accommodates a range of religions, none of which dominate and which have all worked out a way of coexisting with science and with each other.
- As a nation we live with a huge range of nationalities and we are better for it - socially and economically.
- If we see beyond our (perfectly natural) fear of things and people that are new to us, we can allow that other part of human nature - that we are social animals - to come to the fore.
- We have the apparatus of democracy already in place.

Yes, a lot of what we have now is under threat for all the reasons I've covered above. But we can prove how we live, making it better suited to the current threats we all face. If we don't, we all lose. If we do, we all can win.

Think in terms of all of us being in need of a common goal. And that goal can be establishing common, social, society-wide contentment, and the common sense of security that a feeling of genuine contentment needs.

(A Footnote)

I'm very aware that, above, I'm saying we all need to check things that we're told are 'the truth'. And I'm also saying that it is true that the climate is changing, and that we need to respond to the threats that that poses to all of us.

I am not contradicting myself. I both believe the climate is changing, and that there is a huge amount of independent, verified, peer-reviewed science to back that up.

And on a personal level, something like 15 years ago I was asked to look into and write about climate change. The person employing me had no firm view, and neither did I. It took just a couple of months of real, on the ground experience for us to realise that the changing climate is a reality. That it is a huge deal with huge implications for everyone. And that it is being actively denied by a massive range of people who gain from the status quo. All the people who gain wealth and/or power from the existing fossil-fuel dominated world.

Coincidentally, climate change is also a good example of a subject that people will seek to deny, because it feels like it is too big a deal to take on board. We - you, me and most everyone else in the UK - are used to living with all the benefits that the status quo have given us. The idea of having to radically alter what we do is hard to accept. What we have is nice!

But the reality is that climate change is already changing how life is for all living things - not just humans. And it will ruin, brutally, all that we humans have if we don't change how we collectively and individually behave.

In short, we have to change how we live in the present if we want a future that's worth having.