

## Truth and post-truth in the environmentalism debate

Frans Wijzen

Radboud University, Netherlands

### ARTICLE INFO

### ABSTRACT

#### Keywords

Truth and Post-Truth  
Environmentalism debate

The topic of this conference, nurturing young Muslims in the post-truth era, is interesting but also challenging. In today's world, youngsters everywhere use social media and are confronted with fake news. I contribute to this topic from a perspective that I am familiar with the environmentalism debate. This is a debate in which the boundary between truth and post-truth is blurred. In what follows, I will discuss four topics: truth and post-truth; fact and frame; optimism and pessimism; reality and representation.

This is an open access article under the [CC-BY-SA](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/) license.



### Truth and Post-Truth

The first question that comes up here is: what is truth, or what is the boundary between truth and post-truth? This is basically an epistemological question. What is true knowledge, and how do we acquire true knowledge? Keep in mind that I am not talking about religious truth, or the truth of the belief in meta-empirical realities. It is wise to distinguish two forms of truth: truth by correspondence and truth by conversation. Normally, when we say that a statement or a mental representation of reality is true it means that the representation of reality in the mind corresponds with reality 'out there'. This is the correspondence model of truth.

This understanding of truth is based on the modern European Enlightenment distinction between knowing subject and known object, advocated among others by the French philosopher René Descartes. Seen as such, one can strive at 'objective' knowledge. Post-modern thinkers, however, question if a distinction between knowing subject and known object can be made. The subject is always situated in a certain position, constrained by time and space. Thus, from a post-modern-perspective, truth by correspondence becomes problematic.

Truth emerges in a 'dialogue' between the knowing subject and the known object. This is the conversation model of truth (Rorty, 1980). By conceptualising and describing objects, to a large

extent we constitute them, and we reify them. Thus, I define 'post-truth' here as an understanding of truth that goes beyond truth by correspondence.

### Fact, fiction, and frame

Particularly in the environmentalism debate, we see sceptics and realists, and we have become aware of the fact that knowledge production and rationality are bounded. Most scholars acknowledge that are limits to their scientific deliberations. First, in empirical science, we define our object of study and operationalize it. This is based on choices, and thus to a certain extent relative and subjective. For example, how do we conceptualise nature (Latour, 2017; Latour, 2018)? Is it that part of reality that is distinct from human-made culture? Is there 'pure' nature, untouched by human beings? And how far do we need to go back to get there?

Second, we live in knowledge societies where we have an overload of information. In the environmentalism debate we have thousands of scientific articles and research reports, and based on various definitions and operationalisations, these are not always compatible. We clearly see this in debates on greenhouse gas emissions. Thus, we have to select sources of information, and this selection is based on our preferences.

Third, we interpret information from specific cognitive frames. Thus, we frame facts in discursive ways, and by doing so we constitute facts (Hajer, 1995). Discourses are shared languages that (groups of) people use to construct visions of (social) reality that are considered to be real and right. According to Michel Foucault (1989), the founding father of discourse theory, truth is relative to discourse. During the 2020 presidential elections in the United States of America, Donald Trump and Joe Biden uttered quite different narratives on climate change and COVID-19 crisis, and both narratives were somehow based on scientific evidence. Clearly, scientists look at different things and look at them from different perspectives, and none of them can see the whole.

If they are sceptical, they speak of climate *change*, arguing and showing evidence that climate changes are of all ages, and that human behaviour has nothing or little to do with that. For example, the last glacial epoch was about 12.800 years ago, and it lasted for about 1.300 years. If scientists are alarmed about human mastering of nature, they speak about climate *crisis* with a sense of urgency. Thomas Kuhn (1962) argued that different paradigms are to a large extent incommensurable, because they reason from various cognitive frameworks.

### Optimism or pessimism

To go one step further, the way we interpret facts is partly based on world views and images of man. This is another reason for our bounded rationalities. When we are optimists, we believe that humankind has the ability to adapt to climate changes. When we are pessimists, we believe that we

are too late already, that we passed the point of no return. In addition, there are practices based on these world views. Do we go back to nature through environmental conservation? Do we fight against nature through protective measures? Or do we work with nature through technological innovation? In the debate on climate change there is a gap between environmentalists or deep-ecologists and eco-modernists, scholars who argue for 'green growth' or 'limits to growth'. Do we trust on science and technology, or do we mistrust human rationality?

### **Reality and representation**

Does the above-mentioned definition of post-truth signify that all truth is relative, that we cannot escape from discourse, that there is no way to distinguish between reliable and unreliable representations of reality? No, not at all! I opt for critical realism, on the one hand no blind objectivism, on the other hand no naïve relativism. I look at our schools and universities as communities of contested discourses (MacIntyre, 1990: 22), where we try to convince each other by empirical evidence and rational arguments, trying to prove that our representation of reality is better or more reliable than that of others in terms of explanation and prediction.

Nurturing young Muslims in the post-truth era requires that we teach them to practice hermeneutical suspicion: do not believe everything that is said on social media, practice triangulation, cross-check information, and look at information from different perspectives, shifting positions. Always ask yourself: who says what, from what position and with what interest? Who benefits or profits from the information that is given? Practice co-research (teamwork) and dialogical research (in conversation with the 'objects' studied).

### **Epilogue**

For me, the religious world view has to do with hope. From my perspective, we have to teach our youngsters to be optimistic and to believe in a better future. Learning from mediaeval Islamic thinkers such as Ibn Sina, Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd, religion is not against rationality, rationality is religious (Bagir, 2005: 41). In the same vein, the founding father of Islamic eco-theology, Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1995), does not propagate anti-science, by anti-scientism. So, do not make truth absolute, because there is always the possibility of a bigger truth. And do not make truth relative; otherwise, we have to close our colleges and universities. It is not an easy task, but it can be done.

## References

- Bagir, Zainal, Islam, Science and 'Islamic Science'. In Zainal Bagir, Science and Religion in a Post-Colonial World. Adelaide: ATF Press, 2005.
- Foucault, Michel, The order of things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences. London: Routledge, 1989.
- Hajer, Maarten, The politics of Environmental Discourse. Ecological Modernization and the Policy Process. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Kuhn, Thomas, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.
- Latour, Bruno, Facing Gaia. Eight Lectures on the New Climate Regime. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017;
- Latour, Bruno, Down to Earth. Politics in the New Climate Regime. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry. Encyclopaedia, Genealogy and Tradition. Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1990
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, The Islamic World-View and Modern Science. In: Islamic Quarterly 39(1995)2, 73-89.
- Rorty, Richard, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature. Oxford – Cambridge: Blackwell, 1980