

TRUTH IN THE TIME OF TRUMP

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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Office Hours:
LBR 1309
MWF 12:15-1:15
or by appointment

Course Description

Donald Trump's candidacy and presidency introduced many of us to the idea of "alternate facts" and a "post-truth" nation. These and related concepts are ripe for philosophical examination. This seminar will explore what Trump's presidency can tell us about such topics as truth, lies, propaganda, bullshit (in the philosophical sense), divided democracy, public and private forms of government, the responsibilities we owe to each other—and the responsibility we owe to the truth.

In general we'll be looking at the overlap between epistemology (i.e., theories of knowledge, truth, and justification) and political philosophy. We'll be looking at what truth is, why it matters, and how our democratic political system not only depends on truth but can also be defended as a *source* of truth, or as a better way of discovering truths than other forms of government.

In particular we'll be looking at how truth functions as a *norm*: as something we take for granted whenever we carry on a conversation, as something that underlies communication, and as something that is a necessary presupposition of our ability to interact and converse with each other. This means that we'll look at specific threats to truth—and to our ability to communicate—including lies, statements that are true but misleading, and statements that are just nonsense or bullshit. We'll discuss whether it is worse to lie or mislead or bullshit and which of these pose the greatest threat to democracies.

We'll also examine some of the systemic threats to truth and democracy: in particular, the increasing polarization that we find in the American electorate and the expanding role of private businesses in dictating people's personal behavior.

Finally, we'll consider whether and how our current situation is unique—or whether American democracy has faced similar challenges in the past. Here we'll draw on the tradition of American philosophy to shed light on our current situation, the philosophical, political and practical stakes at risk, and what might be done to improve our civic culture.

This class, as a result, has two interrelated goals. The first, specific, goal is to better understand and analyze the current historic moment. The second, more general, goal is to arrive at a sophisticated and rigorous understanding of what truth is, why it matters, and its connection to politics. We'll be using Donald Trump's presidency as a lens to better understand these philosophical concepts but this class is not intended to be anti-Trump: it is, however, designed to be resolutely pro-Truth.

Texts

These are the books we'll be reading. They are all available at the campus Barnes & Noble, as well as many other places.

Elizabeth Anderson: *Private Government*
Richard Rorty: *Achieving Our Country*
Jennifer Saul: *Lying, Misleading, & What is Said*
Cass Sunstein: *#Republic*

All other course readings are included in a large .pdf that you can download from myCourses.

Expectations

Belaboring the Obvious

1. Philosophy is a group activity that depends on conversation and discussion. This is a discussion-intensive course (which is why it has a low enrollment cap.) Discussion is really the only way to make sure we're covering our bases and considering all the options we need to consider. There is no way to do this entirely on your own. In order for this class to function well I need to be confident that everyone's done the reading—no free-riders—but I don't expect everyone to understand the entire reading. That's what class and our discussions are for, and even then we will probably still have questions. Simply put, I assume everyone will make a good faith effort to do the reading, to get at least some idea of what it's about, and to have a couple questions or interesting thoughts to raise. I expect regular attendance, obviously. Finally, I will do everything I can so that everyone feels comfortable participating in our discussions—and I recognize that discussion involves both talking *and* listening. Attendance and participation are worth 20% of the final grade.

Seminar Format

2. This class will be run as a seminar which means, among other things, that I'll try to keep the lecturing to a minimum. This is so we can work out our own thoughts and exercise some degree of self-control over the topics we discuss. Every once in a while I'll probably lecture because a) I can't help myself or b) there's some crucial background information that I want everyone to have or c) you demand that I do it. But I want to limit my lecturing so we can all participate and not just spectate. If you'd prefer a more lecture-oriented course I'll be happy to recommend some.

Typed Questions

3. In order to guide our discussions I am asking everyone to bring a typed question to the class meetings marked with an "*" on the following schedule of readings. This question may be a specific request for clarification or reflect a more critical engagement with the reading. In any case, it should a) be specific, perhaps by referring to a particular passage in the reading, and b) reflect some real thought about the issues raised by the day's reading. Your question should reflect your judgment as to the most important issue that needs clarification or discussion. A few sentences are usually enough. I will collect these in class: I do not accept late questions and you must be present to hand in your question. The typed questions will count toward 20% of the final grade.

"Writing-Intensive"

4. This class is also "writing-intensive" which means it satisfies some extremely loose RIT standards for what counts as "writing" and "intensive." In other words, taking this course satisfies RIT's expectation that everyone take an upper-level, general education, writing intensive course.

We'll try to do justice to the spirit of these standards by paying particular attention to how we write and to how we can write more and better. If this isn't an issue for you, then that's wonderful, really. For the rest of us, I believe there are three things that can help. One is to have a theory about what makes for good writing. I don't care what the theory is, but I do think it's important to have a general sense for what makes the difference between clear and muddled prose. Personally, I've found the writings of Joseph Williams incredibly useful (see, for example his *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*). Second, it's important to know that disciplinary conventions are meant to be broken so that your writing can be as clear and accessible as possible. Helen Sword's *Stylish Academic Writing* is excellent on this point, giving lots of empirical evidence that shows how good, successful writers manage to engage their readers while breaking every so-called rule in the book. Third and finally, I think it's most important to read good writing, since we're likely to imitate what we read. Unfortunately, most philosophers aren't terribly good writers and probably shouldn't be imitated, even when they're otherwise clear, or smart, or even brilliant. Here we'll work around this by paying close attention to different styles of writing and considering what does, and does not, work.

Term Paper

5. As far as specific assignments, the idea is to write, by the end of the semester, a really nice 10-12 page term paper. This is old school! My sense, which may be inaccurate for all I know, is that old-school term-papers can be a source of anxiety. But not this one: we'll build up to the term paper in a steady and progressive way so that, before you know it, you'll have something really solid and substantial by the end of the semester. I'll have more to say about this as the semester unfolds but here are some general thoughts:

- a. I'm open to co-authored and collaborative papers. There's some risk here—you need to trust your coauthor—but collaboration also has its advantages.
- b. You might consider submitting your term paper to an undergraduate philosophy conference or undergraduate philosophy journal. These all have specific guidelines for submissions which can provide you with an overall target as far as length and style.
- c. I plan to be as hands-on as you need: so, if you have any questions about content or style, at any point in the process, let me know and we can talk it through.
- d. I also plan to write a journal article based on this material, so I'll be sharing my process as we go. The idea is for this seminar to be a good collaborative working group where we can develop our positions and try out our ideas. We're all in this together.
- e. To get to our final destination—a term paper—there will be a few shorter assignments along the way. These will take the form of a proposal, an outline, and an introductory section, that will help get us from Point A to Point B. I'll return all of these with comments; you'll have the option of revising and resubmitting, if you wish; a final draft will be due by the 13th week; and a final, *final* paper will be due during exam week.
- f. I'll have a lot more to say as we go along, so don't be worried if you have some questions at the outset. That's natural and good. Again, if you have questions at any point in the process feel free to talk to or e-mail me.

The proposal, outline, introductory section, and draft will each be worth 5% of the final grade. The final, complete, term paper will be worth 40% of the final grade

Additional Information

6. Because I think philosophy is really wonderful and important I'm always happy to talk about the course. Feel free to drop by my office hours or speak to me after class. I've found it's usually a lot more efficient to talk in person than over e-mail.

7. Feel free to ask if you have a question about your grade. While I expect you're able to keep track of this, too, I'm happy to tell you where you stand if you have any concerns. I generally avoid myCourses in the conviction that we don't need one more barrier to more direct forms of communication.

Readings and Assignments

Please note: a particular day's reading and assignment should be done *before* class.

01.17.18	Introductory Remarks
01.19.18	Tim Harford: "The Problem with Facts" Matthew Yglesias: "The Bullshitter-in-Chief"
01.22.18	Harry Frankfurt: <i>On Bullshit</i>
01.24.18	*Heather Douglas: "Bullshit at the Interface of Science and Policy: Global Warming, Toxic Substances, and Other Pesky Problems"
01.26.18	Gerald Cohen: "Complete Bullshit"
01.29.18	*Cheryl Misak: "Pragmatism on Solidarity, Bullshit, and other Deformities of Truth"
01.31.18	Huw Price: "Truth as Convenient Friction" pp. 167-178
02.02.18	Huw Price: "Truth as Convenient Friction" pp. 178-190
02.05.18	John Capps: "A Pragmatic Argument for a Pragmatic Theory of Truth"
02.07.18	Richard Rorty: <i>Achieving Our Country</i> "American National Pride: Whitman and Dewey"
02.09.18	*Richard Rorty: <i>Achieving Our Country</i> "The Eclipse of the Reformist Left"
02.12.18	Richard Rorty: <i>Achieving Our Country</i> "A Cultural Left"
02.14.18	Jason Stanley: "Precis of <i>How Propaganda Works</i> " Robert Gooding Williams: "Jason Stanley's Theory of Propaganda and Ideology"
02.16.18	*Elizabeth Anderson: "The Epistemology of Democracy"
02.19.18	Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway: "Challenging Knowledge: How Climate Science Became a Victim of the Cold War"
02.21.18	Elizabeth Anderson: "Fair Opportunity in Education: A Democratic Equality Perspective"
02.23.18	Elizabeth Anderson: <i>Private Government</i> "When the Market Was Left"
02.26.18	Elizabeth Anderson: <i>Private Government</i> "Private Government"
02.28.18	Niko Kolodny: "Help Wanted: Subordinates" Tyler Cowen: "Work Isn't So Bad after All" (Chapters 5 & 6 in Anderson, <i>Private Government</i>)
03.02.18	*Elizabeth Anderson: <i>Private Government</i> pp. 119-120, 126-144
03.05.18	Jennifer Saul, "Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation and Philosophy of Language"
03.07.18	Jennifer Saul: <i>Lying, Misleading, & What is Said</i> pp. 1-12
03.09.18	*Jennifer Saul: <i>Lying, Misleading, & What is Said</i> pp. 12-30
03.19.18	Jennifer Saul: <i>Lying, Misleading, & What is Said</i> pp. 31-50
03.21.18	Jennifer Saul: <i>Lying, Misleading, & What is Said</i> pp. 51-68
03.23.18	Jennifer Saul: <i>Lying, Misleading, & What is Said</i> pp. 69-86

- 03.26.18 Jennifer Saul: *Lying, Misleading, & What is Said* pp. 86-99
- 03.28.18 *Jennifer Saul: *Lying, Misleading, & What is Said* pp. 100-114
- 03.30.18 Jennifer Saul: *Lying, Misleading, & What is Said* pp. 115-138
- 04.02.18 Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan: "Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making" pp. 1-48
- 04.04.18 *Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan: "Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making" pp. 49-85.
- 04.06.18 Cass Sunstein: *#Republic*, Chapter 1
- 04.09.18 Cass Sunstein: *#Republic*, Chapter 2
- 04.11.18 *John Dewey: "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us"
Richard Hofstadter: "The Paranoid Style in American Politics"
- 04.13.18 Cass Sunstein: *#Republic*, Chapter 3
- 04.16.18 Cass Sunstein: *#Republic*, Chapter 5
- 04.18.18 Cass Sunstein: *#Republic*, Chapter 6
- 04.20.18 John Dewey: "The Eclipse of the Public"
- 04.23.18 Cass Sunstein: *#Republic*, Chapter 7
- 04.25.18 *Cass Sunstein: *#Republic*, Chapter 8
- 04.27.18 Cass Sunstein: *#Republic*, Chapters 9 & 11
- 04.30.18 John Dewey: "Renascent Liberalism"
- 05.04.18 Final Paper Due
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