

What is truth?

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Most of us think we know what is true. We hold opinions, beliefs and convictions that feel self-evident. But what if many of the things we call truth are actually stories that we tell ourselves?

In this video, I explore the difference between truth, fact, belief and narrative. I argue that our identities are shaped by stories about nationality, faith, politics, family, culture and experience. Those stories help us make sense of the world, but they can also persuade us that our beliefs are facts when they are not.

I explain why certainty can be dangerous, why context matters more than we often admit, and why understanding other people's narratives is essential if we want to change minds, reduce conflict and create a more caring society.

This is a video about humility, doubt, critical thinking and the importance of recognising uncertainty in a world where everyone claims to know the truth.

Do facts exist? How much of what we believe is actually true? And how should we respond when other people see the world very differently from us? These are big questions. And how do we work out the answers?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_WG_CaiA7bQ?si=iRnC618NWY0bH94S

This is the audio version:

https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=zrx4w-1af3a6c-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&download=1&rtl=0&fonts=Arial&skin=f6f6f6&font-color=auto&logo_link=episode_page&btn-skin=c73a3a

The Debate Ammunition for this video is available [here](#).

This is the transcript:

What is truth? That is a profoundly important question because most of the time, a lot of us think we know what is true, and much of what we think is true is not. Many supposed truths are actually beliefs, and we often confuse beliefs with facts. Understanding the distinction really matters, and that's what this video is all about.

Beliefs are important. They shape our understanding. There's nothing wrong with having beliefs. Some beliefs support our well-being. Others can cause harm. We need to be able to tell the difference. But we all have beliefs, and we always will. They make sense of our reality, and we can't do without them.

We understand realities through narratives. We make sense of our lives through stories. Stories tell us who we are. They shape our identity. They influence how we see the world. They help define what we think is true.

So identity is built from stories. Stories tell us what our gender, whatever it is, means. They create nationality and identity, and they shape faith, which many of us inherit from our parents as a shared intergenerational story, and that religion can then shape our understanding of the world. These narratives become a part of us. They become our truth.

And this is also true in politics and the media. They not only form their own view of the truth, but they shape ours as well.

Political parties tell stories about themselves. We accept some of those stories. We reject others. That's what politics is all about.

And newspapers also promote particular narratives. We once trusted the BBC because it seemed unbiased. Now we have our doubts.

All of these influences help define our truth or lack of it, and then our suspicions, and that also matters.

Doing so, truth and belief are often mixed together.

We may believe that more state intervention is essential and beneficial. Others may strongly disagree. Each side thinks the other is wrong; beliefs can feel like fact to us. That does not make them real.

The Ipswich Town test explains this.

I, quite irrationally, believe that Ipswich Town is the best football club in England. The evidence does not always support that belief, although this season has helped sustain it. So deep down, despite the recent evidence, I know my belief is not quite true. It's a measure of hope over expectation. It's a measure of who I think I am. I was born and brought up in Ipswich, and that part of it remains within me and will do forever. But it is a belief and not a fact that Ipswich Town is the best football club in England, although I'll argue with you about it if you want me to.

The fact is, this is what gives rise to so many of our disagreements, and even moral absolutes have exceptions. We say some principles are absolute. Not killing people seems to be one example, and yet almost everybody knows of a reason why, on occasion, we must break this rule, even if we don't do so personally.

Context alters our judgment. Certainty is often less certain than we think it is.

Even so, we persist in thinking facts do exist. My father had a simple story about this, and he told it to me when I was quite young, and it was in the context of newspapers with which I was fascinated. He said there were only two things in any newspaper that were facts. The first was the date, and the second was the sports results. And he said that was vital because gambling depended upon it. Everything else, he said, should be doubted about what was in that newspaper, and I think he was right. And the lesson was that I should think critically. I should appraise what they said, and I should decide what was true as far as I was concerned.

And that is true even with those things like facts. I said the date was right. And let's be clear. I can state as a fact that I was born on 21st March, 1958. That is true, but only within our current date convention. It is a fact within the framework that we have agreed to measure dates; otherwise, it's nonsense.

So even facts depend upon agreed definitions, and they aren't always agreed. So facts still require context. And what this means is that most of life is, in fact, about interpretation.

Everything about me since the time of my birth is open to interpretation. My memory can be unreliable. My twin brother says so. And recall can definitely be incomplete. So understanding changes over time; that is part of being alive.

My point is this: we are often too certain. I'm sometimes too certain myself. I know that. I'm guilty of what I'm saying we should do, so I'm trying to teach myself at this moment. It's easy to hold rigid beliefs or seem sure and to overstate our conclusions, which might be conditional, provisional, or simply uncertain because the facts aren't yet established. In that case, certainty can become a barrier, when humility and understanding is often required.

We need to accept a world in which uncertainty and misunderstanding exist, and our

education should be emphasising this and not supposed facts.

The example of Reform I think illustrates this. I've been told by several people very recently, that they do not think that everyone in Reform is racist. They're right, but then they go on to say that every racist is in Reform. But even that claim is not true. We know it isn't. Reform now attracts some openly racist people as well, and racists can be found elsewhere, too, in all political parties, and I stress that point, and none. We know that's true, so let's not pretend otherwise. Reform might have some racists in its ranks, but so are they everywhere.

So, we must embrace something uncomfortable and not convenient when we claim a supposed truth. The reality is, in the case of racism, it's a pervasive problem that we need to tackle. It's not just in existence on the far right, although it seems more prevalent there. And we should be talking about prevalence, not facts.

In that case, we also need to do something else, and that is we need to understand other people's narratives.

We need to know how people reach their views.

We need to understand their experiences.

We need to understand their identities.

People often jump straight to conclusions, but understanding and even doubt must come before persuasion.

The fact is, if facts there are, that a politics of care requires that understanding. We must engage with uncomfortable views. We must seek ways to move beyond them by understanding the narratives that are behind them. That process can be difficult, but it is necessary if society is to change.

I think that's worth doing, and I think the effort is worth making. Do you? There's a poll down below. Let us have your views. Please share this video and do like it, if that's what you do. And if you want to buy Tom and me coffee, we'd be very grateful. There's a link down below.

Poll

[poll id="428"]