Abstract This chapter examines the classical philosophical binaries of truths and lies, philosophy and sophistry. These binaries overstate their case and in their stead, thinking about degrees of truth rather than truths and lies or truth and post-truth obviates potential misunderstanding or judgments. At stake in this reading is the sensitivity required of judging within contexts. This sensitivity incorporates the dialectical and post-modern notion of post-truth as including truths and lies rather than an admission that the quest for truth, however problematic, is altogether relinquished. To think of degrees of hypocrisy in light of degrees of truth refuses the simple and perhaps simple-minded rush to label trivial manifestation of hypocrisy and demands a more nuanced approach to the conditions that may or may not warrant the label of hypocrisy.

1.1 The Context of Post-Truth: The Trumpian Age

George Orwell reminds us in Nineteen Eighty-Four that the regime of Big Brother and its use of doublethink “means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them.” (1981/1949, 176) If logic was supposed to preserve some modicum of clarity and ascertain truth claims, under fascism and totalitarianism it loses its power. This is the case in Orwell’s dystopian novel because the party controls the historical record, erasing inconvenient facts and adding others, so that the distinction between truths and lies becomes blurred. As Orwell says, the “past was erased, the erasure was forgotten,
the lie became truth.” (ibid., 64) If official assertions are deemed truthful only because they are sanctioned by those who authored them, what is the point of quibbling over logical nuances and empirical evidence and testimonies? Any challenge in Orwell’s fictive world is bound to end in either dismissal or persecution, gulags established by the likes of Stalin and his henchmen or concentration camps set up by Hitler and the Gestapo. President Trump has relegated anything he fears or disagrees with as “fake news” to discredit it as unworthy of the traditional critical examination accorded to public claims and statements of fact, following the slippery slope that turns democracies into totalitarian regimes. Herein lies the concern of this book: it is not that the Trump Administration will ignore dissent and send dissenters to the gulags or concentration camps, but that it will empty public discourse of the richness of debate and deliberation, where conventional reference to evidence and truth telling are sacrosanct. In other words, without some basic agreement about the boundary conditions that inform communication as a starting point, agreements and disagreements are reduced to personal preferences and power moves.

Becoming popular with Brexit and continuing into the Trump era, “post-truth” was dubbed by the Oxford English Dictionary its word of the year in 2016. Post-truth must be taken seriously not only by journalists who cover current political development but also by philosophers. On one level, this term takes us back to the classical Socratic distinction between sophistry and philosophy, and on another, there is something more insidious and frightening akin to the dystopia envisioned by Orwell. The specter of truth haunts the contemporary political stage, relentlessly being dismissed while never quite leaving the stage, demanding, as it were, to remain at the center of every debate, whether about the scientific data informing the fight against coronavirus contagion or foreign relations with adversaries. On another level, this point of obfuscation about the truth and perhaps relativism run amok was an unintended consequence of the challenges to every scientific claim for its hold on truth and certainty. To speak of hypocrisy in the moral register requires speaking about truth telling and the conditions under which a statement is deemed true. Philosophers have traditionally played a central role in investigating the conditions that distinguish true statements from false ones, both on logical and empirical grounds. Their investigations established the ground rules for communication so that misrepresentations could be corrected rather than, in the Orwellian fictive world, become part of a fabricated historical record. In this sense, epistemological questions become moral
questions as well: statements that cannot be critically examined and refuse rectification can turn into deliberate deceptions. The post-truth condition requires the kind of epistemological and moral vigilance that would undergird the engagement with the specter of hypocrisy. The community of science studies has traditionally scrutinized the privilege accorded the natural sciences as the explorers of knowledge and the guardians of its truth claims. This critical scrutiny linked epistemological concerns with social and moral ones as they apprise public policy.

As one of its leaders, Bruno Latour reminds the community of science studies writ large (sociologists, philosophers, and anthropologists who endorse some version of deconstruction, poststructuralism, or postmodernism) that it may be indirectly responsible for the current misunderstanding of how to deal with critical engagements, but not for the perniciousness of our post-truth predicament. To someone unfamiliar with the critiques of scientific certainty, these critiques may seem to legitimate the dismissal of empirical data, evidence-based statements, and the means by which scientific claims are deemed to be credible or true. Is this “gullible criticism,” indeed, “a case of radicalism gone mad”? (Latour 2004, 231) Latour’s lament suggests that the “question was never to get away from facts but closer to them, not fighting empiricism but, on the contrary, renewing empiricism.” (ibid.; italics in the original) There is a difference between bad critique contesting the facticity of scientific “facts” and good science studies wanting to “get closer” to facts. For science studies scholars, the facticity of facts and the grounds on which they are established (epistemology) is only one part of the story; the other, even more crucial part is concerned with the horrors inflicted on people, animals, and the planet when facts are deliberately or accidentally misconstrued and are uncritically accepted (morality). In this rendering, an earlier concern with the “two dogmas of empiricism,” introduced two generations earlier by the philosopher Willard Van Orman Quine comes to mind. The first “dogma” or belief suggests that there is “some fundamental cleavage” between truths that are analytic (“grounded in meanings independent of matters of fact”) and those that are synthetic (“grounded in fact”). (1961, 20) The second dogma is reductionism: “the belief that each meaningful statement is equivalent to some logical construct upon terms which refer to immediate experience.” (ibid.) In questioning the validity of these two sets of belief, the one about the meanings that depend on facts and the other about the logical structure of language, Quine deliberately blurs the boundary between “speculative metaphysics
and natural science.” (ibid.) His own pragmatic approach argues for the inherent interpretive dimension of every statement about human experience and thereby problematizes the epistemological conditions under which a community of inquirers reaches an agreement about truth claims.

As Quine concedes, the “myth of physical objects is epistemologically superior” to myths about gods and fairies that control nature because it has “proven more efficacious than other myths as a device for working a manageable structure into the flux of experience.” (ibid., 44) The efficacy in question here differs from an appeal to a direct and unencumbered perception and knowledge of facts; instead, it relies on the continuous interpretation and inscription of meaning to statements about matters of fact, allowing for the changing truth status of statements (given new evidence). Quine’s concession to degrees of truth about knowledge claims and Latour’s concern to get “closer” to facts in order to ascertain their truth-value are supposed to reassure the scientific community and the public that the truth about our knowledge claims is still worthy of pursuit. There are others, like Steve Fuller, who seem to have given up on the quest for truth altogether and give credence to the Orwellian nightmare we observe in the Trumpian age. As a leading British sociologist of science and advocate of social epistemology (all knowledge is socially constructed), Fuller offers academic legitimacy to a dismissive way of thinking about truth claims and the conditions under which they ought to be scrutinized. His promotion of post-truth circumvents the critical analysis of truth conditions in favor of a plurality of opinions that in turn need not defend themselves in any epistemological court. (2018, Chapter 1) This approach exploits Quine’s analysis of the dogmas of empiricism and Latour’s lament over losing touch with empirical facts and cynically presents itself as the guardian of populist common sense. With a Trump-like glee, the likes of Fuller present themselves as rebellious mavericks and iconoclasts fighting against the privileged elites whose insular scientific discourse is deployed by experts to pontificate over authoritative consensus claims.

At stake is no longer an internal debate among scientists and philosophers over knowledge claims and their truth-value, but the very possibility of coherent deliberations over public policies. Given that what has been taken for granted about public communication can no longer be relied on, it is worthwhile to revisit the classic philosophical concerns with ontology and epistemology. These concerns point to the danger of critical engagement deteriorating into skepticism and relativism. To avoid ending
with outright cynicism about the possibility of knowing anything at all, it would behoove us to agree, however tentatively and by convention, that in order to pursue the truth about empirical data (for personal reasons or policy purposes) a community (of inquirers) must share a common ground or some ground rules of communication.

Revisiting the question of what counts as truth telling takes us back to Socrates’ ongoing battle with the sophists of his day. Some have argued that the line of demarcation between philosophy and sophistry is clear, almost sacrosanct. The standard argument goes like this: “philosophy” (φιλοσοφία filosofía) claims as its end the love of wisdom and therefore of knowledge and truth, while “sophistry” (σοφία sofistía) uses fallacious arguments and deceptive techniques to win debates. It is interesting that the Latin sophista (and sophists) refers to someone who makes use of fallacious arguments and to “a master of one’s craft; a wise or prudent man, one clever in matters of daily life,” the first with negative and the second with positive connotations. The addition of “clever” in the second could have a negative connotation as well if it were meant to contrast with the “wise” of wisdom. In any case, sophistry becomes in Socrates’ hands a contemptuous and pejorative label to distinguish those clever (even if wise) craftsmen from the philosophers whose love of wisdom has no pecuniary rewards. (Century Dictionary) Socrates’ derisive comments about sophistry are usually presented as part of his unwavering commitment to the truth, the love of wisdom at all costs, and his famous claim that sophists are paid to twist meanings to suit their paying masters (Gorgias). Aristotle continues in this vein to define sophistry as “wisdom in appearance only” (Metaphysics). In Socrates’ denunciation of sophistry in general and the sophists as his sworn enemies there is a subtle acknowledgment of the knotty relationship between the seeker of truth and wisdom and the one who claims to have gained it. During his trial, Socrates suggests he is the wisest man alive because he knows what he does not know, admitting to the limitations of his knowledge (Apology). The sophists, by contrast, are pretentious: they pretend to know what they, by definition, cannot know, that is, the truth. They may know something, as Socrates admits he does as well, but their knowledge consists of the tricks of the game of learning and the rhetorical skills with which to persuade their listeners. Philosophers and sophists alike use rhetorical devices and are therefore rhetoricians and orators, attempting to persuade their audiences. The difference between philosophers and the sophists, then, lies in
their respective intentions: some seek truth, the others seek to win arguments. The rhetorical skills will not get one to the truth, though they will help win arguments. The lawyer as sophist thus seeks to argue the case as persuasively as possible, even when this results in exonerating the guilty and indicting the innocent.

My reading of Socrates detects a certain concern with hypocrisy—deception and pretense, self-deception, and the deliberate manipulation of an audience (even of one)—conveniently leveled against sophists but exempting philosophers. (see some of this in Dupriez 1991) But is the charge of hypocrisy applicable in a case where sophists openly declare their intent to argue as powerfully as possible to win the hearts of their audience and win cases when paid to do so? In this sense, sophists are as honest about their trade as philosophers are, though their goals differ. Perhaps there is a confusion here between sophistry and rhetoric, a confusion that begins already with Socrates. As Edward Schiappa (1995) suggests (following Gorgias 465C), Socrates’ sense of the mixture of the two relies on his observations about the methods used by the sophists. In selling their credentials and their expertise, sophists used rhetorical devices and the flourishes of logical argumentations to persuade their interlocutors, and in doing so, they had no interest in philosophical pursuits. If the name of the game is victory at all costs and if the game is political brinksmanship for the sake of amassing power, then any philosophical illusion about knowledge for knowledge’s sake or the quest for the truth is beside the point. The genealogy of this recognition dates back to Roman emperors and later to Machiavelli (in the sixteenth century), Marx and Nietzsche (in the nineteenth century), Foucault and Lyotard (in the twentieth century), and reaches the advocates of the “playfulness” of post-truth games in the age of Trump and Brexit (in the twenty-first century). New discursive games may endanger the ones we have historically perceived insofar as they seem to refuse to engage at all with their interlocutors and critics. Cynical dismissal of different viewpoints by means of rhetorical entertainment violates the premise of critical deliberation established by philosophers. It is no longer the Socratic distinction between philosophy and sophistry that holds, but a distinction between deliberation and entertainment. Sophistry in the service of distraction needs no rules and evades the detection of falsehoods, since the truth is no longer at issue. The Trumpian age warrants a philosophical engagement not because philosophers can hold up truth criteria that would bring the 45th US president’s fans to their senses, but because only within a
framework that respects truth seeking and truth telling, however problematic both remain, can a society hope to minimize the perils envisioned by Orwell’s fictional dystopia and Hannah Arendt’s scholarly treatise on totalitarianism (1951), as we shall see below.

Barbara Cassin, an important interpreter of the French philosopher and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s work, moves the discussion of truths and lies to meaning production, which is exemplified within the psychoanalytic process. (2020, 25) As she does this, she explains that where truth was on the side of philosophy, now it is on the side of psychoanalysis (and sophistry, reconsidered). In her words, “from Freud to Lacan, we have moved decisively from the love of truth to the discourse of truth.” (ibid., 27) This move modifies the quest for and love of truth as a hidden treasure to be uncovered. The search for and dialogic exposition of truth is taken out of the hands of philosophers and shifted to the interpretive mode of looking for meaning in the “discourse of truth” that is undertaken in the therapeutic context of psychoanalysis. The emphasis on the discursive process also announces the potential for the unconscious to show itself through speech and construct meaning whose discursive truth is announced as well. Unlike the Socratic dialogue that keeps the speakers teleologically focused, on track to find out what a concept means, in this case, speech produces meaning in its enfolding. Philosophers like Socrates seem to have an agenda and a dialogic method by which to accomplish it (even if it may be the case that Socrates himself really just enjoyed conversations and arguments for their own sake), in the psychoanalytic context, says Cassin, the “most splendid, original truths” emerge organically. Cassin argues that, according to Lacan, “discourse creates being, and this is why its meaning can only be grasped after the fact, in view of the world it has produced.” (ibid., 35) In this sense, then, the truth is constructed and not uncovered. Without continuing to engage the intricacies of the psychoanalytic discourse and logic within clinical settings, it suffices here to say that it is clear that speech does not reveal or disclose or unveil the façade of the subject; it brings into being one’s being. In short, there are “only interpretations and interpretations of interpretations.” (ibid.) In other words, there is no philosophical essence or truth to be discovered or unmasked. Socrates himself had to admit that philosophy and sophistry were similar enough in order to insist on a difference, to formulate a difference and hope it would stick, even at his trial and even with an audience that was skeptical of anything he had to say in his own defense. Cassin’s interrogation, by contrast, breaks down the Socratic
difference when it gets to constructing meaning (and truth) rather than searching for the Truth.

There is a radical difference between the Trumpian-like refusal to engage the criteria according to which to measure the truth-value of empirical or any other claims within the framework of public discourse and the debates over these criteria and their efficacy, whether they are constructed or transcendent. The rhetorical misappropriation of some of the more flamboyant rhetorical moves of self-proclaimed postmodernists, for example, does a grave disservice to public deliberation over worthwhile disagreements. Perhaps the most accessible, least nuanced work that carried the day at the time to discredit the privileged scientific discourse was written by Jean Baudrillard (1995) who suggested the Gulf War was nothing but a media hoax. After pronouncing this outlandish claim, it became difficult to defend the poststructuralists and deconstructionists who were making careful arguments about the effects of epistemological overreaching. The analytic wing of the philosophical community reacted with vehemence to Baudrillard’s rhetorical (sophistic) maneuvers and found easy pickings. As one of their leading advocates, Harry Frankfurt, noted: “These shameless antagonists of common sense—members of a certain emblematic subgroup of them call themselves ‘postmodernists’—rebelliously and self-righteously deny that truth has any genuinely objective reality at all. They therefore go on to deny that truth is worthy of any obligatory deference or respect.” (2006, 18–19) Name calling (“shameless antagonists of common sense”) as a substitute for an argument reeks of fallacious reasoning (ad hominem). Shifting from the descriptive (“rebellious”) to the normative (“self-righteous”) is the maneuver of someone trying to discredit an argument without fully laying it out. And confusing the legitimate critique of objectivity with a wholesale dismissal of truth as such is itself a shameless overstatement (similar in kind to Latour’s own critique of critique), one anchored not in textual evidence but in speculation at best and plain aversion at worst to the point that intellectual “respect” is abandoned.

Had Frankfurt read the works of postmodernists or deconstructionists, he might have avoided committing logical fallacies in his judgment of their work. He would have learned that it is exactly their commitment to honesty (scientific and other) that motivates their scrutiny, that their interest in understanding and interpreting facts and evidence is both epistemological and ontological (in Quine’s sense), and that when Jacques Derrida, for example, speaks of the limits of metaphysical language, he
does not thereby mean to negate the existence of objective reality. Rather, he pleads for some humility on the part of those savants making claims to know, objectively, the nature of reality. For example, he says: “what is called ‘objectivity,’ scientific for instance (in which I firmly believe, in a given situation), imposes itself only within a context which is extremely vast, old, powerfully established, stabilized or rooted in a network of conventions (for instance, those of language) and yet which still remains a context. . . That does not in the slightest discredit them. In the name of what, of which other ‘truth,’ moreover, would it?” (1988, 136) This is neither a claim to an alternative truth nor a renunciation of the scientific project; it is, on the contrary, a plea for care and self-awareness in our knowledge production endeavors, the kind already announced in the Socratic dialogues and the psychoanalytic practice. Would this qualification suffice for Frankfurt? Does such a call for context within which statements about objectivity and truth are tested undermine a commitment to reality, facts, and objectivity as such? As Latour has insisted in his rebuke to bad critique, this kind of careful, critical inquiry would bring the investigator “closer” to reality, facts, and truth. Closer in the sense of recognizing human fallibility and the mediating effects of linguistic pronouncements, closer in the sense of pursuing knowledge and truth even while we know that claims are always bound by the limitations of what Donna Haraway (1988) has called our “situatedness.” Yet insistently closer nonetheless.

Perhaps like John Searle before him (1983), Frankfurt has a fundamental mistrust of continental philosophers in general and the French postmodernists and deconstructionists in particular. It may be their allegedly difficult writing style or their critical posture vis-à-vis logocentrism that upsets him; it may be their failure to venerate the “truth” as he understands it. Rather than build bridges and find common ground, he suggests drawing on the Socratic distinction between philosophy and sophistry, which for him suggests that only he and his fellow analytic philosophers “care primarily about the discrete facts, and about inferences that these facts may support.” (2006, 95) As fanciful as the language of postmodernists and deconstructionists may sometimes be, they do not recoil from this “common sense” approach to inference making. Rather, their linguistic maneuvering formally illustrates the very limits of linguistic expression that they thematize, and attests to their own struggle to be careful and sensitive to nuanced meanings. Frankfurt’s conclusion that
“It is only through our recognition of a world of stubbornly independent reality, fact, and truth that we come both to recognize ourselves as beings distinct from others and to articulate the specific nature of our own identities” (ibid., 101) sounds reasonable but is contestable. Perhaps the likes of Frankfurt fail to appreciate the early efforts of Baudrillard, for example, who worried about the impact of the “discourse of simulation,” one that “threatens the difference between ‘true’ and ‘false,’ between ‘real ‘and ‘imaginary’.” (1983, 5) Baudrillard’s concern with “hyperreality” was neither shameless nor antagonistic, neither rebellious nor self-righteous; instead, it warned of the conditions under which reality might be mistaken for its simulacra, facts lost in the shuffle of their duplication, and the truth never fully revealed even when searched for. (ibid., 7) Had he read these lines, Frankfurt might have been less dismissive of the French thinkers he holds in contempt. It is one thing to argue about the methods by which truth is ascertained, as Socrates did, and quite another to suggest that truth has been abandoned, or worse, mocked, as Socrates claimed was the case with the sophists of his day. And to suggest that only one method should dominate the intellectual landscape is tantamount to intellectual dogmatism reminiscent of religious clerics and fascist dictators.

But not all truths are equal. As we recall from Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, there are differences between historical, mathematical, scientific, and philosophical truths. Referring to philosophy as the ultimate arbiter of the truth-value of knowledge claims, it becomes clear, for Hegel, that “what counts as truth can only deserve the name of truth when philosophy has had a hand in its production. Other sciences may try to get by without philosophy and to rely merely on clever argumentation, but without philosophy, they are unable to possess any life, spirit, or truth in themselves.” (2018, 42 #67) Whether empirically verified or supported by “clever argumentation,” scientific truths lack the “life” and “spirit” that turns them into philosophical truths. Philosophy, for Hegel, is essential to the production and legitimation of truths. Hegel’s warning differs from Frankfurt’s and Latour’s because he does not advocate that in the search of truth philosophers must get closer to the facts, but comes closer instead to Quine’s, Baudrillard’s, and Cassin’s respective concerns with interpretation and meaning. Philosophical deliberations, according to Hegel, guarantee a deeper understanding of the conditions under which truths are produced. Hegel never discredited scientific knowledge, but unlike some contemporary analytic philosophers, he insisted that it was only a
means for and not the end of discovering truths. The collection of empirical data may yield useful information; organized methodologically, this information can be transformed into knowledge; examined critically, this knowledge can reveal truths. Lacan’s reading of this Hegelian move from knowledge to truth points to the “sensitive frontier” between them.

For Hegel, “an ideal solution” is the one in which “truth is in the state of constant reabsorption in its own disturbing element, being in itself no more than that which is lacking for the realization of knowledge.” In Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, this means, in Lacan’s reading, that “Truth is nothing other than that which knowledge can apprehend as knowledge only by setting its ignorance to work.” (1977, 296) A dialectical *aufhebung* is needed so that knowledge can eventually, after a logically unfolding process, fully contain “Truth” but also perceive its own development as being “true.” The Hegelian progress toward a future truth establishes a temporal horizon toward which knowledge aims. The ongoing accumulation of scientific knowledge evolves and is philosophically transformed over time into truths, and these truths, in turn, continue a dialectic movement that acknowledges “ignorance” and overcomes it from a higher plateau of understanding. Lacan compares the striving toward the unknown that becomes partially known with each step to Sigmund Freud’s understanding of the perils of truth seeking. In Lacan’s words, “Freud’s dramatism” suggests “the re-entry of truth into the field of science at the same time as it gains recognition in the field of its praxis: repressed, it appears.” (ibid., 297) For Freud, as we shall see in some detail later, the insertion of the “repressed” truth is an attempt for the truth to be recognized as such, to have a chance to be recognized at all. This differs from the celebratory or perhaps simply the matter-of-factness of Hegel’s elevation of truth as an indispensable feature of knowledge, which would be revealed with every step of the dialectical movement. Freud’s hidden truth may be so “repressed” that it might not be brought to light, and if revealed, denied as truth and cast as only partial and lacking rigorous empirical support. Though Hegel and Freud search for the truth in the process of knowledge acquisition, in Lacan’s reading, the Hegelian optimism about the final revelation of truth is questioned by Freud’s concern over truth’s “constant re-absorption in its own disturbing element.” The Hegelian *aufhebung* is forward and upward, with the potential of getting ever closer to the ultimate Truth; the Freudian inward movement is as committed to progress toward the truth but perhaps more realistic about its self-imposed limits. Either way, summarizes Lacan,
Hegel’s “unhappy consciousness” meets Freud’s “discontents of civilization” (ibid.) in their shared lamentation about the limitations shared by knowledge, self-knowledge, and any claim for apprehending the truth.

What is at stake is not truth and knowledge, truth and reality, or even self-knowledge, but instead Michel Foucault’s linkage of truth and power along Socratic and Nietzschean lines. This nexus might frighten away the self-proclaimed connoisseurs of truth whose daily fare is limited to examining its decontextualized state, its neutral and universal domain of meaning. According to analytic philosophers, the self-proclaimed custodians of truth’s technical apparatus, power has nothing to do with the truth. They remain oblivious to critiques, standard since Socrates, that have shown the intimate relations truth has with its promoters and guardians, whose expertise is to remain unchallenged so that politically expedient “noble lies” can be morally justified. (Republic 414b-c)

In Foucault’s discussion of the “specific intellectual” (whose expertise displaces the “universal intellectual” of the nineteenth century), he recognizes the “political responsibilities” associated with this public role. (1980, 130–1) In light of these responsibilities, Foucault reminds his readers that “truth isn’t the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves.” (ibid., 131) The romantic imaginary that saw great canonical thinkers as shielded from the politics of their day is called into question. Foucault places the seekers of truth within the boundaries of the tumultuous world of politics, explaining along the way that “truth isn’t outside power, or lacking in power.” (ibid.) That truth claims are powerful especially when contextualized within power relations (of the academy or the state or capitalism or the church or all of them in varying degrees) was already admitted by Socrates. But should Frankfurt and his cohorts seize on these statements to bolster their argument about postmodern antagonism toward the pristine status of truth, Foucault is quick to aver that “truth is a thing of this world,” namely, it cannot escape objective reality because “it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint.” (ibid.) Read critically, the second statement about truth production and its constraints explains the first about truth being “of this world” on three interrelated registers. First, truth is a human production; it is not given to humans by the gods (contrary to Greek mythology and biblical lore). Second, truth production has constraints (logical, factual, linguistic, and cultural) that precede it. Third, multiple “forms of constraint” may
conflict with each other and at times depict the truth as a compromised and conventional production.

These concerns over the production of knowledge and truth were not new with Foucault. The history of philosophy is a history of truth seekers no matter the method or approach and no matter the imperfect results. Some, like Socrates and Spinoza, exhibited modesty, others, like Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel, organized knowledge and presented comprehensive worldviews, while still others, like Rousseau and Nietzsche, problematized the project of modernity and the faith in knowledge production exhibited by promoters of the Enlightenment. Though sensitive to the corrupting influence of power over the quest for knowledge and the search for truth, philosophers traditionally sought to wrest truth from the clutches of power and reveal its universality despite its manifestation within particular contexts. After Marx, and despite his own claims for universal truths, it is difficult to accept decontextualized truth claims. Does this mean that, according to Foucault, anything goes when it comes to truth production? Is Foucault’s apprehension about truth production an indication of relativism, as some have charged? Being aware of the pitfalls awaiting the seekers of truth need not (logically or even practically) lead one to consternation or cynicism; on the contrary, the same intellectual vigilance claimed by analytic philosophers seems to be at work here. Even when, or perhaps especially because, “each society has its régime of truth,” Foucault advises his readers to notice that each community “accepts and makes function as true” specific “types of discourse.” Likewise, there are “mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements,” “the means by which each is sanctioned,” and the “techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth.” These statements would as likely come from an analytic academic as from a French radical who has been said to care nothing for the truth. This shared concern with truth may diffuse the epistemic tension between the analytic and continental schools of thought. Foucault refers to “the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.” (ibid.) Who are “those who are charged”? Who authorizes them? Who are the intellectual gatekeepers? For Socrates, philosophers held the line against the sophists; for Hegel, philosophers had to critically engage the scientists; for Frankfurt, he and his analytic friends will fend off the French nihilists (who, to no one’s surprise, invoke Nietzsche).
Once truth is understood as a “régime of truth,” as Foucault contends, philosophers cannot afford to ignore the “political, economic, institutional régime of the production of truth.” (ibid., 133) Foucault extends the Socratic binary between philosophers and sophists, and questions the status of those who make truth claims. But unlike the Socratic belief that truth could be neutralized from and remain outside of the political realm, Foucault insists that his call to arms “is not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time.” (ibid.) This injunction is more modest and honest than the one offered by Socrates who advised that if truth is powerful, then the best that could be done with it is to ensure it no longer remains exclusively in the clutches of the powerful, with the exception of the philosopher-king. For Foucault, then, it is not only that the powerful will use the truth for their purposes, as Socrates warned, but also that the power of truth will be abused. This challenge keeps the epistemic bar high enough to detect power relations wherever they are and invites, at a lower register, critical examination of what can be accepted as truth outside of or alongside the establishment that will harness whatever is available to retain its power. However tempting, might this invitation confuse, as Arendt cautions, rational and factual truths? Rational truths, as modern philosophers declared, arise from logical investigations and logical analyses, while factual truths emerge from empirical data collection. Immanuel Kant was the first to combine the two sets of claims: “thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.” Thinking requires both empirical content and logical structuring on the way of assessing truth claims. Unlike Kant, Arendt contends that much is at stake in differentiating “mathematical, scientific, and philosophical truths” from factual ones. (2005, 2) Though she would agree with Hegel and Foucault about human intervention in the production of all of these truths, she finds it useful to distinguish between them to some extent and with full awareness that the distinction is problematic.

In the political realm, Arendt contends, “the chances of factual truth surviving the onslaught of power are very slim indeed.” (ibid., 3) Writing during the cultural upheavals of the 1960s, it stands to reason that she focuses on “the clash of factual truth and politics, which we witness today on such a large scale.” (ibid., 5) What would she have said had she witnessed the post-truth era of the 2010s? Since Arendt considers
the conflict between truth and politics to be the conflict between truth and opinion, and since she understands opinion to be publicly communicated, she suggests that “facts and opinions, though they must be kept apart, are not antagonistic to each other; they belong to the same realm.” (ibid., 7) Being in the same political realm, they are susceptible to mistakes and misrepresentation, and are thereby to be evaluated differently than rational truths, the validation of which belongs to a different realm, perhaps the scientific and academic. There is an oppressive feature to the presentation of and insistence on factual truths in the political domain. In Arendt’s words: “Seen from the viewpoint of politics, truth has a despotic character. It is therefore hated by tyrants, who rightly fear the competition of a coercive force they cannot monopolize, and it enjoys a rather precarious status in the eyes of governments that rest on consent and abhor coercion.” (ibid., 8) Though Arendt’s references are to the European tyrants of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and the communist Soviet Union, one could easily project this view onto the contemporary political atmosphere of Putin’s Russia, Orban’s Hungary, Maduro’s Venezuela, Netanyahu’s Israel, Bolsonaro’s Brazil, Erdogan’s Turkey, and Trump’s United States, to name but a few of the authoritarian-leaning regimes in power today. The Trumpian mantra of “fake news” reverberates across media outlets as if one were living under Orwell’s fictionalized Big Brother and the Ministry of Truth. The open hostility to a free press and the imprisonment of dissidents may be more visible in Russia and Venezuela than in Israel and the United States, but the vilification of protests by Trump as “riots” and demonstrators as “radical thugs” bears the stamp of a leader with little tolerance for dissent. Critics and whistleblowers in the United States are fired from their government positions as co-conspirators of the “deep state.” The very truth that is the goal of philosophers is itself said to have a “despotic character” by these antidemocratic politicians. The appeal to a philosophical examination of truth claims is necessary for any political deliberation. Without some ground rules and basic agreement on what counts as truth and what differentiates one truth from another, it would be difficult to communicate and administer public policies.

Since facts and their truthfulness “could always have been otherwise,” as Arendt contends, they are open to manipulations, counterfactuals, and outright lies and fabrications. (ibid., 9) This much was already asserted above when quoting Quine and Foucault. Arendt pushes the point to insist that, unlike the likes of Frankfurt (whom she does not address),
“factual truth is no more self-evident than opinion,” and therefore remains contestable and contested at every turn, lending opposing opinions their own sense of legitimacy. (ibid., 10) Under these conditions, “truthtellers,” as Arendt calls them, are bound to exercise their persuasive talents and thereby sway the opinions of others, perhaps to enjoy their political support. (ibid., 12) Without the scrutiny of philosophers and scientists, politicians like Trump exploit the problematic status of “factual truth” to license themselves to say whatever they want. Allowing lies to be used in statecraft, as Arendt concedes, may be temporary and about specific national secrets or the appropriate deception of enemies, but they are not on the level of the “noble lies” attributed to Plato as a matter of course for the political elite. In other words, white lies uttered by politicians for the sake of nudging public behavior in a pandemic, for example, differ from outright falsehoods that sow division and engender fear (claiming that the coronavirus will be eliminated quickly or have minimal effect). But the attribution of the so-called noble lies to Plato as an endorsement of misleading the public, Arendt insists, is a misreading of the Greek, and that in no way did Plato give carte blanche permission for political deception. (ibid., 19)

Arendt’s classification of different kinds of truth, factual and rational, may shed light on the concerns voiced by Latour and Frankfurt in relation to the truth of scientific facts that are both open for interpretation and may yield putative consensus among researchers. Though in Arendt’s binary, scientific facts are part of rational truths, one can see their Kantian overlap with factual truths, those worthy of empirical contestation and critical scrutiny. The history of science offers ample evidence that what were once considered scientific truths have been replaced with others, at times contradictory, at other times complementary, but decisively different. (Think of the geocentric versus the heliocentric view of the universe, or leeches and bloodletting versus the use of antibiotics in immunology.) This ongoing process of confirmation and falsification does not relegate truth-bearing facts to the dustbin of opinions; instead, it demands a more robust level of verification and legitimation, ever more precise and exacting than was tolerated before. From outside the scientific community and the community of academic researchers, this process may appear unstable, confusing, contradictory, and prone to mischief. Plenty of science studies scholars have pointed out the dangers of this process, while other science studies critics have focused on its self-legitimating
protective walls. As we shall see in the next section, scientists and philosophers of science distinguish between truths reached by convention and those deserving universal consent when addressing philosophical concerns over knowledge and truth. Just as there are different kinds of truth, there are different kinds of lies that include mistakes and errors, dissimulation and secrets, all the way to intentional and repeatable lies. (Derrida 2002) Philosophers and scientists distinguish themselves from sophists and hacks by arguing for the ongoing search for truth and the elimination of error. In their minds, outright lying would shatter the delicate framework of knowledge and truth production and therefore must be avoided at all costs. Intentional and repeated deception attributed to the charge of hypocrisy has no room in such a framework.

1.2 Critiques of Scientific Truths

Philosophers have traditionally considered themselves the custodians holding the keys to the antechambers protecting truths from prejudices and distortions, relying on the empirical data collected by the sciences and the rigors of logical analyses. In their toolbox, one finds various forms of critical analysis, the tools with which to collect data, transform them into knowledge claims, and test their truth status. Yet, philosophical inquiry without critique risks being dogmatic or slipping into the domain of rhetorical argumentation. As Theodor Adorno reminds us, critique is essential for philosophy, in its search for truth and wisdom, and for democracy insofar as it allows anyone to contest the claims of those in power. In his words, the “critic becomes a divisive influence, [or to use] a totalitarian phrase, a subversive” (1998, 283) insofar as the status quo is challenged and sacred political institutions are called upon to do better. The price of critique, in terms of divisiveness about methodological norms and what counts as knowledge claims, can be high: critique is not without risk. Whether Socratic or Spinozist, the practice of critique may exact a price: sentenced to death (as a “subversive”) after trial for the former, being excommunicated (as a “subversive”) for the latter. The search for truth, then, is no idle preoccupation of philosophers, but an urgent activity incumbent on those living in a democracy. Adorno makes a further distinction “between responsible critique, namely, that practiced by those who bear public responsibility, and irresponsible critique, namely, that practiced by those who cannot be held accountable for the consequences.” Between the two critiques, he
notes, “critique is already neutralized.” (ibid., 285) Was Socrates’ critique “responsible” in Adorno’s terms? Was he bearing “public responsibility” as a private citizen who riled the youths of Athens? Or was it “irresponsible” because he could not be “held accountable” for the consequences of his agitation? In that sense, can critique ever be “responsible” insofar as it cannot contain the effects of its provocation to disturb or destabilize the status quo? In fact, Socrates was deemed irresponsible by his peers and tried for the potential danger his critique posed. The very distinction between responsible and irresponsible critique, in Adorno’s analysis, “neutralize[s]” critique because any moral attribution for its potential consequences defangs its epistemic power. Shifting critique from questions of truth to questions of prudence is a neutralizing move, one that undermines the power of critique to speak truth to power regardless of consequences.

Adorno reminds his readers that “the truth content of critique alone should be that authority [that decides if it is responsible],” but that when such a criterion (of truth content) is “unilaterally invoked” by ideologues, critique itself can lose its power and be at the mercy “of those who oppose the critical spirit of a democratic society.” (ibid.) At stake is not critique as such but its “truth content,” which in turn should be the final arbiter about initially testing the validity of the critique by philosophers, and eventually its acceptance by politicians and the public. The “authority” of the critique in relying on its truth content, when “invoked” by philosophers and politicians alike, suggests its legitimacy regardless of those who “oppose the critical spirit of democratic society.” Citing the Greek etymology of critique in krisis, Wendy Brown explains that despite its bad reputation, critique is “the art of making distinctions, an art considered essential to judging and rectifying an alleged disorder in or of democracy.” (2005, 5) So, here we get the Foucauldian gesture toward resistance, a resistance to (self-legitimating) claims of truthfulness in political discourse, and a gesture toward the procedural and prudential processes by which a “disorder” or crisis can be approached and perhaps rectified. In Brown’s terms, adjudicating, assessing, and rendering judgment for the sake of some kind of “restorative aim” might be a way of moving from Socrates the gadfly to Adorno’s responsible critic, from words to action. (ibid., 5–6)

Critique can accomplish this feat because it also “counters the distinctly modern presumption of critique’s dependency on and involvement with transcendent Truth,” (ibid., 7) whether this “transcendent Truth” is
beholden to Plato’s Theory of the Forms or the Hegelian World Spirit. In short, Brown’s critical theory navigates between “normative moral theory” and “utopian intellectual exercises,” both of which she deems flawed since they are either too historically specific or completely ahistorical (in a universalizing sense). If this sounds ambitious, Foucault’s guiding hand remains as steady as ever. Following his advice, Brown argues that “critique, whether immanent, transcendent, genealogical, or in yet some other form, is always a rereading and as such a reaffirmation of that which it engages.” (ibid., 16) It is this commitment to the value of “rereading and reaffirming” the ideas and hypotheses of scientists that should be guiding (but sometimes are missing from) the practices of science studies critics, as Latour has noted above. Admittedly, not all science critics are well versed in the scientific literature and some lack the technical expertise they could have mastered in order to critically engage their targets. But this fact alone does not justify a wholesale attack on the pursuit of rational and factual truths in the hands of science critics as if they are all irresponsible.

Scientific truth claims and their generation by the scientific community offer safeguards against frivolous skepticism, relativism, and outright deception. Robert Merton (1973/1942) famously outlined the four features of the scientific ethos as principles that characterize the ideal workings of the scientific community: universalism, communism (communalism), disinterestedness, and organized skepticism. It is the last principle that is relevant to the discussion of the truth-value of knowledge claims, since it unequivocally demands an institutionalized mindset of putative rejection of any hypothesis or theory articulated by any community member as true. The slippery political slope (authority, responsibility, and legitimacy) is apparent in the scientific context: how is being on guard against complacency different from being too skeptical to test any putative truth at all? Take the example of Al Gore, who in his *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) sounded the alarm about climate change. More than a dozen years later we are still plagued by climate change deniers who refuse to look at the evidence, suggesting instead that the standards of science—from the collection of data in the North Pole to computer simulations in labs—have not been sufficiently fulfilled (“questions remain”) to hold humans responsible for the increase in the earth’s temperature. Some climate skeptics explain their doubt about climate change in this manner: “Consider someone like myself who was born in the midst of the Cold War. In my lifetime, scientific predictions surrounding global climate
change has [sic] veered from a deep frozen to an overheated version of the apocalypse, based on a combination of improved data, models and, not least, a geopolitical paradigm shift that has come to downplay the likelihood of a total nuclear war. Why, then, should I not expect a significant, if not comparable, alteration of collective scientific judgement in the rest of my lifetime?” (Fuller 2018, 86) The seeds of doubt, as Descartes taught us, can be sown anywhere, and they bear unexpected fruits, depending on the context of their cultivation. Expecting improvements to the climate change model does not entail that no (improved) model can be offered, that methodological changes in themselves are a bad thing (they might be, rather, improvements), or that one should not take action at all based on the current model because in the future the model might change again. Change—evolutionary, fractured, continuous, cumulative, or disruptive—is what scientific processes are all about. When change is suspended—as in petrified religious dogmas that abhor critique—cognitive atrophy sets in and slow decay follows.

The Royal Society of London (1660) set the benchmark for scientific credibility—what counts as factual truth—low when it accepted as scientific evidence any report by two independent witnesses. As years went by, testability (confirmation, for the Vienna Circle, falsification, for Karl Popper) and repeatability were added as requirements for a report to be considered scientific, and by now, various other conditions have been proposed as well. Skepticism, organized or personal, remains at the very heart of the scientific march toward certainty (or at least probability), but when used perniciously, it has derailed reasonable attempts to use science as a means by which to protect, for example, public health. Both Robert Proctor (1995) and Michael Bowker (2003) chronicle cases where asbestos and cigarette lobbyists and lawyers alike were able to introduce enough doubt in the name of attenuated scientific data collection to ward off for decades regulators, legislators, and the courts. Instead of finding enough empirical evidence to explain the failing health condition (and eventual death sentence) of workers and consumers attributed to asbestos and nicotine consumption, organized skepticism was weaponized to fight the sick and protect the interests of corporate giants and their insurers. Instead of buttressing scientific claims (that have passed the tests—in refereed professional conferences and publications, for example—of most institutional scientific skeptics), organized skepticism has been manipulated, exploited, and abused to ensure that no (legal) claim is ever true enough or has the complete legitimacy of the scientific community. In
other words, what could have remained the reasonable cautionary tale of a disinterested and communal activity (that could then be deemed credible) has turned into a circus of fire-blowing clowns ready to burn down the tent so as not to admit that paying customers were fooled into a dangerous tent to begin with. Customers who get sick remain confused, not realizing that just because the stakes (for scientific validation) have risen over the decades, this does not mean there are no standards that can or should be met. Despite lobbyists’ and lawyers’ best efforts at derailment, courts eventually found cigarette companies and asbestos manufacturers guilty of exposing workers and consumers to deadly hazards, just as they are finding agribusiness giants, like Monsanto, guilty of selling weed-killers that are carcinogenic.

If we add to this logic of doubt, which has been responsible for discrediting science and the conditions for proposing credible truth claims, a bit of U.S. cultural history, a broader picture of the unintended consequences of certain critiques of science can be discerned. Citing Kurt Andersen (2017), Robert Darnton suggests that the Enlightenment’s “rational individualism interacted with the older Puritan faith in the individual’s inner knowledge of the ways of Providence, and the result was a peculiarly American conviction about everyone’s unmediated access to reality, whether in the natural world or the spiritual world. If we believe it, it must be true.” (2018, 68) This way of thinking about the truth—unmediated experiences and beliefs, unconfirmed observations and personal opinions, and disregard for others’ experiences and beliefs—continues what Richard Hofstadter (1962) dubbed America’s tradition of “anti-intellectualism.” For Americans, this predates the republic and is characterized by hostility toward the life of the mind (admittedly, at the time, religious texts), critical thinking (self-reflection and the rules of logic), and even literacy. This view claims that the heart (our emotions) can more honestly lead us to the Promised Land, whether it is heaven on earth in the Americas or the Christian afterlife; any textual interference or reflective pondering is necessarily an impediment to be suspicious of and avoided. This lethal combination of confidence in one’s own feeling and righteous individualism brings about the kind of ignorance displayed in full view by Trump. This mindset is similar to what psychologists call “confirmation bias,” the view that we endorse what we already believe to be true regardless of countervailing evidence. We find ourselves in an era of “truthiness,” a term coined by talk-show host and comedian Stephen Colbert and defined as “the conviction that what you feel to be
true must be true.” This attitude flies in the face of a long philosophical tradition that demands and expects one’s personal enlightenment to be based on the “courage to know” and the ability to release oneself from the “self-incurred tutelage” of others. (Kant 1784) However interpreted later, the Hegelian, Marxist, and Frankfurt School traditions expected the enlightenments to overcome the limits of faith, speculation, and superstition and become critical and self-reflexive enough to know the limits of one’s enlightenment, one’s own knowledge claims. (Malloy 2004)

Surely, there is merit in asking for responsible critiques of science. Weren’t many of these critiques meant to dethrone the unparalleled (and in many cases unjustified) authority claimed in the name of science? This was definitely the case, as Stephen Jay Gould argues (1999, Chapter 6), during the racist exploitation of the “scientific method” to prove white superiority. There is a long history of the abuse of science (regardless of its ethos) for political purposes, justifying racist policies in the name of science and the collection of empirical data. As Gould explains, critical examination of the blatant violation of the scientific method could falsify any truth claimed in the name of science. One has to know the scientific method and not rely on the reports of charlatans. (ibid., Chapter 8) One has to question the extent to which institutional safeguards and self-policing by the scientific community (enumerated by Merton) were followed by scientists and were familiar to the public. Many have raised such objections. Jean-Françoise Lyotard (and Marx before him), warning of the shortfalls of the scientific enterprise, points out the conflation of power and money in the scientific vortex that legitimates whatever knowledge production profit-maximizers desire. In other words, the critique of scientific discourse was put on par with critiques of other discourses, refusing to grant it privileged immunity. Whose credibility ought to be challenged, and whose truth claims deserve special scrutiny? Can scientific discourse be protected from critique if it is true, as Monya Baker has reported, that “[m]ore than 70% of researchers have tried and failed to reproduce another scientist’s experiments, and more than half have failed to reproduce their own experiments”? (2016, 1) The beneficiaries of scientific research funding are mostly silent on these questions about the problems (methodological and financial) of reproducing scientific experiments. Baker’s report cites Nature’s survey of 1,576 researchers and reveals “sometimes contradictory attitudes towards reproducibility.” Although 52% of those surveyed agree that there is a significant “crisis of reproducibility, less than 31% think that failure to reproduce published
results means that the result is probably wrong, and most say that they still trust the published literature.” (ibid.) So, if science relies on reproducibility as an essential feature of its legitimacy (and superiority over other discourses), and if the results of reproducibility are so dismal, must this discourse not be discredited? Is this question too indicting? One answer, given by Hans Plesser (2018), suggests that there is a confusion between the notions of repeatability (“same team, same experimental setup”), replicability (“different team, same experimental setup”), and reproducibility (“different team, different experimental setup”). If understood properly with these different terms, it stands to reason that one may not get the same results all the time and that this fact alone does not discredit the scientific enterprise as a whole or undermine the scientific ethos advocated by Merton.

Nuanced distinctions take us down a scientific rabbit-hole most critics and post-truth advocates refuse to follow. These nuances are also lost on a public that demands the bottom line of any inquiry in brief sound bites: Is science scientific enough, or is it bunk? Is it trustworthy? Trumpian political moves excel at rhetorical reductionism: set up false binaries so as to steer the choice in particular, even if unreasonable ways (Scott 1988), and repeat a falsehood often enough that people start believing it because they heard it already somewhere before. Complete disregard for evidence-based arguments is part of this mindset. And because sound individual critical faculties are not a prerequisite for listening to or participating in political discourse, post-truth may mean no truth, whatever the president says is true, whatever officials persuade people is the case, or whatever we get used to hearing. Critical questions about truth telling and the role of responsible critique mentioned above are relevant here just as they were in the case of scientific discourse. They become more urgent when totalitarian moves (mentioned by Orwell and Arendt and practiced by democratically elected presidents around the globe) conflate the political and the scientific, erasing the presumed distinction—methodological and institutional—between political and scientific discourses, between the truths incessantly contested and those settled on for ideological purposes. With such practices in mind, no wonder the presumed distinction itself becomes murky and unworkable. Nonetheless, is the distinction worth upholding?

Admitting that the distinction between discourses is not as clear and stable as truth seekers would like it to be, and conceding the inevitable discursive overlap between the scientific and the political (as in the case of
philosophy and sophistry and in the ways Foucault explains power relations) does not entail conceding that anything being critically engaged is thereby worthless. Discrediting a rigid distinction and navigating a blurred one are different modes of exposition from the wholesale dismissal of the usefulness of such a distinction when dealing with truth claims. Discrediting science has become a welcome political distraction that can be dated to the Reagan years of distrust of the government and its experts and continues into the Trumpian age. More than just a distraction, however, it is an ideological pivot point that opens up the floodgates to radical free-market logics, spanning from resource extraction and colonial globalization to the relaxation of environmental regulations and the exacerbation of wealth inequality. In the so-called marketplace of ideas, the wealthy few compete unfairly and always win, while the many are predestined to lose because they are poor or poorly funded. The original intent of critical investigations by truth seekers has been hijacked by the deliberate obfuscation of empirical data in the hands of corporate experts and lobbyists whose power to do so is protected in the name of freedom of speech, open competition, and democracy. (Sassower 2015) The epistemic intent of organized skepticism has been legally subverted to sow doubt and defer as much as possible the financial and moral culpability of corporate leaders. Neither the charge of outright public deception nor the charge of hypocrisy (when appealing to “organized skepticism” as a tactic for delaying the acceptance of scientific reports) deterred the lawyers and lobbyists who fought a losing battle on behalf of the tobacco and asbestos industries.

1.3 The Politics of Post-Truth

How do philosophers contribute to the climate of post-truth, where blurring the lines of demarcation between truths and lies has become commonplace? Over a century ago, Friedrich Nietzsche had a clear answer: the truth is fabricated, even when produced by scientists. In his short essay “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” (2006), he credits humanity with mastering the “art of dissimulation,” an art that encourages humans to deceive and lie. This art is accomplished by “wearing a mask, hiding behind convention” so that it is bewildering “how an honest and pure drive for truth could have arisen among them.” (2006, #1) It is puzzling, from this perspective, how the ubiquity of human folly would give rise to any interest in the truth. Nietzsche suggests that instead of
knowledge of the world, “we possess nothing but metaphors for things,” because our knowledge claims are limited by the language we use. (ibid.) “What then is truth?” he asks. His answer puts the quest for (factual) truths in perspective: the truth is nothing but, in his words, a “movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding.” (ibid.) This characterization of the truth must have inspired Ludwig Wittgenstein’s switch from his view of the transparency accorded to the words we use to describe objects (1999) to a more complex understanding of linguistic family resemblances and the fluidity needed for the recognition of the contextual meaning of language. (1958) It must have also indirectly affected the pragmatic move Quine has declared about the empirical basis of philosophical truths (as we have seen above).

For Nietzsche, “Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions—they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins.” (ibid.) If truths are indeed illusions, and if humanity has forgotten that they were all along nothing but “binding” metaphors (because conventionally accepted), then of course these truths deserve to be critically examined. The “investigator” of truths about nature is “at bottom” only “seeking the metamorphosis of the world into man.” (ibid.) This is not the strong epistemological claim that we fabricate the world itself and that there is no “reality” outside our fabrication, but the more modest (Heraclitean) claim that the seeker’s “method is to treat man as the measure of all things.” (ibid.) As for science, Nietzsche continues, “all that we actually know about these laws of nature is what we ourselves bring to them—time and space, and therefore relationships of succession and number.” (ibid.) In case one wonders what exactly Nietzsche means by the limits of human knowledge and its scientific (factual) truth claims, he continues to explain that “we produce these representations in and from ourselves with the same necessity with which the spider spins.” (ibid.) The self-excreting spider becomes the exemplar of spinning scientific webs, perhaps to catch some truths about nature, perhaps to catch sustenance, perhaps to weave a beautiful pattern with explanatory powers or one with no function at all. Recalling the “honest Athenians,” Nietzsche concludes by saying that “all of nature swarms around man as if it were nothing but a masquerade
of the gods, who were merely amusing themselves by deceiving men in all these shapes.” (ibid., 8)

Why does Nietzsche bring up the “masquerade of the gods” as an amusement in “deceiving men”? Is it not difficult enough to have a grasp of nature without being deliberately undermined in the process? It seems naïve for philosophers and scientists to believe that if they carefully adhere to their methods when seeking the truth they can attain it, because, as Nietzsche suggests, the gods would deceive them no matter what. It is unclear why the gods would want to deceive humans, unless Nietzsche uses this personification of the elusiveness of truth to underline the inherent inferior epistemic power of humans by comparison. Eliminating human failure or the failure of one’s methods will not guarantee overcoming divine deception, that is, rising to the level of divine epistemic power. Instead, whatever is humanly known is circumscribed by understanding the meaning of natural phenomena in human terms so that the truth (about nature) is inherently “a movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms.” Some observers and promoters of the contemporary post-truth condition seem to follow this line of thought as an excuse for not seeking the truth anymore. (Fuller 2018)

Instead of being the seekers of truth, thinkers who care about what and how we think, that is, Nietzsche’s “investigators” and “geniuses of [truth] construction,” philosophers are ridiculed by contemporary promoters of post-truth as marketing hacks or sophists. Some would argue that the criteria by which propositions are judged to be true or false are worthy of debate, a sentiment apparent from Socrates to Nietzsche and Frankfurt. With criteria in place (even if limited to a Nietzschean “convention”), at least we know what we are arguing about, as these criteria (even if contested) offer a starting point for critical scrutiny and communal engagement. This, as Nietzsche would agree, is a task worth performing, especially in the Trumpian age when multiple perspectives constitute the public stage on which not only the gods have chosen to celebrate their masquerade, but also politicians and their paid experts. It is much easier to enjoy the masquerade than search for the truth.

In addition to debasing the work of philosophers and scientists, the post-truth mindset cynically exploits the difficulty of searching for the truth amidst the institutional skepticism that must accompany the collection of data and the construction of scientific models. It is one thing to challenge a scientific hypothesis about astronomy because the evidence is still unclear (as Stephen Hawkins did regarding his own theory of Black
Holes until his death), and quite another to compare it to astrology (and give equal hearings to horoscope and Tarot card readers as to astrophysicists). The claims that anyone knows as much as anyone else, that experts can and should be ignored, and that any method of inquiry is as good as any other, are practically unreasonable and logically invalid. But they remain part of the Trumpian folklore and are supported by the likes of James Surowiecki (2004) who recalls Francis Galton’s 1907 observation that no matter how uninformed a crowd of people (at a country fair) may be individually, collectively it can guess the correct weight of an ox with great accuracy. (Average guess of 787 villagers was 1,197 lbs., while the actual weight was 1,198 lbs.). As folk wisdom, this is charming; as public policy, it is dangerous. Who would want a random group of people deciding how to store nuclear waste, and where? Who would volunteer to be subjected to the judgment of just any collection of people to decide on the necessity of an appendectomy or a triple-bypass surgery? Even when we endorse the view that we can collectively reach the truth, must we not ask, by what criteria, according to what procedure, or under what guidelines? Herd mentality, as Nietzsche already warned us, is problematic at best and immoral at worst. This does not imply worshipping experts and scorning all folk knowledge or having low regard for individuals and their (potentially informative) opinions. Some of us warn our students that simply having an opinion is not enough, that they need to substantiate it, offer data or logically argue for it, know its provenance, and who promoted it for what purposes before adopting it as their own, so as to be wary of uninformed (even if well-meaning) individuals (and presidents) whose gut dictates public policy. There is a difference between being skeptical of expert advice and being suspicious of nonexperts, because the former can defend themselves with data and experience while the latter can only defend their right to an opinion, however misguided. For those sanguine about the limits of knowledge and expertise, the past two hundred years offer plenty of frightening examples of state terrorism (already announced by Hegel in regard to the terror witnessed in France, and Horkheimer and Adorno [2002] in regard to Nazi atrocities) that illustrate in concrete form the limits of Enlightenment thinking. What characterizes the Trumpian age is a cynical disregard of any boundary conditions proposed by rational discourse and the reliance on evidence. Personal attacks via Twitter replace the art of persuasion. Unfortunately, this mindset has direct policy implications and it affects the entire globe with unwarranted trade wars with allies and foes that cost domestic jobs
(when promising to bring jobs home), unnecessary escalation of nuclear-war threats that resemble a game of chicken (as if no president ever faced such an option), devastating immigration regulations, and the relaxation of emission controls that devastate the environment. Here, too, the charge of hypocrisy is limited in its potential to start critical engagement because of the cynical post-truth mindset that finds facts and evidence cumbersome and immaterial in comparison with ideological bravado.

There is something appealing, even seductive, in the provocation to doubt the truth as rendered by the (elite scientific) establishment, even as we worry about sowing the seeds of falsehood in the political domain. The history of science is full of stories of authoritative theories debunked, cherished ideas proven wrong, claims of certainty falsified, and misuse of the scientific method for abhorrent ideological purposes (racism, sexism, anti-Semitism). Why not, then, jump on the post-truth wagon? Might this move unleash the collective imagination, enhance our knowledge, and improve the future of humanity? One of the lessons of postmodernism (at least as told by Lyotard) is that “post” does not mean “after” but rather “concurrently,” as another way of thinking all along. Just because something is labeled post, as in the case of postsecularism, does not mean that one way of thinking (secularism) or practicing has replaced another (religiosity); it has only displaced it and made both alternatives present at once. Under the rubric of postsecularism, for example, we find religious practices thriving (80% of Americans believe in God, according to a 2018 Pew Research survey), while the number of unaffiliated, atheists, and agnostics is on the rise. Religionists and secularists live side by side, as they always have, more or less agonistically. In the case of post-truth, by contrast, it seems that one must choose between post-truth and the hierarchical world of truths or the rigid distinction between truths and lies. But if we reject this binary of truths and lies, it becomes clear that truth as such is not given up just as modernity was not given up in the postmodern worldview. Must “post-truth” lose its hyphen, replicating postmodernism and postsecularism to avoid the periodization of chronological historical moments? Tending to the truth and the avoidance of lies, focusing on the search for truth despite the pitfalls of ignorance, and believing in the value of truth when considering knowledge claims are all practices no less worthy of pursuit in the Trumpian age than they were before. These practices may ward off the threat of cynicism while acknowledging the terror of truth telling. The lines of demarcation between truth and
deception, however appealing and necessary at times, remain necessarily and inevitably blurry: Socrates was both a philosopher and a sophist.

If post-truth meant the realization that truth and provisional or putative truth coexist and are continuously being reexamined, then no conflict would be at play. This realization could be accompanied by an appreciation of degrees of truth or degrees of verifiability when empirical observational reports are compared with other reports from different domains to encourage a lively, and hopefully critical, debate about the truth. False claims (that are only provisionally anchored in reality) would be debunked, reasonable doubts could be raised about provisional claims, legitimate concerns might be addressed when comparing different claims from different sources, and putative truths would form the basis of policy recommendations (with provisions for revision as new data emerge). In the Trumpian age, substituting personal accounts for established knowledge when such substitution is based exclusively on the right to one’s opinion is dangerous. The danger is to public policy, such as not wearing masks in public during a pandemic, as much as it is to the foundation of a community that must navigate knowledge claims and their truth-value. It is one thing to propose a theory and subject it to critical scrutiny (Popper’s conjectures and refutations) and quite another to use presidential powers to implement a theory without any scrutiny at all. While philosophers and scientists who might be also sophistical in deploying the art of persuasion to win an argument are usually clear about their intentions, those who deliberately deceive while pretending to be lovers of the truth would be haunted by the charge of hypocrisy. It is a sad moment in history when outright cynicism enables disregard of this charge altogether, dismissing along the way the importance of the search for truth.

1.4 Perspectival Truths

According to Michela Massimi, “truth within a perspective” offers a way out of naïve realism or an overly determined and absolutist view of realism. Thinking of truth within a perspective offers a nuanced appreciation of the context-dependent (Nietzschean) claim for truth. Massimi is interested in answering questions about the possibility of constructing universal knowledge claims about nature without using reductionism
or appealing to foundationalism. In her words: “[I want] our scientific knowledge claims to track perspective-independent states of affairs within the ever-changing bounds of scientific perspectives.” (2018, 344; italics in the original) Just because humanly constructed truths are “context-dependent,” as Massimi seems to agree with Nietzsche without citing him, does not mean that the “state of [natural] affairs” themselves cannot be “perspective-independent,” that is, ontologically autonomous. While Nietzsche was inquiring about the truth in a “nonmoral world,” Massimi insists that “getting things right is a norm about what we take science to be about.” (ibid., 345; italics in the original) This is not to say that morality and norms are the same, but to recognize that “getting things right” in science has a definite normative weight. The normative aspect of scientific inquiry as an adherence to a particular prescribed ethos (in Merton’s sense) comes as close to adopting a moral framework, one with boundary injunctions the violation of which constitute “getting it wrong.” For Massimi, the epistemological quest has a moral dimension, the kind already announced in Socrates’ derision of sophistry (it was the exchange of money that was immoral, not the rhetorical devices used to persuade an audience) and his insistence on the privileged status of philosophy. With this in mind, Massimi reviews three kinds of perspectival truth, echoing in another register Nietzsche’s claim about the impossibility of knowing the (Kantian) “thing in itself” and settling on various interpretive perspectives within reasonable human reach. Perspective-dependent knowledge claims in science are “dependent on a given historically and/or intellectually situated scientific perspective.” (ibid., 347) With this historically informed move, Massimi does away with the modernist pretensions of a “view from nowhere,” the “bird’s eye view” from which the world can be observed “objectively.” Historically and intellectually contextualizing scientific claims renders their truth status contingent (perspective-dependent) but in such a way that they neither overshoot (with a universal or transcendental claim) nor undershoot (we are limited to relativized subjective opinions). Massimi explains in her second move that “perspective indexicality” is a way of conceding that scientific representation “is always perspectival and indexical because it is always from a well-defined vantage point.” (ibid., 348) Setting up an index that relates to levels of empirical richness of data adds another dimension to the perspectival one. This, too, echoes Nietzsche’s warning about the linguistic limitations of our truth claims and his acquiescence to
the conventions of the age as well as gesturing toward more recent feminist “standpoint epistemology.” But instead of being accused of some sort of relativism, the “perspective-relativity” espoused here, she continues, “can capture perspectival considerations about truth being relative to scientific perspectives while also maintaining that nature consists of well-defined and perspective-invariant states of affairs.” (ibid. 349) Holding simultaneously the invariance of “states of affairs” and the multiplicity of perspectives as part of human experience exposes the false binary into which these two positions have been traditionally placed. Here they are posed as complementary and not oppositional. Nietzsche’s masquerade ball comes to mind: nature shows itself in different disguises because the gods playfully deceive us, but nonetheless nature remains the same regardless of its costumes and masks.

In her third move, Massimi advocates “perspective-sensitivity” whereby “scientific perspectives provide the circumstances or context of use defining the truth-conditions for knowledge claims in science.” (ibid., italics in the original) Scientific perspectives are the contexts within which the truth status of knowledge claims is assessed. This kind of truth is “truth within the limits (afforded by rival scientific models or rival historical perspectives) of inaccurate-yet-successful scientific representations of a perspective-independent world.” (ibid., 353) This kind of truth is circumscribed by the conditions set up by the perspective adopted at that time by the scientific community. Popper’s situational logic (1994/1957) comes to mind as an informative methodological recommendation for the framework within which truth claims and choices among incommensurable scientific theories are made. What, then, of the scientific enterprise? What about the scientific process whose discursive privilege depends on its precise and reliable knowledge of (factual) truth? Massimi’s conclusion never loses sight of her target, which is the articulation of the conditions under which truth can be attained. Departing from the many analytic philosophers and scientific methodologists before her who used physics as their ideal model, she appeals to cartography as a model for scientific inquiry: this inquiry “becomes a mapping exercise (with incomplete and partial maps) of a world we never made. Perhaps this is all we can reasonably expect from science. Perhaps we should not ask for more from perspectival truth.” (ibid.) If this conclusion sounds too pessimistic for the acquisition of knowledge or the ascertaining of truth claims about nature, Massimi is quick to make her next move from the “context of
use” to the “context of assessment.” There, a “cross-perspectival assessor” could “understand contextual truth-conditions in terms of standards of performance-adequacy that a scientific knowledge claim . . . has to satisfy.” (ibid., 354; italics in the original) In other words, a scientific knowledge claim that is true under specific conditions within a particular context could be compared to another claim within other contexts to fully adjudicate its cross-perspectival value and adequacy. This move is reminiscent of Kant’s notion of intersubjectivity as the bridge between abstract objectivity and solipsistic subjectivity.

Massimi sounds uncannily Nietzschean in her closing words: “Perspectival truth may well be our best bet of getting things right from a human vantage point—a vantage point we equally share with our historical predecessors and contemporary rivals. This is the only vantage point we can legitimately reclaim as our own.” (ibid., 358; italics in the original) Nietzsche’s famous insistence that perspectival truth is the only truth humans can claim for themselves, following Heraclitus’ claim about humans being the measure of all things, is well recognized. Massimi can be similarly celebrated for her careful examination of the conditions under which perspectival realism maintains simultaneously a perspective-independent reality while conceding perspective-dependent scientific knowledge. In the age of post-truth, this is probably the most informed and responsible critique we can hope for: upholding some factual truths about reality no matter the context or the speaker while contesting other truths. Being epistemologically problematic while ontologically secure takes off the table nonsensical and irresponsible assertions about reality or the obvious impossibility of ever fully apprehending it, assertions that on their face derail critical deliberations. The likes of Frankfurt in the analytic tradition are correct in sensing the precarious position critics of science may inadvertently push the rest of us to adopt; but they are incorrect in preserving a pristine line of demarcation between truths and lies, between empirical facts and metaphysical statements, as Quine explains in his pragmatic move. The likes of Latour are correct to caution us against throwing the baby out with the bathwater, but incorrect in addressing the cure to the problem in washing the baby more carefully or not washing the baby at all and leaving them alone. And the promoters of post-truth in the Trumpian age are correct about the skepticism that permeates the cultural setting of contemporary political discourse, but are incorrect in ignoring the dangers associated with the cynicism that accompanies post-truth “playfulness.” Once again, it is one thing to be critical to the point of
institutionalized skepticism and quite another to relinquish any quest for truthfulness and the ethical commitments associated with it. (Vice 2011)

If the insistence on certainty and the binary of truths and lies are displaced with degrees of truth, there are readily available lessons about degrees of civility, from brutal honesty and compassionate frankness to manners and community building, that can be learned. The question of civility, manners, and etiquette, as Ruth Grant reminds us, is “necessitated by the moral shortcomings of human beings” (1997, 31), and in this respect raises questions about the charge of political hypocrisy to which we turn in the next chapter. Politicians can navigate their inevitable use of hypocrisy in different circumstances and still maintain some sense of personal integrity, that is, remain close to their moral truths even when they manipulate factual ones. Grant follows Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s sense that the “distinction between moral and factual truth governs the distinction between lies and fictions, which in turn replaced the attempt to distinguish lies from truth-telling in the ordinary sense.” (ibid., 115) To be truthful to one’s moral principles and to maintain one’s integrity may require, in this reading of Rousseau, using fictions—not blatant lies but maybe fabricated white lies—to ensure political compromises and prudent governance. In this sense, then, Grant concludes that “to lie means to betray the moral truth whether one adheres to the factual facts or invents them.” And this means, for her, that “the only falsehoods that deserve to be called lies are those that deceive us about moral judgments.” (ibid.) Falsehoods, in this recounting, are less serious, less pernicious than lies, and they seem to warrant the name “lies” only when their deception is applied in moral matters rather than factual ones. It also seems to be less about the intention of the speaker to deceive than about the context in which they are positioned: certain judgments are inappropriate in certain contexts. It seems that degrees of fidelity to empirical or political facts are more critically condemned when moral judgments are also at stake.

The quest for truth in all matters is contextualized and modified, whereby the assessment of partial truths or degrees of truth is set against a moral and not a factual backdrop. Grant insists that what is at stake for Rousseau, and by extension what would worry us as well, is personal integrity, however fluid, and not within the binary of truths and lies, morality and politics. She quotes from Rousseau’s Reveries to say that “Truth is an homage that the good man pays to his own dignity” so that “truthfulness is a requirement of integrity and its demands are stricter than the demands of justice towards others.” (ibid., 117–8) This view of
truthfulness appears here as a requirement for integrity, yet it remains unclear what the truthfulness is about: is it about one’s dignity (self-reported) or facts (reported by others)? The appeal to dignity may be related to sincerity and acting in good faith, at least being honest with oneself. Moving from the epistemological to the political sphere, it seems on this account that the discussion of truth as such or an absolute factual truth is irrelevant for political discourse where flexibility and compromise are common. Does the shift from truth to degrees of truth entail a compromise whereby truthfulness loses its meaning altogether? Would any delineation between truths and lies, good and bad behavior, moral rectitude and failure become so elusive as to set in motion the specter of relativism? Grant is ready to deal with these questions head on: “A tolerable compromise, acceptable lie, or beneficial manipulation always remains faithful to the moral truth, promotes justice as far as possible given the particular circumstances, is promoted by disinterested motives, and does not require the compromise of personal integrity.” (ibid.) “Tolerable,” “acceptable,” and “beneficial” take the burden off an absolute moral judgment, which would seem empty if dependent on “compromise,” “lie,” and “manipulation.” This would ensure, then, that the “man of integrity may make prudential calculations and must consider the consequences of his actions when making ethical and political judgments. Prudence is not in itself a threat to integrity.” (ibid., 140) Once again, classic binaries are challenged. One can be both prudent and maintain integrity, since compromise, for example, is for moral purposes, for the sake of the community, and no longer in the name of truth. In fact, at times the only way to ensure good outcomes is by calculating and manipulating, using the art of persuasion or weighing relative injury. As we shall see in the next chapters, degrees of truth, integrity, and prudence play an important role in fully coming to terms with degrees of hypocrisy, especially in the political sphere. What is at stake here is not so much the burring of binary distinctions as seeing that what is on either side of the binary does not mutually exclude what is on the other side; on the contrary: each side of the perennial binaries of philosophy and sophistry and truths and lies highlights its difference from the other, and as such, problematizes the charge of hypocrisy.

In certain situations people are more honest with each other (perhaps in intimate friendships), and in others less so (in infrequent large family gathering, for example). Honesty and verbal exchanges are as much about truth telling or shielding one from the truth as they are about etiquette.
and manners: what is proper here and now may not be there and then; what may be proper in one culture seems completely inappropriate in another. What Americans perceive as aggressive modes of communication by Israelis are considered honest and truthful by Israelis among themselves; American politeness and cheerfulness, by contrast, is perceived by Israelis as saccharine and fake: why don’t you come out and say what you really mean? Context matters, obviously, but so does our cultural sensitivity to reading context and recognizing how it differs from other contexts. The professor who is completely truthful with a student under supervision may be less so with a colleague at a professional meeting where a job or promotion is under consideration or where the appearance of showing off at the expense of the embarrassment of another is unbecoming, even gratuitous. Of course, questions about authority and rank, gender and career prospects in these examples raise additional questions about accountability. In these different cases, manners and degrees of truth intermix and one’s behavior may not necessarily reflect on one’s character, integrity, or morality. Instead, what may be at play is the ability to adjust to different contexts and exhibit behavioral fluidity that is context-relative (in Massimi’s terms). This context-sensitive approach to interpersonal relationships and their discursive moves provides the epistemological backdrop—a wide spectrum of truths and lies that eschews extreme cases of blatant lies and indisputable truths—against which to question political hypocrisy as well. Will blatant lies be unrecognized? Or, will they stand out so that interest in them will become marginal? The Trumpian age makes us realize that questions about the charge of hypocrisy must be reserved for complex situations and not wasted on obvious instances.

The difficulty of speaking about degrees of truth and human fallibility in scientific investigations and human communication is compounded by the difficulty of being self-conscious and critical about one’s observation and communication. Considering the complexity of determining what the truth is and how it is linguistically conveyed, Lacan explains how the speaking analysand turns the “subject” into someone who “is now speaking,” who is “the subject of the enunciation.” (1977, 298) When the question “Who is speaking?” arises in psychoanalytic treatment, when it is “the subject of the unconscious that is at issue,” Lacan insists that a “reply cannot come from that subject if he does not know what he is saying, or even if he is speaking, as the entire experience of analysis has taught us.” (ibid., 299) More broadly, how reliable is the testimony of any
scientist or analytic philosopher when doing their best to report truthfully an experience or an observable fact? If the patient during psychoanalysis indeed “does not know what he is saying” in the sense that in speaking the truth is produced, what is at stake in the interpretation of the meaning of what is linguistically produced? Would the concept of degrees of truth be helpful here? All of this gets even more complicated when what is at issue, for Lacan, is the “Dasein hunt” that during analysis takes the form of a “paradox”: “conceiving that the discourse in an analytic session is valuable only in so far as it stumbles or is interrupted.” Scrutiny of and attention to the details of the psychoanalytic discourse—the speech pattern of the patient, whether reporting, reminiscing, or emoting—are important starting but not terminal points of analysis. Being granted entry into someone’s unconscious through a linguistic fabric, Lacan reminds us, is not as simple as ringing a doorbell and waiting for the door to open. On the rare occasion when entry to the unconscious is granted, it happens surreptitiously, as if one “stumbles” through the doorway and down the stairs or as if one is “interrupted” from the casual speech in which they were engaging to find something completely different, unexpected. The stumbling by accident or the unexpected interruption is a “cut in the signifying chain,” a chain one weaves in ordinary speech to make sense of one’s thoughts and feelings, of one’s life story, of one’s reality and the world one inhabits. Lacan continues: “If linguistics enables us to see the signifier as the determinant of the signified, analysis reveals the truth of this relation by making ‘holes’ in the meaning of the determinants of its discourse.” (ibid.) Language and speech fail the speaker and listener in different measures (as Wittgenstein concedes as well), and therefore, as reliant as psychoanalysis is on speech and linguistic chains of significations, this encounter has its limitations. The difficulties associated with revealing “the truth of this relation” are different from those found in the context of philosophical or scientific discourse, of course, because the production of meaning does not yield clarity. Yet Lacan’s analysis here is informative beyond the confines of the psychoanalysis.

Just as it is the case for Lacan that getting to or stumbling upon the truth happens, so it may be the case for the seekers of (natural, factual, empirical) truth, philosophers and scientists. If in psychoanalysis the hope is not to lose what is temporarily revealed from the recesses of the unconscious, so it might be the case in scientific inquiry where some accidental revelations are gleaned in the deep or far away recesses of natural phenomena. Displacing the binary of empirical and rational methodology
with a linguistic turn toward one’s conscious narrative allows for thinking about degrees of truth. However different, there is something enticing about recognizing that only the cracks and disruptions of one’s speech give glimpses into one’s unconscious in the psychoanalytic context and applying it to the philosophical search for truth. The precarity of internal truth seeking overlaps with the precarity of making knowledge claims and ascribing truth-value to them. The specter of Quine’s dogmas of empiricism haunts those who make any claims about the world or themselves. Can the search for truth escape dogmatic thinking? Does dogmatic thinking shackle the mind to a hierarchy of truths? Would the escape from dogmatic thinking release the mind to embrace partial truths and degrees of truth?

We are wearing masks, as Nietzsche pointed out, and we are in a so-called masquerade ball to which the gods invite us but in which they also deceive us. Our epistemological difficulties are thereby compounded. Dogmatic thinking seduces the uneasy mind into what David Hume called a “dogmatic slumber” from which few are awakened. Have we crossed over to the Baudrillardian world of simulacra, a dream world of sorts where we deceive each other about an already incomprehensible world? Is there a way out of this hyperreality that is simultaneously real, unreal, surreal, and post-truth? And, perhaps more urgently: can philosophers, scientists, and others extract themselves completely from self-deception and linguistic fictions at least partially and to some extent, or are they instead doomed to remain in a foggy and messy human condition? These questions matter in assigning degrees of truth and by extension degrees of hypocrisy, and when doing so, they guide the seekers of truth because much is at stake. Once again, it is one thing to be cavalier about masks and deception when the stakes are low and one can afford to be playful (as if in a masquerade), and quite another when, for example, confiscating land and shattering lives. The Trumpian age is a reminder that the stakes are indeed high; it reminds us to resist the distraction of cynical daily entertainment delivered courtesy of the President’s Twitter feed. One way to thwart the appeal of cynical post-truth entertainment, that is, the replacement of debate over truth claims with outrageous fabrications detached from reality, is to insist on the value of truth in all communication. As will become clear in the next chapters, degrees of hypocrisy, just like degrees of truth and civility, can be informative in navigating the turbulence of political discourse at least as benchmarks against which to measure complicity and dangerous conduct. Giving up on absolute truths is not giving up on the search for truth just
as giving up on a clear line of demarcation between truths and lies is not giving up on exposing blatant lies and defending partial truths when they foster deliberation.

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