On the Democratic Value of Truth

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A central theme of Michael Lynch's work—one which receives an extended defense in his recent book *On Truth in Politics*—is that truth is democratically valuable. To my mind, this thesis is both true and profound. In this piece, I want to discuss—in a sympathetic and exploratory fashion—two issues that arise for those who, like both Lynch and myself, accept it. The first concerns how to understand the idea that many people fail to sufficiently respect the value of truth. The second concerns what explains the democratic value of truth.

1. What is it to Have Insufficient Regard for Truth?

An idea that has been much in the air these last ten years is that contemporary politics—and its agents, where this includes both many politicians and many ordinary citizens—have insufficient regard for truth.[1] Indeed, a sense that this is so animates and motivates Lynch's project: it is urgent to make the case for the value of truth precisely because many people do not value it enough. As Lynch puts it, we are facing a "crisis involv[ing] a loss of confidence in the value of truth" (Lynch 2025: 2). I share the sense that many people have insufficient regard for truth. But there is something of a puzzle as to what it is to disregard truth, and how such disregard is even possible.

One way in which one can clearly (and unpuzzlingly) show disregard for truth is by lying a lot. As Lynch points out, though, truth is not just a norm of assertion. It is also a norm for belief. It is with respect to our belief-forming practices that the puzzle about disregard for truth arises.

We can get at the puzzle by contrasting two different kinds of agents that Lynch wants to distinguish, both of whom might inhabit our political society. The first agent values truth, and robustly aims at forming true beliefs, but has a highly warped sense of what is true, what epistemic practices will get them to true beliefs, which sources of testimony and other evidence are

[1] Compare the raft of recent works on the alleged "post-truth" moment (e.g., McIntyre, 2018).

trustworthy, and so on. Some kinds of conspiracy theorist are supposed to be a paradigm instance of this first kind of agent. For convenience, I will just label them the "conscientious conspiracy theorists" (while acknowledging that not all agents of this kind need be conspiracy theorists, and that not all conspiracy theorists are conscientious in this way). The second agent, by contrast, is supposed to value truth insufficiently, showing a kind of disregard or disrespect for truth—*caring* insufficiently about truth, as compared to social approval and conformity. Lynch labels agents of this second kind "the Twitbookians." Importantly, Lynch says, the Twitbookians may still say that they value truth and evidence, and even sincerely so. But if they do, they are deceived about their own practices and values, since *in fact* they do not really value the truth (very much) (Lynch 2025: 11–12).

But what is it exactly to value truth insufficiently as opposed to merely have a warped set of views about how to get truth? That is: what does the difference between the conscientious conspiracy theorists and the Twitbookians come to?[2]

This is an important question, because arriving at some answer to it is a precondition of the intelligibility of the diagnosis that many of us are like the Twitbookians in showing insufficient regard for truth. It is also important for thinking about remedies: plausibly, the remedy for a society inhabited by people who care about truth but have warped evidentiary standards (like the conscientious conspiracy theorists) is rather different from the remedy for a society inhabited by people who just do not care about the truth very much at all (like the Twitbookians).

Let me run through a few candidate answers (as to what the difference between these two types of people is) that I think do not work.

One thing Lynch suggests is that the Twitbookians do not regulate their beliefs by the norm that it is only correct to believe what's true. But this itself admits of two interpretations. On the first, the point is just that the Twitbookians violate this norm. But that cannot be the difference

[2] Of course, I do not mean this question to be understood as if the Twitbookians and the conscientious conspiracy theorists are pre-defined groups of people, and we are trying to understand their differences. Rather, I mean it to be understood as asking what is the most fruitful way of drawing the dividing lines, such that (a) the Twitbookians come out as insufficiently valuing truth in some way that the conscientious conspiracy theorists don't, and (b) it looks like the rise of the Twitbookian (or semi-Twitbookian) condition is a real social ill we are facing.

between the Twitbookians and the conscientious conspiracy theorists, since both these groups violate the truth norm. So, while there might be some sense in which merely holding a false belief or using shoddy evidential practices shows disregard for the truth, this cannot be what characterizes the difference between the conscientious conspiracy theorists and the Twitbookians.

Alternatively, to say that the Twitbookians do not regulate their beliefs by the truth norm might be to say that they *knowingly* violate the truth norm. If they did this, there would be a more robust sense in which they show disregard for the truth and in which they contrast with the conscientious conspiracy theorists. But it is hard to understand the Twitbookians as knowingly violating the truth norm. As we just noted, the Twitbookians may *think* they care about truth and evidence. So, they need not realize they are violating the truth norm any more than the conscientious conspiracy theorists do. More generally, the truth norm on belief is distinctive and unusual, compared with most other norms, in that it is hard to make sense of anyone knowingly violating it (cf. Shah, 2003). It is part of what it is to believe something that you take it to be true; so, if you really believe *p*, you'll think you satisfy the truth norm in believing *p*. And conversely, if you recognize *p* is not true (such that it would violate the truth norm to believe it), then you thereby do not count as believing *p*.

This points the way to another possible characterization of the difference between the conscientious conspiracy theorists and the Twitbookians, one that Lynch mentions a few times. Perhaps the Twitbookians' political commitments aren't beliefs at all: they are some other state that *is* compatible with being recognized as false by its holder (cf. Hannon, 2021). Perhaps the way in which the Twitbookians show insufficient regard for truth, then, is that they are just not even in the game of belief, where something's being a belief involves its being regulated by truth-directed considerations at least by your own lights. Understood this way, Twitbookians are a coherent possibility. But if this is supposed to be how we understand the Twitbookians, I doubt that the Twitbookian predicament is empirically widespread enough to be an attractive diagnosis of the way in which our actual political practices have gone awry. To say that some political grouping does not even have political beliefs at all is an extreme diagnosis. Moreover, for the vast majority of ordinary people who assert that vaccines cause autism, or that the 2020 U.S. election was stolen, it just does not ring true, to me at least, to say that they recognize that what they are saying is false and accept the content only in some special, non-doxastic way compatible with this recognition.

Rather, they really do seem to believe it.[3] In other words, this way of drawing the line between the conscientious conspiracy theorists and the Twitbookians seems to make nearly everyone who makes these kinds of judgments a conscientious conspiracy theorist and nearly no one a Twitbookian. And that, in turn, makes it hard to see how disregard for truth in the sense of the Twitbookians can be described as a major social ill.

So how might we better understand what it is to have insufficient regard for truth? I want to make two (related, compatible) suggestions, drawing on other aspects of what Lynch says.

First: decades of psychological work on motivated reasoning has shown us that desires and goals other than that of attaining true belief can play a role in driving our reasoning and hence belief-formation.[4] In particular, we often desire to arrive at beliefs that conform with our partisan "tribe," and to arrive at empirical beliefs that do not challenge or make trouble for our prior worldviews (Williams, 2023). On the standard psychological picture, these "directional goals" to reach a *particular* conclusion compete with—and sometimes overwhelm—"accuracy goals" to reach the *true* conclusion, whatever that might be. So, there is a sense in which, when we succumb to motivated reasoning, we are motivated by considerations other than truth and (perhaps subconsciously) care about truth less than these other considerations. This is compatible with my foregoing points about how we end up regarding whatever we ultimately believe as true and evidentially supported, and hence take ourselves to be complying with both the truth norm and evidential norms. Indeed, the psychological account of motivated reasoning gives an explanation of this. According to this account, the way we respond to directional goals is not just to immediately believe whatever we desire to believe. Rather, it is to engage in a biased search for, and processing of, evidence. This biased search for and processing of evidence has the result of making us feel like we are believing truly and in accordance with the evidence.

[3] There are, perhaps, some things that political partisans say but are best interpreted as not believing. Lynch mentions the oft-repeated example of those who claimed that the photos of Trump's 2016 inauguration showed larger crowds than the photos of Obama's inauguration—even though it was obvious from the pictures that this claim is wrong. Another example might be the number of Republicans who assented in a survey to the claim that Hillary Clinton is literally the devil. But these examples seem to me the exceptions to the norm.

[4] For reviews of the literature, see Kunda (1990) and Kahan (2016).

This suggests the following way of characterizing the difference between the conscientious conspiracy theorists and the Twitbookians. The conscientious conspiracy theorists (thus characterized) trust very unreliable sources and have warped evidential standards, but *not on account of directional goals or motivated reasoning*—perhaps just because they got unlucky in their epistemic environment. By contrast, the Twitbookians trust unreliable sources and have warped evidential standards on account of prior directional goals or motivated reasoning. They succumb to "hot irrationality"—irrational belief driven by desires—and not merely "cold irrationality," in the language of some older philosophy and psychology (e.g., Pears, 1984).

While I think there is a lot to like about this way of characterizing the difference between the Twitbookians and the conscientious conspiracy theorists, I think it does risk being *over*inclusive with respect to the former category. The evidence suggests we all succumb to motivated reasoning quite a lot. This seems to make us all Twitbookians to some degree or other. Maybe so, but if the rise of the Twitbookians is supposed to be at least a partial diagnosis of our present political circumstance, it had better not just be an ineliminable feature of the human condition more broadly.

So here is a second, complementary idea. Maybe merely succumbing to motivated reasoning doesn't suffice for being a Twitbookian. Rather, what makes one a Twitbookian is being negligent in one's inquiry in such a way that one is especially vulnerable to, or ought to realize that one is likely engaged in, motivated reasoning. For example: consider the surprising number of people who have beliefs about complex empirical questions (say, about the efficacy of some particular economic policy, or about whether using standardized tests in admissions increases or decreases inequality) on quasi-a priori, "it stands to reason" type grounds, without having really considered either the empirical evidence *or* expert opinion. Such people seem to be negligent inquirers. They should realize that they are likely engaged in motivated reasoning, and that their beliefs are likely driven by a desire to reinforce their prior worldviews. Similarly, consider those who "shop for experts," reading many books and articles by experts who share their prior views but none by equally well-credentialed experts who do not (Contessa, 2022). Again, this is negligent. This kind of negligent inquiry, I think, fails to put enough weight on the importance of arriving at true belief. It is a way of being disrespectful of truth. So perhaps it is this (egregiously) negligent inquiry that should be understood as characteristic of the Twitbookians.

2. What Explains the Democratic Value of Truth?

Having tried to make sense of what it is to disregard or underweight the value of truth, let me turn to what is so concerning about a society that does so. I feel this concern at a deep, elemental, emotional level, particularly—frankly, and here I make no pretense to political neutrality—with respect to the current U.S. administration.[5] There are many deeply upsetting and despair-inducing things about the Trump administration and its behavior, but—for me at least—its disregard for truth is right up there toward the top.[6] (The attempt to overturn the 2020 election—and now, its attempt to rewrite the history of that attempt—provides perhaps the most striking set of examples, though there's a lot of competition.) Indeed, in some sense, its disregard for truth seems to lie beneath many of the other things that are objectionable about it. I mention this not (just!) to tub-thump but because I think it's consideration of these sorts of concrete cases, and our cognitive *and* emotional reactions to them, that animates the sense that we should *want* a vindication of the value, and democratic value in particular, of truth. And they also, I think, set some adequacy constraints on what a good account of the democratic value of truth will look like.

Lynch's own account of the democratic value of truth hinges on the notion of *epistemic agency*. To quote him:

> Democratic politics involves inclusive deliberation between free and equal persons about what society ought to do. Hence societies that practice democratic politics have a reason, just on that basis, for promoting deliberative decision-making procedures such as rational legislative processes and informed political decisions. But to achieve *those* ideals requires, among other things, promoting and protecting the means by which people can be responsive to epistemic reasons. That means valuing not just epistemic agency but responsible epistemic agency […] Responsible epistemic agency consists in using [reliable] practices to pursue having true beliefs. […Thus,] the

[5] I am not denying that people on all sides of the political spectrum—and associated with previous U.S. administrations on both partisan sides—lie, engage in motivated reasoning, inquire negligently, and fall prey to misinformation (see e.g., Stanovich, 2021). But the disregard for the truth among the current administration (and apologists for it) is on a different level, and I do not think we need pretend it is the same.

[6] Is this disregard for truth just lying, and not the kind of disregard for truth in belief-formation discussed in the previous section? I cannot see into the minds of those who are in the administration, but I think it is likely some of both. There is extensive lying, but there is also plausibly a lot of motivated reasoning, selective inquiry, and self-persuasion.

> means by which we can reliably pursue true belief are politically valuable—because they are demanded by some of the most fundamental […] democratic values. (Lynch 2025: 80–81)

I have two concerns about this argument. The first is that I am unsure how it shows that truth is democratically valuable. Instead, it seems geared toward showing that responsible epistemic agency is democratically valuable. Admittedly, responsible epistemic agency is, on Lynch's view at least, agency that will reliably get at the truth. But to show that the procedures that get at truth are valuable (democratically or otherwise) is not to show that truth is valuable (democratically or otherwise): one can argue from an end's being valuable to the means to that end being valuable, but one generally cannot argue from the means to an end's being valuable to the end being valuable.[7] Maybe Lynch would be content to show that the procedures that reliably get us to truth are democratically valuable, rather than that truth itself is. But I have the sense that truth itself, and not just some set of procedures that reliably get to it, is important for democracy. Much great art, music, and literature sounds the theme that truth is important, valuable, and worth struggling for. Epistemic agency—not so much. That's not to say that epistemic agency is unimportant. But I would like to be able to vindicate the evocative if elusive idea at the heart of all this great art that truth itself is important.

The second worry is that there is something a little overly ideal-theoretic (in at least one sense) about the argument. In the foregoing quotation, Lynch seems to be endorsing a deliberative conception of democracy, where democracy is not just about voting or representation but about deliberation between citizens that precedes decision-making.[8] But as we all likely know, no modern national-level polity has ever even approximated a working deliberative democracy of the

[7] Lynch suggests, both in his book and in personal conversation, that one can at least sometimes do this. By analogy, he suggests that the value of being at the top of a mountain could derive from the value of having climbed there. But this does not seem right to me. It might be right that, concerning the achievement of getting to the top of the mountain—where this constitutively involves both the climb and one's eventual arrival at the top—much of the value of getting to the top of the mountain comes from the climb rather than from the outcome of being at the top. But I don't see how being at the top can be made valuable by the value of the climb. On the contrary, this seems like a view on which being at the top of the mountain, in itself, is not that important—and so, too, for a view where what matters is pursuit of the truth, not its achievement.

[8] Proponents of deliberative democracy are legion, but for one core statement see Cohen (1989).

sort that deliberative democrats envision. That is not exactly an objection to deliberative conceptions of democracy.[9] But it does suggest the following: if what's bad about a political culture that insufficiently values truth is that it precludes the achievement of "inclusive deliberation between free and equal persons" from which political decision-making springs, then the insufficient valuing of truth seems only to be further overdetermining a bad outcome that would obtain, and has obtained, even in its absence. But this does not seem right. Rather, it seems to me that even relative to the baseline of the highly non-ideal and non-deliberative kind of democracy that we always have and likely always will live in, the devaluation of truth constitutes a significant degradation of democratic values. Returning to the current U.S. administration, I find it hard to believe that the heart of what is so upsetting about its flagrant disregard for truth is that it precludes a kind of idealized agency or deliberation that we probably never approached anyway.

So let me sketch an alternative, and in some respects rather simple, picture of the democratic value of truth. The alternative picture is primarily aimed at explaining the value of truth with respect to non-normative matters. And it pertains to the representative function of democracy rather than its deliberative elements. When people have false non-normative beliefs, they are prone to making mistakes about the extent to which policies, politicians, and parties advance or otherwise fit with their values. Moreover, the value of democracy is in part found in the way that it is (equally) representative of citizens' *values*. A democracy that represents citizens' *votes* perfectly, but where those votes are based on false non-normative beliefs that engender mistakes about what best advances or fits with citizens' values, falls short with respect to representing these values. This is not to say that it would be more democratic to institute policies or governments that do represent these values well but are not what the citizens voted for.[10] Rather, it is to diagnose a deep problem that widespread false non-normative beliefs produce: they make it impossible to simultaneously

[9] Or at least, not straightforwardly. See Wenner (2017) for a critique of (some forms of) deliberative models of democracy on grounds of their being overly idealized.

[10] Though some have proposed something like this: consider Christiano's (2008) "values-only voting." The claim behind this kind of proposal is that democracy is, or should be, more about representing people's underlying values than their factual beliefs—or, to put it another way, more about representing people's preferences over outcomes than their beliefs about what will produce those outcomes. I have some sympathy with this theoretical claim, although less for values-only voting in practice.

honor citizens' votes and their underlying values. The value of truth in politics (with regard to non-normative matters) is that it makes these representative aims co-satisfiable.

Now, many will protest that there *are* deep differences in values (and not merely in non-normative beliefs) between, say, those who vote Democratic and those who vote Republican. Obviously, this is true to at least some degree. But it is also true that if values were all that drove political division, there would be no need for political lies. For example, the lie that the 2020 U.S. election was stolen would presumably be unnecessary to win over someone willing to support an anti-democratic coup *described as such*; only for someone who at least somewhat values democracy would the claim that Trump was the rightful winner be important. Similarly, if people just did not *care* about whether the President was tied up in Jeffrey Epstein's sexual abuse of young women, he would not have to convince them that the claim that he was is a hoax. In some ways—and if I am looking for a dash of optimism amid the despair—the market for political lies reflects a certain fixed core of shared values that most people are *un*willing to revise.

The account of the value of truth I've just sketched holds some promise of doing justice to the depth and emotional valence of our (or at least my) reaction to disregard for truth in politics. It isolates a direct and fairly simple way in which democracy and truth are interconnected: when falsehoods reign, citizens' own values are not done justice. Admittedly, it makes the political value of truth in a certain way instrumental—where the end it serves is accurately representing people's underlying values.[11] But I am not convinced that we should be troubled by this. At one point Lynch (2025: 78–79) seems to imply that such instrumental accounts must think of truth as a good to be *distributed* fairly. But I do not think they need do so. Thinking of the value of truth in this instrumental way does not require thinking of it either as a resource of fixed quantity or as something that can be distributed. It merely requires noticing the way in which, when falsehoods reign, democratic values are instrumentally frustrated.

[11] It is compatible with the view that truth also has intrinsic non-political value, however—a claim that I am sympathetic to but find hard to argue for (like many claims about intrinsic value).

3. Conclusion

My questions about Lynch's account of disregard for truth and of the democratic value of truth—and my alternative proposals—should not mask our substantial agreement about a great deal. I see what I have been doing here, fundamentally, as a kind of broadly shared inquiry with him about the connection between truth and democracy and about which themes from his rich work ought to receive the most emphasis.[12]

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