ST GEORGE'S HOUSE

The 2025 Elson Ethics Lecture

Is it True that there is Truth?

Sandro Botticelli, *The Calumny of Apelles* (c. 1494–95), tempera on panel, Uffizi Gallery, Florence. Calumny drags the innocent to judgment, while Truth stands at the edge of the scene, pointing to the open sky.

The Revd Canon Dr Hueston E. Finlay

11 November 2025, 19:00

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The Elson Ethics Lecture 2025 – St George's Chapel – 11th November.[1]

1.0 Introduction

Mr Dean, ladies and gentlemen it is my great honour to deliver the Elson Ethics Lecture for 2025. Although Ambassador Elson is not here this evening, it has been my privilege to have enjoyed his friendship over the last twenty years and that of his family. It is especially good that Louis is here to represent the Elson family. The Ambassador has been extremely supportive of the House over a sustained period of time and has been kind enough to support me, as Warden, with his wise counsel and advice. To him and to the family I extend my gratitude.

1.1 Climate Change

Let me begin this lecture by asking a question. What, right now, is the greatest challenge to our humanity? I suspect a good many of you might opt for climate change. Despite the few deniers this is an acknowledged problem and it is generally agreed that it is now too late to avoid all the impacts of climate change but it is not too late to avoid the very worst outcomes. If this were not the case we might as well follow the Greek philosopher Epicurus and 'Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die'.[2] But no, there are still measures that can be taken and it is ethically incumbent upon us that all mitigation and resilience be investigated thoroughly and realised where possible. The ethical dimension comes across loud and clear in Antonio Guterres's speech at the opening session of the Cop30 summit in Brazil, while the ambition for rescuing 1.5℃ is laid out in graphic detail in the Climate

Analytics report published at the beginning of this month.[3] Although theologically phrased, this was the point made in the Papal Encyclical *Laudato Si'*.[4] The Church of England anxious not to waste paper failed to respond in kind but it did pragmatically produce a two-pager on how best to approach carbon neutrality in local church buildings. There is one final point I should like to make about climate change: we have been here before. We have not seen this **level** of climate change but as human beings we have been through what is known as the Little Ice Age.[5] There is a famous painting by Adam van Breen, the seventeenth century Dutch painter, depicting skaters on the river Amstel in 1611 around the time when Europe was experiencing unusually cold and harsh weather. We could also look at Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Hunters in the Snow*.[6] What was to blame? Several factors, no doubt, but certainly large volcanic eruptions, low solar activity and an increase in carbon dioxide produced as forests regrew in response to the decline in population. The people of the time, however, were not much interested in the 'what' question and sought more to answer the 'who'. Fingers of accusation were pointed at lazy farmers, foreigners, and witches: none – even if they had existed – were culpable. Climate change, then, is a reasonable answer to my question.

1.2 Decay of Truth

But I say to you, there is an even greater threat to humanity.[7] It is the decay of truth. Truth, for reasons that will become apparent, sits at the heart of what it is to be human. [8] It is in the intellectual bloodstream that feeds our personal and societal existence. Right now, however, truth, the value that is truth, and the respect for truth is decaying and its rotting corpse threatens what it means to be human.

Unlike with climate change there is no general agreement that we are facing an existential threat. The English language has evolved to cope with our loss of confidence in truth with the coinage of new words and phrases: post-truth, fake news, doublespeak, alternative facts, echo chambers, deepfakes, spin, disinformation to name but a few. The view of this lexical development is not uniform precisely because it is not agreed that we are in the midst of such a deep threat. Even an ethical threat. It was not an ethically neutral stance, for instance, when Sean Spicer, the White House Press Secretary in 2017 claimed that the Trump inauguration had drawn, and I quote, 'the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration – period – both in person and around the globe'. When contrary photographic evidence was provided, Kellyanne Conway shrugged and explained that Spicer was providing 'alternative facts'. I will want to suggest later that it makes no sense to speak of 'alternative facts' but for the moment, like a good red, I have opened the bottle and will now leave the wine to breathe. Again, unlike with climate change we are not yet in a position to seek solutions. This is partly due to liberal views born of research in the humanities that now find themselves revitalised in the rhetoric of right-wing politicians and commentators. To this too we shall return. And yet one last analogical comparison: as with climate change, we have been here before and it did not go well! Been through it before? Yes, indeed and it all began with a technological revolution, the invention of the printing press.

1.3 The Printing Press and the Reformation

Before the invention of the press sometime in the mid-fifteenth century documents were propagated only by copying. Somebody had to take a scroll – for example – and copy it by hand. This was time intensive to say the least; it was expensive; and it was prone to transcription error. Due to the creativity of Gensfleisch – better known as Gutenberg - there

was now an industrial process, a means of producing books and, even more importantly, pamphlets in huge volume. The earliest works through the printing presses of Gutenberg and his like-minded technophiles were religious.[9] In fact they were letters of indulgence offering afterlife remission in return for support of the Papal wars against the invading Turks. Those indulgences would soon change focus: the new project would become the building of St Peter's in Rome. At this point an Augustinian monk by the name of Martin Luther (1483-1546) entered the fray.[10] An unknown figure back then, he shrewdly employed this new invention to propound his claim that the Church ought to be reformed. This began in 1517 with the post-it note he nailed to the door of the Cathedral Church of Wittenberg calling for a reform of ecclesial practice. Soon afterwards in collaboration with the press owners in Wittenberg he started producing two very important documents: the first was his translation of the Bible into the vernacular and the second a set of increasingly hostile pamphlets. All of a sudden the text of the Bible was taken out of the exclusive control of the Church and placed into the hands of any literate reader. This led to a significant change in the repository of truth. While previously everyone looked to the Church to tell them what the Bible said, now the vernacular Bible made it possible for any reader to offer their own interpretation. Do bear in mind that at that time no more than 10% of the population were literate, so, it was not, as it might be today, that the biblical text was available to almost everyone but it was available to many more people, some of them with political desire for control and even expansion. The Reformation as Luther saw it was a matter of theological truth but it took no time at all before spiritual motivations were being cynically invoked to legitimate economic and political changes.[11] This is most obviously seen in the so-called Peasants' War that started seven years after Luther nailed his theses. The origin of this war began not with text but with a vision. In 1476 in the small hamlet of Niklashausen, a

shepherd by the name of Hans Behem had heard the Virgin Mary explain that there would be no further oppression of the poor.[12] Although relatively local at this stage uprisings began to occur with alarming frequency. Once Bibles rolled off the press the downtrodden read the text as divine approval for their cause. Luther was appalled and urged negotiation in place of revolt but frankly the horse had bolted.[13] The peasants came off worse in this short war, losing some 100,000 souls. The Thirty Years' War a century later, founded on the same new understanding of authority, would surpass the bloodiness and loss of life when 25% of all Germans were killed.[14] This lengthy conflict came to an end when all parties being exhausted and populations decimated, signed the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 an agreement that brought lasting peace until the onset in 1789 of the French Revolution.

Turning our attention away from Central Europe and towards England we find perhaps the greatest reforming voice in the person of William Tyndale (c.1494-1536). A translator and theologian he fiercely pitched Scripture against the Church urging his readers to trust the Bible over priests, ceremonies, and inherited practices.[15] The result of this insistence was schism and violence. The violence was seen both physically and metaphorically. We see the metaphorical form in Tyndale's own vitriolic correspondence with his erstwhile friend George Joye on a matter of translation.[16] The violent form was all too evident in an increasingly febrile Tudor court. Henry VIII a serious student of the Scriptures was nonetheless uncomfortably accustomed to violence. We need think no further than Henry's treatment of his various wives or Mary – his daughter – who earned the nickname Bloody Mary for good reason as she approved executions by fire up and down the country.[17] Schism also grew in the ground of this Reformation soil. Amidst a culture of suspicion champions of intolerance grew in number. There was a lot of us and them; a lot of 'you are either for us

or against us'.[18] So much for this well-known and documented history, how was it that intolerance and all this dreadful loss of life was made possible.

In a recent book under the title *The Decay of Truth* it was argued that four conditions are required for such a situation to arise.[19] The four conditions are these: First, an increasing disagreement about facts and scientific interpretation of data. Second, a blurring of the lines between opinion and fact. Third, an increase in the volume of opinion and experience over fact. And finally, fourth, a decline in the trust placed in former authorities. These criteria work well in our instance especially if we replace fact with text. There was an increasing disagreement between Catholics and Protestants, and Protestants and other Protestants about how to interpret the text. There was a blurring of the lines between raw opinion about the text and how the text might have been faithfully read. There was no little eisegesis going on, by which I mean readers read into the text what best accorded with their personal experience or even political aspirations. And lastly, at least on the Protestant side there was a decline in the trust that had once been placed in the Church. You might even want to think of the *Sola Scriptura* principle as a fatal blow to any structure constructed upon ecclesiastical authority. My point here is obvious. The Reformation brought in its wake questions about truth, the nature of truth and the appropriate authorities to safeguard truth. These questions were accompanied by distrust, intolerance and death. As I said previously, things did not go well.

2.0 The Intellectual Background to our Situation

We now turn our attention away from the particular context of the Reformation to our own circumstances. In my opening remarks on the current decay of truth I mentioned that incredibly vacuous phrase 'alternative facts'. To my mind this phrase makes no sense

because a fact is either a fact or it is not. Let me support my point with a few practical everyday examples. First, it is a fact that in the UK drivers drive on the left-hand side of the road. This is not open to an alternative view; to drive on the right-hand side would be both a traffic offence and a danger to other users of the road. We are, here, dealing with a fact. We also deal with a fact when we go shopping. We hand over £5 for an item priced at £2 and we reasonably expect to receive £3 in change. In this instance we are dependent on some basic mathematical facts. Lastly, we deal with a fact when we pick up a mobile phone. The phone may be able to do much more than simple telephoning but it is indisputably a mobile phone. When, like the Walrus in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-glass,* we speak of shoes and ships and sealing wax and cabbages and kings, we are engaged in the universe of truth.[20] It is a fact that on the eleventh of November in the year 2025, Charles III is the King of England. Moreover, it is only a small intellectual step to define a fact as that which is true. Facts by definition are true and they are not open to alternative perspectives. You would think this is pretty clear and yet our twenty-first century culture casts doubt on this definition. How did this state of affairs come about? What is the intellectual history that stands behind this incredible position?

2.1 Protagoras and Nietzsche

The story begins, to my mind, with Protagoras. Thriving around 450 BC he was famous for his saying 'Man is the measure of all things'.[21] As with much of early Greek philosophy we learn about his views through Plato's record of one of Socrates' conversations. In the *Theaetetus* Protagoras is absent but his disciple Theodorus is being challenged by Socrates. Perhaps we ought to say, claims Socrates, that your belief is true for you, but false for many thousands of people? Theodorus agrees and proposes that truth and falsity are dependent

upon individual impressions.[22] Socrates will have none of this but it is Theodorus's view that an individual's impressions are at the heart of truth that is of particular interest to us. Note, however, that although Protagoras believes the 'human is the measure' he does not conclude that every person is entitled to their own view of things. Instead, he reasons that from his philosophical position it follows that human beings simply cannot offer a view about anything. He lands in the sea of scepticism.

The Protagorean position was not fondly read by medieval philosophers or the seventeenth rationalists like Descartes and Spinoza. In the nineteenth century, however, it found a new lease of life in the person and writing of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). The arch debunker of all-time took on Protagoras's measure doctrine and allowed it to infiltrate his entire philosophical corpus. Reading Nietzsche always comes with an intellectual health warning. Much of his writing is composed of short disconnected paragraphs. There is nothing that is systematic about Nietzsche and that has led to very different interpretations of his philosophy, if he actually does have a unified philosophy. The whole business is messy.[23] He is, to my mind, a philosophical nightmare, yet his influence on our contemporary discussions of truth is profound.

In his late book *The Will to Power* he clearly tells us 'There are no facts, only interpretations'.[24] There is a blatant problem with this claim: namely that if there are no facts then the claim that there are no facts cannot itself be a fact! Let us put that problem to one side and acknowledge that the statement itself - that 'there are no facts, only interpretations' - can lead to the sort of rampant relativism that conjures up the possibility of 'alternative facts'. Yet this is the great example of the difficulty faced when reading Nietzsche; precisely because his writing is messy and unsystematic, readers see in his work what they want to

see and not necessarily what he is really getting at. I would argue that Nietzsche is not a relativist but a perspectivalist. Allow me to briefly explain. In another late book, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, he has one more oft-quoted phrase: 'There is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective 'knowing''.[25] His point is not that a person can have any view they want but only that every person does have a view, they have a position, if you will, from which they see things. The saying misattributed to Winston Churchill that 'History is Written by the Victors' is an expression of this line of thought.[26] It is also reasonable to assume, for example, that somebody looking at the Eiffel Tower from the east will have a different view to somebody looking from the south. Indeed, the nineteenth century short story writer, Guy de Maupassant so deplored the Eiffel Tower that he ate lunch at a restaurant there every day because it was the one place in Paris where he could sit and not have to see the tower itself! His was yet another perspective. Nietzsche, then, was not an all-out relativist he was a perspectivalist and to this extent he has been misunderstood.

Not, mind you that I think perspectivalism clearly outperforms relativism in the philosophy stakes. It contains several false assumptions.[27] Yet, perspectivalism, I agree, is somewhat helpful when we are thinking about values, for it is self-evident that while I might value cricket more than soccer you – misguidedly I feel certain – may have things the other way around. That conceded, the problems raise their ugly heads when we get involved in daily life. Here we need to know the constant rules of the road, basic mathematics and the agreed workings of language. A scientist, by way of yet another example, cannot make progress unless her understanding is constructed on constant laws and constant magnitudes. Such matters are not open to perspective!

Of course, I readily acknowledge that no matter how much I protest, Nietzsche's philosophy is alive and well in our contemporary world. Not only is there a decisive move in the direction of relativism, there is yet another move that questions the very validity of talk about truth. Take for example the twentieth century philosopher Richard Rorty who suggested only old-fashioned metaphysical prigs talk of truth any more.[28]

If we take Protagoras and Nietzsche together as influencers of our current modes of thinking you get an understanding of why we are where we are. Each in their own way have promoted the four conditions for the decay of truth that we encountered in our discussion on the outcomes of the Reformation. They have led to the birth of crazy notions like 'alternative facts' which in turn allow for disagreement about the facts. The rise in relativism in particular has blurred the line between opinions and facts. Everyone on social media is entitled to their point of view and all views are valued equally. With the advent of the internet there has been an explosion in the volume of opinion and incessant attention to personal experience at the cost of proper regard for the facts. And as we know all too well there is a steady decline in trust in the formerly respected authorities, the sources of factual information, even to the point where Michael Gove once remarked in a television interview that 'the people of this country have had enough of experts'.[29] I am not convinced: anyone with a serious illness might well wish to have expert medical opinion, rather than consulting the butcher, the baker or the candlestick maker.[30]

3.0 Truth Beyond Facts

Thus far I have restricted myself to truth as closely conditioned by facts but I should like to go further. Charles Dickens's novel *Hard Times* opens with the schoolmaster Thomas Gradgrind pontificating thus:

> 'Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!'[31]

The novel goes on to explore the possibility that truth goes deeper than just sheer fact. There is much to be gained by listening to another character, Sissy – the daughter of a circus performer – as she explores truth through story, care of the neighbour and moral imagination.

3.1 Roland Barthes and the Death of the Author

But here too we find this broader cultural notion of truth under attack. Allow me to introduce yet another pernicious attack on truth, one that has more to do with the humanities than it does with philosophy: it is namely the question of authorial intention. Those of you who know me well, will know that I am a student of the writings of a certain nineteenth century theologian by the name of Friedrich Schleiermacher. Naturally, I do not follow him blind and I recognise that there is much in his work upon which we would wish to improve. **But** he was the first person to write a systematic account of what is going on when we read a text, when we interpret a text. That discipline is now referred to as hermeneutics. For Schleiermacher hermeneutics has this objective: 'to understand an author better than [they] understood themselves'.[32] Schleiermacher suggested that a writer had thoughts which they wished to communicate and that the task of the reader was to excavate those thoughts from the text. This is the epitome of authorial intention, the desire to understand what a speaker or a writer is seeking to communicate. That desire to understand

is most important when we are faced with canonical texts, whether cultural, literary, political, legislative or even religious. When we sit in front of these texts, we want to know what they are intended to communicate. We want to engage with the author.

This is not, mind you the way of things in contemporary literary criticism, the practices of which often find their way into the thought-forms of the opponents of truth. Unlike scholars from most of the humanities, the literary critic has typically – although not universally – driven a wedge between the text and its author. By this I mean that a theologian, for example, reading an ancient text is very likely interested in who wrote the text and why they wrote it. So, when they study a text by Augustine, they consider the circumstances in which the text was written and attempt – at least attempt – to understand what Augustine intended when he wrote that text. This is what is meant by intentionality. The literary critic sees no such obligation. Why so? That is, of course a complex question but one answer is that a certain French critic by the name of Roland Barthes once suggested that a text is no longer associated with its author. In his short but influential and brutal article 'The Death of the Author' he explained his thinking.[33] Published in 1967 – so not recently – he attacks the idea that there is a connection between a text and its author. He stands we might say in a duel with Schleiermacher. And he wins. Or at least he wins in the space that is reserved for literary criticism. He has no interest in what the author might have meant; he disregards the author and gives primacy to the reader. He asks 'what do you, the reader, think the text means?' And once he asks that question he has leapt into the dangerous waters of relativism. That leap cuts the connection between author and reader; it leads as the essay title suggests to the death of the author. It is a brutal act of literary homicide. Moreover, to claim that intentions don't matter, or that texts can mean whatever readers please, places reading practice disturbingly close to authoritarianism and totalitarianism of the kind we encounter

in some modern political administrations. This is what I meant when earlier I spoke of liberal views born of research in the humanities that now find themselves revitalised in the rhetoric of right-wing politicians and commentators. The liberal scholar has provided the right-wing commentator with tools of mass destruction and the liberal is left with no riposte.

Moreover, suggesting that readers can and should hear whatever they wish is particularly difficult when texts are written allegorically. Let me give you an example of a concrete text. It comes from the pen of Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), an erstwhile Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin. In his *Modest Proposal* of 1729, Swift memorably writes:

> I am assured by a very American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child, well nursed, is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether *stewed, roasted, baked* or *boiled*, and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a *fricassee*, or a *ragout*.[34]

Faced with this text the reader has a choice. Either they believe that Swift was making a serious suggestion or that he was being satirical or ironical, that is writing allegorically, with the intention of pointing us to the plight of the Dublin poor in the early eighteenth century. In this particular case it is precisely because we are paying attention to Swift's intention that decide this is a satire.

3.2 Truth and Trust

Naturally, retrieving authorial intention from a text is an uncertain process and is never final, yet it is vitally important. Why? Because communication is central to what it means to be human. Metaphorically killing an author – whether they are communicating through artefact or the written or spoken word – is to denigrate our very humanity. The word which

the author is communicating is suffocated and with that the author's – or the speaker's – humanity is significantly diminished. Their truth is lost.

To those who say the hope of retrieving authorial intention is a pipe dream, I reply with a resounding 'no'. It is not a pipe dream but a vision of a better reality. That reality itself is founded on our notion of truth. If we look to the etymology of the word 'truth' we find that it derives from the Middle English word troth. That is the word you hear when you attend a *Book of Common Prayer* service of marriage: the groom says and thereto I plight thee my troth.[35] He promises to his bride: truth, faith, fidelity and trust. Truth and trust are intimately bound together, and without truth we are left with distrust. For this reason, there is an ethical responsibility placed on a reader who, rather than killing the other – the person trying to communicate with them – or distrusting the other, should begin to read, to hear, with generosity. That way truth goes beyond facts, it emerges into what it is to be human.

4.0 Concluding Remarks

Thus far we have endeavoured to understand why truth as a concept is decaying and the historical intellectual streams that flow into that river of death. I have argued that there are such things as facts and that facts are not open to perspectives but are matters of truth. In the last few moments, I have tried to explain that truth goes beyond sheer facts, forming an alliance with trust that goes to the very heart of what it is to be human. The decay of truth is an existential threat to our very humanity – this is my core point.

We sit here in this glorious Chapel on the 11th November having no doubt at some point in the day remembered those who gave up their lives so that we might have freedom. What have we done with that freedom? There is the grisly violent conflict between Ukraine and

Russia, the destructive engagement of Israel and Palestine, a terrible civil war in Sudan where such is the loss of life that pools of blood can be seen from space.[36] At home and abroad there is growing economic inequality leading to political tension and shameful poverty. Throughout Europe there is a growing hatred – and hatred is not too strong a word – directed towards migrants. And all over the Western world the political 'rules of the game' are wobbling. As Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) the German and American philosopher writing in 1951 cautions us:

> The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.[37]

Not only the political but each and every one of these challenges is exacerbated by a loss of trust in institutions and in each other, a wilful disregard for truth, and mounting intolerance. These conditions as applied to Europe in the years immediately following the Reformation did not go well, and we are watching history repeat itself.

Yet it is not too late to apply the brakes and regroup but it will take a monumental effort of societal and political retrenching and perhaps that needs an upwards movement. If we are convinced that truth is a reality, we ought to say so and not accept the disinformation peddled in the media or at the despatch box. The short story writer Isaac Bashevis Singer puts it this way: 'At one time a lie was a lie'. Today, they've given the lie a fancy name – 'propaganda'.[38] We have an even more fancy name: 'disinformation' but Singer is right, this is only a fancy name for a lie. If we are to thrive as human beings lies are not acceptable. It becomes our duty then to build up trust and to defend truth.

I consider this duty as not beyond us because as a theologian and priest I acknowledge that we are absolutely dependent beings, dependent on the one in whom we place our trust for every breath we take. I leave the last word to Dante, in fact the very last words of *The Divine Comedy*, remembering that in medieval time a 'comedy' was a work that began in misery and ended in joy. His epic poem ends in the hopeful presence of

l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle,[39]

the truth that is the love that moves the sun and all the other stars.

NOTES

[1] This lecture draws heavily on conversations with Professor James Simpson as we walked around Provence and sat with his family at various meals. For his generosity and thoughtful conversation, I am enormously grateful. I have also made extensive use of his *Burning to Read* (Belknap Press, 2007) and to a lesser degree *Permanent Revolution: The Reformation and the Illiberal Roots of Liberalism* (H.U.P, 2019).

[2] Jan Steen, *The Bean Feast*, oil on canvas, 80 x 105 cm, Hessen Kassel Heritage. Note the phrase in part is found in Isaiah 22:13 and quoted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:32.

[3] Jonathan Watts and Fiona Harvey, 'Missing 1.5C climate target is a moral failure, UN chief tells Cop30 summit', *The Guardian*, 6 November 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/nov/06/missing-15c-climate-target-is-a-moral-failure-guterres-tells-cop30-summit [accessed 6 November 2023] and Climate Analytics, *Rescuing 1.5°C: New evidence on the highest possible ambition to deliver the Paris Agreement* (PIK, 2025).

[4] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home* (Vatican, 2015). For an account of the encyclical and its influence see Austen Ivereigh, 'Laudato si' puts down roots', *The Tablet*, 18 October 2025, pp. 4-6.

[5] Adam van Breen, *Skating on the Frozen Amstel River*, 1611, oil on panel, 44.3 x 66.5 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C..

[6] Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Hunters in the Snow,* 1565, oil on panel, 162 x 117 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Although earlier that the van Breen painting the Little Ice Age had already taken hold.

[7] A play on Matthew 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43.

[8] There are many popular books about truth. As a small selection consider James Ball, *Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World* (Biteback Publishing, 2017); Julian Baggini, *A Short History of Truth: Consolations for a Post-Truth* World (Quercus, 2017); Simon Blackburn, *Truth: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Penguin, 2005) Matthew D'Ancona, *Post Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight* Back (Ebury Press, 2017); Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth* (Collins, 2018). Naturally there are academic volumes dealing with this same subject. I have consulted the following but it is a very small sample: Simon Blackburn and Keith Simmons (eds), *Truth* (O.U.P., 1999); Alexis G. Burgess and John P. Burgess, *Truth* (P.U.P., 2011); Michael Glanzbert (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Truth* (O.U.P., 2018); Timothy M. Mosteller, *Theories of Truth: An Introduction* (Bloomsbury, 2014); Frederick F. Schmitt, *Theories of Truth* (Blackwell, 2004).

[9] For a brief account of the impact of the printing press in the Holy Roman Empire see Joachim Whaley, *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire, Volume I: Maximilian I to the Peace of Westphalia* (O.U.P., 2012), pp. 117-121. Whaley's two volume history of the empire is abbreviated in Joachim Whaley, *The Holy Roman Empire: A Very Short Introduction* (O.U.P., 2018). For a brief one-volume history of Germany see Mary Fulbrook, *A Concise History of Germany* (C.U.P., 2019).

[10] My preferred biography is Heinz Schilling, *Martin Luther: Rebell in einer Zeit des Umbruchs, Eine Biographie* (C.H. Beck, 2016). For an account of Luther's astute use of the new printing technology see Andrew Pettegree, *Brand Luther* (Penguin, 2015).

[11] See Peter Marshall, *The Reformation: A Very Short Introduction* (O.U.P., 2009), p. 1. A detailed and scholarly account can be found in Carlos M. N. Eire, *Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450-1650* (Y.U.P.: 2016).

[12] Lyndal Roper, *Summer of Fire and Blood: The German Peasants' War* (Basic Books, 2025), p. 10.

[13] There were reformers who, unlike Luther, encouraged the violent uprisings. Here we can think of Thomas Müntzer in particular. For a scholarly biography see Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Thomas Müntzer: Apocalytic, Mystic and Revolutionary* (T&T Clark, 1993).

[14] Peter H. Wilson, *Europe's Tragedy: A History of the Thirty Years War* (Penguin, 2009). For a broad history of this period see Lyndal Roper, *Summer of Fire and Blood: The German Peasants' War* (Basic Books, 2025).

[15] *Burning to Read*, pp. 134-141. For an opposing and more positive view of Tyndale see David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (Y.U.P., 1994).

[16] For an account of this dispute see *Burning to Read*, pp. 176-183.

[17] Somewhere between 280 and 300 Protestants were executed at the behest of Mary I, most of whom were burned at the stake.

[18] Reference is to Joshua 5:13-14.

[19] Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich, *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life* (Santa Monica, Rand Corporation, 2018). Quoted in Andrew Bell, *Truth Decay: 2024 Acton Lecture* (Sydney, The Centre for Independent Studies, 2024).

[20] Lewis Carroll, 'Through the Looking-Glass' in *The Complete Works of Lewis Carroll* (Penguin, 1988), pp. 168-172.

[21] We do not have access to Protagoras's work *Truth* but from later writers we have the following quote: 'Of all things the measure is the human being: of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not'. See Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos,* 7.60.

[22] This is a paraphrase of Plato, 'Theaetetus' in John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, *Plato Complete Works* (Hackett Publishing, 1997), p. 190. The actual quotation is rather too long to print in full here.

[23] See Bernd Magnus and Kathleen M. Higgins, 'Nietzsche's works and their themes' in Bernd Magnus and Kathleen M. Higgins (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche* (C.U.P., 1996), p. 21.

[24] This is a paraphrase of Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (Vintage Books, 1968), §481. The actual text reads: 'No, facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations'. For a short but decent account of Nietzsche's philosophy see Richard Schacht, 'Nietzsche's kind of philosophy' in Bernd Magnus and Kathleen M. Higgins (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche* (C.U.P., 1996). A fine biography of Nietzsche is found in Sue Prideaux, *I Am Dynamite!: A Life of Friedrich Nietzsche* (Faber & Faber, 2019).

[25] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* translated by Douglas Smith (O.U.P., 1996), p. 98.

[26] See Matthew Phelan, 'The History of "History is Written by the Victors"', *Slate*, 26 November 2019, https://slate.com/culture/2019/11/history-is-written-by-the-victors-quote-origin.html [accessed 9 November 2025].

[27] For more detail on this point see Simon Blackburn, *Truth: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Penguin, 2005), pp. 85-92.

[28] See Richard Rorty, 'Deconstruction and Circumvention,' in his *Philosophical Papers, Volume 2: Essays on Heidegger and Others* (C.U.P., 1991), p. 86. I came across this phrase while reading Simon Blackburn, *Truth: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Penguin, 2005), p.58.

[29] Michael Gove during a Sky News interview with Faisal Islam on 3 June 2016, quoted at https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Michael_Gove#:~:text=Gove:%20People%20from%20organisations%20with,Inteviewer:%20It's%20Oxbridge%20Trump [accessed 10 November 2025].

[30] Reference is to the nursery rhyme 'Rub-a-dub-dub'.

[31] Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (Penguin, 2007), p. 9.

[32] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts* (Scholars Press, 1977), p. 112).

[33] Published in Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, translated and edited by Stephen Heath (Fontana, 1977).

[34] Jonathan Swift, 'A Modest Proposal' in *Jonathan Swift: A Critical Edition of the Major Works* (O.U.P., 1984), pp. 493-494.

[35] See also Anthony Trollope, *The Warden* (Penguin, 1984), p. 11.

[36] Ben Farmer and Lilia Sebouai, 'Visible from space, Sudan's bloodied sands expose a massacre of thousands' in *The Telegraph*, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2025/10/28/sudan-bloodied-sands-massacre-thousands/#:~:text=The%20pools%20of%20blood%20are,showed%20evidence%20of%20mass%20killings.&text=Analysis%20by%20the%20Yale%20School,to%20break%20out%20and%20flee, [accessed 11 November 2025].

[37] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Penguin, 2017), p. 622.

[38] Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Love and Exile* (Penguin, 1984), p. 116.

[39] Dante Alighieri, *Divina Commedia* (Newton Compton editori, 2018), Canto XXXIII, 146, p. 648. Although I have not made use of following translation, I think it rather fine, Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, translated David H. Higgins (O.U.P., 1981).