

Will the Truth Set You Free?
Truth and Freedom in the Matrix and Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind

In my first paper, I argued that although truth is valuable in many circumstances, we should not conceptualize it as an intrinsic moral good or a goal of life. More specifically, I argued that truth is valuable and necessary as it allows us to describe the world (hence increasing our knowledge of it) and to communicate with others; it is in some sense a tool, but this does not justify us requiring anyone to pursue truth. In this paper, I respond to comments, expand upon thought experiments, and extend the argument in the first paper, focusing on the subjectivity of truth and arguing that it is possible to have true beliefs that are contradictory and that do not correspond to a universal objective truth. Then, I re-examine the robustness of my initial argument by showing how it can be applied to *The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and Grau's writing on the movie. Finally, I discuss some broader implications of my argument.

Before I begin, I first briefly retrace the argument of my first paper. In the first paper, I analyzed the reasons why we value truth based on Plato, Descartes, discussed *The Matrix* as a case study for Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, and introduced a thought experiment. After examining the philosophers, I found that they associate truth with good things, such as freedom, autonomy, self-determination. Conversely, non-truth is presented as being tied to oppression, exploitation, and malicious extent. For example, in both Plato's Cave and the Matrix, non-truth is quite literally seen as a prison (the cave and the Matrix) that limits human potential and reduces human existence. Seeking the truth (exiting the cave and the Matrix) is then seen as breaking free from the shackles of ignorance and living a full, free life: in both *The Matrix* and the allegory of the cave, the moment of freedom is literally also the moment of truth.

I argued that this seemingly natural connection between freedom and truth is not necessary, but contingent on circumstances. We can look at the character of Cypher to see that this

connection between truth and freedom/autonomy and non-truth with oppression and limitation is not always true. It seems that Cypher (and perhaps all people outside of the One) has more autonomy within the matrix than without. Inside the matrix, he can choose his career, his lover, friends, hobbies, and realize himself. Outside of the matrix, he must follow the orders of Morpheus and alienate himself from the rest of humanity, imprisoned on the Nebuchadnezzar and forever limiting his social circle its crew. The truth robs him of any semblance of a normal human life and sentences him to a very limited existence—almost like that of the cave in Plato’s allegory. Thus, if as implied in the *Allegory of the Cave* and *The Matrix*, the value of truth is in autonomy and freedom from oppression, then truth is a tool and there is no reason to value it in itself. Thus, if non-truth rather than truth becomes the most optimal means to freedom, we cannot blame Cypher for pursuing what he views as autonomy and escape from oppression.

Now, turning to the comments of my previous paper. Previously, I gave “deceiving the political leaders of a belligerent country and thereby averting war and saving lives” as an example of a situation where non-truth could be preferable to the truth. A comment I received is: “*Wouldn’t the more ideal (but perhaps unlikely) scenario be that the leaders convince the country of the truth—that war (or at least some wars) are bad or should be avoided?*”.

To respond, I believe that this ‘unlikely’ is very important. If a country has decided to invade another country, then the leaders of that country must believe that whatever it gains from this war outbalances the losses. This is a belief that could either be true or not true. If it is not true, then perhaps the leaders of that country could be convinced that war is bad (but as history goes, that is extremely unlikely to work). But if it is true – as in war is ultimately good for the invader—then the truth would only be counterproductive in avoiding war.

On the other hand, non-truth seems like a better solution, even in the case that war *is* ultimately beneficial for the invader. Say that there are two countries: Country A and Country B. A is strong but lacks resources, and is set on invading B, which is significantly weaker but has many resources. A has a strong military and nuclear weapons, yet B does not. A could invade and win the war with relatively low cost. From the perspective of B, it would be difficult to use truth to convince A to not invade. However, if B could somehow deceive A into thinking that B also has nuclear weapons, then they enter a state of mutually assured destruction and avert war. The truth in this case would mean that B tells A that it does not have nuclear weapons, resulting in war. Thus, we see again, that truth is not necessarily attached to good.

Furthermore, this warring countries example shows that what is true can depend on a frame of observation. For B, war is bad; but for A, if their assessment of the situation is not mistaken, then war is ultimately good. There is no universal true answer to the question *is this war good or bad?* only what is true for different frames of observation. It is possible to have true beliefs that do not correspond to a universal objective truth, and that what is not universally true is not necessarily less true. This is extremely relevant to the matrix. The matrix is positioned as a 'dream world' that is somehow less authentic than the 'real' world. Indeed, whatever a character is experiencing in the matrix, driving a car or fighting agents, they are not real in the sense that objectively these things never happened; no matter how many times Cypher eats steak in the matrix he has never eaten steak in external reality. However, it is true *for* Cypher that he believes that he has eaten steak; it is true *for* matrix-Cypher that he has eaten steak just as how it is true *for* Country A that war is good and true *for* Country B that war is bad. We can see Cypher inside the matrix and Cypher outside the matrix as the frames of observations of Country A and Country B: within the reference frame of the matrix, he has eaten steak. Furthermore, if we

compare his experience and knowledge of eating steak to a person in our world who has eaten steak, their experiences will likely be the same. Thus, there is no external correspondence and no objective fact, but it does not mean that Cypher's *subjective experiences* within the matrix is in some sense less true. Indeed, there is no reason to argue that falling in love in the matrix means you have not actually fallen in love.

The above then leads into a thought experiment I previously raised, based on the experience machine and *The Matrix*: say that after exhausting Earth's natural resources, humans created a matrix and enter it because it's the only way to have enough resources for everyone. This matrix is entirely human run, the same as the world, everyone is aware of it and free to leave at any moment. I asked: would there be any obligation or reason to pursue the truth and live in the 'real' world? Now, according to the conclusions above, the answer is no. Not only is there no intrinsic value in truth and no intrinsic bad in non-truth, but there is also a sense in which experiences lived within this human-made matrix is just as authentic as experiences lived in our external world. Furthermore, if living in the external world means that a portion of humanity will be sentenced to menial labor and unable to self-actualize because the lack of natural resources, it appears again that selecting non-truth is more conducive to intrinsic goods such as freedom and happiness.

Now, I turn to *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. Before discussing the movie itself, we see that in '*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and the Morality of Memory', Grau suggests that truth is, in fact, intrinsically valuable: he writes that 1) "we just *do* value the truth in this fundamental and basic way"¹ and 2) we "value the truth in a way that cannot simply be

¹ *Thinking Through Cinema: Film as Philosophy*, P.122

explained in terms of the pleasure that knowledge of the truth often brings or makes possible”².

However, I argue that 1) the value of truth is derivative and not fundamental, and 2) we do value truth based on the knowledge that it contains.

Regarding 1), when we ask, ‘*why do we want truth?*’, we can come up with reasonable answers—we do not immediately hit bedrock. For example, we value truth in science because true observations and rules give us power to shape the world to change it in beneficial ways. We value truth in social interactions because we must believe that others are being truthful to trust them and respond to their words/actions. Meanwhile, if we ask someone ‘*why do you want happiness?*’ or ‘*why do you want a meaningful life?*’ he’d be unable to answer beyond saying that these are just things that we want. Thus, we see that truth is not a basic intrinsic value as Grau claims. Regarding 2), we value different truths differently, based on how personally relevant, important, or useful the knowledge contained by the truth is. For example, if I told you I could either tell you how many people are within one square mile of you, what your best friend actually thinks about you, or the next winning lottery ticket number, you would probably pick the winning number. All three of these are equally true statements, but one of them is preferable because the knowledge it contains is the most useful. Conversely, we do not value random truths that appear irrelevant. There are many truths in the world, such as the number of whale species or who is the head coach of the Chicago Bulls. The fact that we do not feel compelled to seek out all these truths, (despite the fact that they are merely a quick Google search away) but only those somehow important to who we are, show that it is the content of these truths rather than their status as being true that make them valuable.

² Ibid.

Now, returning to *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, we find a scenario in which knowledge of the full truth is at conflict with a character's happiness. The movie ends with the main characters morally rejecting ME and the dissolution of Lacuna. Joel and Clementine choose to restart their love—despite knowledge of the past and the likely repeated endings. Indeed, the final happy scenes of Joel and Clementine running on the beach seem to include the same clip repeated; suggesting that they are trapped in this cycle of ME and then falling back in love. How would the argument that truth has no intrinsic value stand relative to memory erasure, and what does it imply we do if we are faced with the choice that Joel and Clementine are faced with?

According to my argument, truth is neutral tool, so we should analyze whether truth in this situation is conducive to autonomy and self-actualization. We should undergo ME and choose non-truth if choosing truth would mean we are trapped and limited by trauma or sadness. But focusing on Joel and Clementine, we find that unlike the Matrix, truth in *Eternal Sunshine* does aid in autonomy. In the Matrix, not knowing the truth of the knowledge does not impede living a full life within it, as knowledge of the matrix is in no way important to who characters are within the matrix. Yet, Joel and Clementine removing memory of each other not only removes the full truth that constitutes important life experiences, limiting their full personality and development, it also eliminates the educative function of truth. In this case, it seems that non-truth would not only involve self-mutilation as described by Grau, but also cause them to not learn from mistakes and trap them forever in this cycle of love and heartbreak, disrupting the freedom of other development/activities and finding more compatible partners.

One implication of truth not having intrinsic value is that in daily life we do not need to feel bad when we are not telling the full truth, and we need not act to pursue truth. Of course, this

does not permit us to lie to others in order to manipulate them—since truth and non-truth are both morally neutral, using either of them in a malicious, oppressive manner is morally bad.

A further, perhaps more philosophical implication is that need to recategorize and reconceptualize truth and how we think about it. Whereas previously we might have seen truth as parallel to values such as happiness or freedom, we now see that truth is morally neutral rather than morally good and thus it cannot be something to continuously strive for, like happiness is. I propose that rather than value, we see truth/non-truth simply as a mode of being, or as a property, much like shape or color for physical objects. This means that things can either be or not true, and truth/non-truth is simply a descriptor of the status of this particular property.

In conclusion, I have elaborated and expanded on my argument that truth is valuable in so far as it promotes intrinsic goods such as freedom and autonomy, and shown it can be helpful in analyzing different situations and choices through *Eternal Sunshine*. Beyond the scope of what is discussed, seeing truth as not necessarily tied to freedom/autonomy and non-truth as not necessarily tied to oppression/exploitation can help us more generally divorce the ‘goodness’ of an action, event, or property from the value judgement that it is typically associated with, and thus live life in a less biased manner. I believe that my argumentation can be applied to many other things that we often see as necessarily morally good or morally bad, simply because they mostly appear in specific circumstances where they are positioned as good as bad. For example, we often see acts of altruism and empathy as morally good, and see being an altruistic, empathetic person as a goal worthy of pursuit. However, whether altruistic/empathetic actions are necessarily good is a topic worthy of further exploration. Indeed, we can perhaps perform a re-evaluation of many other things that are typically considered as intrinsically valuable.