

Using *Stasis* Theory as a Heuristic for Examining Epistemological Dilemmas in a Post-Truth Landscape

Bruce Bowles Jr.

ABSTRACT:

The current definition of *post-truth* creates an adversarial relationship with rhetorical theory, relying on a positivist stance toward epistemology. Additionally, the most public-facing scholarship concerning post-truth tends to view knowledge in rather concrete ways, failing to account for the nuance of differing types of knowledge and rhetorical situations. As a result, most of the pragmatic approaches to dealing with disingenuous post-truth rhetorical tactics are predicated on positivism (e.g., fact-checking), and post-truth gets either downplayed or only treated theoretically in rhetorical scholarship. This article redefines post-truth in a manner more amendable to rhetorical theory and presents a heuristic predicated on *stasis* theory as a method for evaluating the epistemic certainty of rhetorical claims. The heuristic is then used to analyze an exchange from an episode of the podcast *Armchair Expert* to demonstrate how rhetorical discourse can become unproductive and adversarial when interlocutors treat value-based claims as facts. Discussions of the post-truth dilemma need to extend beyond the confines of the current definition to include all discursive practices that ascribe the wrong *stasis*, not just practices that challenge established knowledge and facts.

KEYWORDS:

Post-truth, stasis, epistemology, certainty, heuristic, facts

INTRODUCTION: THE PRAGMATIC POTENTIAL OF *STASIS* THEORY IN DISCUSSIONS OF POST-TRUTH

In many ways, discussions of *post-truth* seem rather antithetical to rhetorical theory. Post-truth is most frequently defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping political debate or public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). Such a definition, and the discussions it often leads to, lends itself to a correspondence theory of truth which separates language from reality in problematic ways, the legacy of which dates back to Plato’s debates with the Sophists (Reames, 2021). As Robin Reames (2021) notes, this move undermines the constitutive nature of language, leaving it as only a reflection of reality rather than a crucial component of how we construct reality. Ideas about objective, absolute truth frequently tethered to debates concerning post-truth tend to run afoul of conceptualizations of rhetoric as epistemic and constitutive. Thus, while scholarship in rhetoric has attempted to address the post-truth problem, it is generally discussed tangentially, as either a tool to set-up an analysis (Donnelly, 2021) or as an overreaction, a moral panic to an issue that is as old as rhetoric itself (Cloud, 2018; Roberts-Miller, 2019).

And yet, even if post-truth is not necessarily new, the consequences our current post-truth landscape presents are becoming catastrophic. When U.S. elections cannot be held without one side claiming fraud (with no credible evidence to support the claim) if they do not win, democracy becomes inherently more and more unstable. When natural disasters and aviation accidents are immediately met with conspiratorial speculation not predicated on the facts of the situation, people face great harm—even death—and the government and regulatory agencies will not be able to prevent, and better respond to, such calamities in the future. Overall, rhetorical theory needs to address the post-truth dilemma in a more concrete, pragmatic fashion if it wishes to contribute to the public discussions surrounding post-truth. Regardless of whether post-truth is a problem as old as rhetoric itself or a newer phenomenon, the insincere and manipulative rhetorical tactics that are wreaking havoc in the media and across political systems matter. The practical nature of rhetoric allows it to serve a useful function in this debate, offering reasonable ways to address these complex problems. One of the most practical contributions of classical rhetoric—*stasis* theory (a methodology for identifying the core issue in dispute)—offers such a pragmatic approach.

This article seeks to offer a revised definition of post-truth in terms of discourse employing inappropriate epistemic certainty, leading to a proposal for a heuristic for dealing with such issues predicated on employing *stasis* theory as a method for evaluating the level of certainty of rhetorical claims. The first section will reflect on the manner in which the phenomenon of post-truth has been addressed in rhetorical studies. From there, the article will address the problematic nature of the current definition of post-truth and explore some of the discussions pertaining to post-truth across multiple disciplines, arguing that the problem with these conversations is a fixation on monolithic approaches to epistemology.

USING STASIS THEORY AS A HEURISTIC

Afterward, *stasis* theory will be explored in order to apply it as a heuristic for discussing issues of epistemic certainty in discourse. This will be accompanied by a redefinition of post-truth predicated on the concept of inappropriate epistemic certainty. This will lead to a discussion of a specific problematic tendency of post-truth—conflating the *stases* as a defense mechanism to protect identity. While one of these confluations is a common topic (conflating fact with value), the problematic conflation of value with fact will be examined. Following this discussion will be a case study of such issues using a debate that emerged between actor Dax Shepard and mathematician Cathy O’Neil on the popular podcast *Armchair Expert*. The article will then conclude with a discussion of the beneficial applications of the heuristic along with a call to be attentive to inappropriate applications of epistemic certainty in rhetoric, especially those that take value-based judgments and attempt to present them as facts or universal truths.

HANDLING THE POST-TRUTH DILEMMA IN RHETORIC

When the issue of post-truth is foregrounded in rhetorical scholarship, the discussions tend to proceed in a rather theoretical fashion, offering unique insights into the problem. Barbara Biesecker (2018) makes the intriguing observation that a lack of truth is not a problem in our current public and political discourse, noting that “we do not suffer a shortfall of truth” but rather “we are witness to its excess(es), enabled by a circuitous slippage between facts or alt-facts, knowledge, opinion, belief, and truth” (pp. 329-330). For Bradford Vivian (2018), these competing truths are essential to the flourishing of democracy. The more problematic issue, in Vivian’s estimation, is the emergence of one “truth” that stakes a claim to all knowledge, allowing it to undermine democratic processes (e.g., the rhetorical strategies used by Nazi Germany). Similarly, James Crosswhite (2018) is concerned with the creation of even more theories of truth being used as an antidote to the problems of post-truth. According to Crosswhite, this fixation on theorizing truth is the problem. Instead of focusing on defining truth, they recommend moving away from conceiving of truth as an object; it is best thought of as a metaphorical concept that is pragmatic in function and connected to concepts of justice.

Since rhetoric and truth tend to have a rather complicated relationship, these theoretical approaches are indeed warranted, yet they often do not provide any concrete, pragmatic tactics for dealing with the disingenuous rhetorical tactics that are becoming common in public and political discourse. As a result, the pragmatic suggestions that gain traction in the public consciousness include problematic tactics, such as fact-checking, which rely on positivist assumptions about truth and almost never work in persuading people away from misleading information (Cloud, 2018). Alternatively, social epistemologists such as Steve Fuller (2018) advocate a completely relativistic approach to the post-truth condition, contending that all knowledge is a social construction, and that the post-truth condition is beneficial as it allows for epistemic diversity that resists monopolies on the methods for generating knowledge.

Neither positivist nor relativist approaches seem beneficial for rhetorical theory. Positivist approaches run counter to the epistemic and constitutive nature of rhetoric, and while more relativistic viewpoints may seem in league with rhetorical theory, they can be just as problematic. As Bruce McComiskey notes, “When language has no reference to facts, truths, or realities, it becomes a purely strategic medium” (2017, p. 6). Many of the most disingenuous rhetorical tactics that are a hallmark of post-truth are dependent on such undermining of the concept of truth, on turning language into a strategic medium. Unfortunately, this leads to rhetorical approaches that unhinge themselves completely from facts and evidence altogether.

Nevertheless, McComiskey (2017) situates rhetoric in a compelling way that addresses this tension and avoids such relativistic leveling. They emphasize rhetoric’s separation from the generation of objective, certain facts and universal truths, aptly demonstrating that these do not require rhetoric, *per se*, except in regard to using language to present them persuasively to others. Still, rhetoric does deal with sound arguments and reasoned opinions in McComiskey’s estimation, and “the very notions of sound arguments and reasoned opinions require facts, realities, and truths as epistemological counterparts, as references and standards against which adjectives like ‘sound’ and ‘reasoned’ may be compared” (p. 7). Rhetoric, in essence, draws upon facts and truth in order to supplement the more probabilistic endeavors to which it is usually ascribed. Arguments regarding best policies, sound actions, etc. must have an anchoring in fact if they are to prove productive. No matter how clever, arguments divorced from factual knowledge and strong evidence eventually run up against consequences that are immune to their chicanery (e.g., the deaths by COVID-19 of those convinced the vaccine was unnecessary and dangerous).

So long as post-truth continues to be framed as a philosophical problem, the solutions will be unsuccessful and will further reinforce a form of positivism that has its own pitfalls and drawbacks. If post-truth is allowed to be downplayed through appeals to relativistic theories of truth, it will only embolden charlatans to act more irresponsibly in the public sphere. Rhetorical theory has more to offer the conversations surrounding post-truth than it has currently contributed.

The primary reason rhetoric has struggled to gain traction in these conversations is the popular definition of post-truth. It frames post-truth in a fashion that rhetoric (and many other disciplines) is inclined to be antagonistic toward. As such, the definition incentivizes rhetoricians to downplay the phenomenon or attempt to reposition it in a way that makes the problem appear wholly unoriginal. In order to offer a new definition, it is critical to understand the precise flaws with the current definition of post-truth as well as the manner in which much of scholarly and public discourse has framed the phenomenon.

USING STASIS THEORY AS A HEURISTIC

POST-TRUTH: A DEFINITION NO RHETORICIAN COULD LOVE

Once post-truth became the *Oxford English Dictionary's* word of the year in 2016, a definition concerning the phenomenon was cemented in the public consciousness. Almost every book or article published concerning post-truth starts with this definition, even if it is just to refute it. Examining this definition of post-truth again makes the reasons why rather apparent: “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping political debate or public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.).

As is apparent, the popular definition of post-truth operates in a positivist fashion. The definition positions emotion and personal belief outside the realm of reason, tacitly arguing for objective facts and logical argument as superior to emotional appeals. Implicit in this definition is a belief that there is a definitive truth from which public opinion can be shaped; the danger—this definition posits—is in deviating from this truth. Here, truth and certainty are presented as being a matter of merely separating objective facts from emotions and beliefs. This emphasis on *logos* at the expense of *ethos* and *pathos* makes this definition obviously problematic for rhetoricians.

In spite of this definition, the manner in which the phenomenon of post-truth is viewed varies wildly, especially within the scholarship that has gained the most cachet with the general public. For some, post-truth is a dire consequence of a divorce from reality and cherished epistemic standards. For others, post-truth is merely a reflection of the way knowledge has always been generated and debated. Lee McIntyre (2018) takes the position that post-truth is a newer (to a degree) phenomenon that poses a grave threat to democracy. While McIntyre is aware that how we come to know reality has always been a complex problem that is perpetually litigated among philosophers and scholars, post-truth discourse pushes much further in McIntyre's estimation, beginning to question “the existence of reality itself” (p. 10). For McIntyre, this is the result of a confluence of factors including various cognitive biases, science denialism, and “both sides” approaches in the media. They are fearful that by “allow[ing] our opinions and feelings to play a role in shaping what we think of as facts and truth,” we can easily become infatuated with what validates our ideologies and biases, leading to a “risk of being estranged from reality itself” (p. 172). Tom Nichols (2017) is equally fearful, believing that we are “witnessing the death of the ideal of expertise itself” (p. 3). And historian Timothy Snyder (2017) sounds the alarm that “Post-truth is pre-fascism” (p. 71).

Fuller (2018) could not be more opposed to these ideas. They view the standard definition of post-truth itself as “clearly pejorative” (p. 3) and argue that the phenomenon these scholars depict is not new at all but merely reflective of the way things have always been. The post-truth condition, for Fuller, is actually democratic in many ways, opening up the arena of debates over epistemology to an ever-expanding sphere of influence. There is a

constant battle over modal power, in Fuller's estimation, for "control over what is possible" (p. 8). As knowledge becomes increasingly more available to the masses as a result of technological advances, this struggle over modal power is hastened. The foxes (those without epistemic power) are presented with more methods and opportunities for challenging the lions (those representing established epistemic power). While this may appear hazardous at first glance, Fuller argues that we tend to view the epistemic positions of the lions as irreproachable when they in fact often exist on unstable grounds. Rather than fearing post-truth, Fuller believes it "is the inevitable outcome of greater epistemic democracy" (p. 61).

Stanley Fish's (2019) stance on the debate resides somewhere between the poles created by McIntyre (2018) and Fuller (2018). Similar to Fuller, Fish finds much to be concerned with in regard to the definition of post-truth. Namely, Fish believes that the definition assumes unmediated access to objective facts and that beliefs and emotions are enemies of reason. These assumptions are flawed in their estimation since "truth is created and manufactured, not in a pejorative sense but in the sense that it emerges in the course of deliberative inquiry that has been conducted within the protocols of evidence and argument in place in a particular practice" (p. 171). Fish aligns with Fuller in the sense that they acknowledge the constructed nature of knowledge, yet Fish also exists in harmony with McIntyre in terms of believing there is a reality to which we aspire to align.

Fish (2019) remains skeptical of the idea of any unmediated access to reality, however. Within scholarly structures, beliefs and assumptions are debated in order to form the epistemological foundations on which truth is built, foundations that are never certain nor permanently stable. Unlike Fuller (2018), Fish is not as skeptical of these foundations. Fish contends that, "In a world where absolutely objective truth is forever eluding our grasp, conclusions drawn from the structures of validation currently established are all we have, and for most purposes they are good enough" (p. 183). These structures of validation may not provide us with unmediated access to truth, but Fish believes they generally serve us well from a pragmatic standpoint.

Dana Cloud (2018) articulates a view somewhat similar to Fish (2019) in relation to rhetoric and epistemology. For Cloud, both reality-based arguments and relativist arguments concerning rhetoric and epistemology are inherently problematic. Rhetorical realism, their preferred epistemic theory, acknowledges that there is a reality but our only access to it is always mediated through language. Subsequently, knowledge is perspectival in Cloud's view. The key role for a rhetor in this model of discourse, then, is to advance positions from episteme (knowledge) to doxa (common sense), to make the arguments of a certain perspective part of what is viewed as reality for your audience.

Intriguingly, each of these scholars provides valuable critiques of the others. In spite of the qualifications he provides, McIntyre (2018) generally embraces a rather objective

USING STASIS THEORY AS A HEURISTIC

standard of truth. However, as Cloud (2018), Fish (2019), and Fuller (2018) are apt to point out, our access to this reality is always mediated by the systems and symbols used to depict this reality. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Fuller's viewpoint on the post-truth phenomenon intends to entirely level the playing field. Post-truth is merely a game of gaining traction and having the power to define the rules by which "reality" will be engaged. As Fish points out, though, those rules have often worked quite well; the cynicism of the processes leads to an epistemological equality that is not as desirous as Fuller makes it out to be. It is also interesting to note that Fuller frequently depicts the foxes as wanting to change the rules, yet McIntyre's discussion of intelligent design rhetoric shows that foxes do not always change the rules so much as they attempt to oscillate between the rules of two epistemic vantage points, using whichever rules best serve their purposes. Fish's approach seems like a solid middle ground, but he never makes a firm defense of why certain validation structures are superior to alternative models. In Fuller's terms, he makes a rather lionesque move in order to defend established knowledge structures on the basis of their status as established knowledge structures. It forms a crude tautology that is tempting to embrace at first glance but does not truly resolve the issue.

Where I believe Cloud's (2018) theory becomes problematic is in claiming all knowledge as perspectival, as equal, in a sense. Pragmatically, certain types of knowledge can be tested empirically in such a fashion as to be almost beyond contestation and immune to perspective (e.g., certain scientific experiments with high degrees of control and only one variable). Other types of knowledge apply universally agreed upon constructs that render facts uncontestable (e.g., dates and time). Still, other types of knowledge require consensus as to definitions but can generate empirical facts within the parameters of the definitions and assumptions employed (e.g., much empirical research on human behavior). Certain forms of knowledge only exist in the abstract or theoretical unless all interlocutors agree on a sanctioned text or process (e.g., morals and values). The degree to which perspective influences knowledge claims is variable, not static.

I believe it is important to pause here to emphasize that such a claim is not an unadulterated defense of empiricism. Far from it. That being said, empirical approaches do have their benefits, and—as Leah Ceccarelli notes—at times “the rhetorical critic should be prepared to develop scholarly insights that can be turned to the defense of a scientific orthodoxy” (p. 199). Furthermore, Bruno Latour (2004), one of the most influential critics of scientific empiricism, began to question whether scientific skepticism had swung the pendulum too far, arguing:

The danger would no longer be coming from an excessive confidence in ideological arguments posturing as matters of fact—as we have learned to combat so efficiently in the past—but from an excessive *distrust* of good matters of fact disguised as bad ideological biases! (p. 227)

While the apprehension that rhetorical studies has shown for empiricism is warranted, empiricism also allows for the construction of knowledge vital to human survival and flourishing. And, in our current post-truth landscape, it is often paramount to advocate for the certainty of vital scientific findings (e.g., climate science, the efficacy of vaccines, etc.).

Furthermore, Susan Harding (2009) contends that standpoint epistemology, often viewed as an antithesis to empiricism, is in the service of improving empirical approaches. Harding aptly points out:

Finally, standpoint projects are not cognitively or politically relativist. They do not aspire to be value-neutral, “handmaidens” to supposedly culturally transcendent sciences. Yet they are not relativist in the sense that they accept the equal validity of any and all knowledge claims or any and all standards for assessing the reliability of such claims. Rather, they have consistently redefined epistemic standards for more accurate, comprehensive, objective, and rational production of knowledge. (p. 195)

Harding views relativistic positions as problematic for feminism. Standpoint epistemology serves as a useful critique of empiricism in the search for better, more dependable knowledge, not as a critique of the enterprise of striving for more objective information about the world. Certain forms of knowledge are as near to certainty as humans can get, and it is important to treat them as such. When I drive my car with my wife and children inside, I avoid speeding not only because it is against the law but also with an awareness that higher speeds increase the risk of, and severity of, an accident. I no longer smoke because I know that doing so increases the chance of lung cancer and other smoking-related illnesses. Empiricism, while flawed, serves a valuable purpose.

Overall, the main problem with the definition and many of the discussions of post-truth is an attempt to deal with issues of epistemology in a monolithic way. Knowledge and truth are portrayed as either concrete or relative, empirical or perspectival, certain or unknowable. Yet, knowledge and truth are content and context dependent. Luckily for rhetoricians, *stasis* theory offers a unique way to deal with this dilemma in a manner that does not become overly positivist or prescriptive.

TOWARD A NEW DEFINITION OF POST-TRUTH VIA *STASIS* THEORY

Where post-truth debates falter is in representing all knowledge as occupying a particular point on a continuum between objectivity and subjectivity, between truth and opinion. Joshua Wakeham (2017), when dealing with the problem of defining *bullshit*, in many ways stumbles into an interesting point in this regard by approaching epistemic questions without committing to a precise standpoint. Wakeham contends that:

Some aspects of reality lend themselves to be known and understood more easily, others resist scrutiny altogether, and many fall somewhere in between. Some things

USING STASIS THEORY AS A HEURISTIC

we believe with a high degree of certainty, other things we believe with little to no certainty, and many fall in between. (p. 18)

Wakeham manages to add a high degree of nuance to such epistemic debates, even if his conclusions lead him beyond this point and toward a social-epistemic theory that is perhaps too relativistic. Knowledge and truth, as presented here, vary contingent on the epistemic and social context.

Manuel Arias-Maldonado (2020) makes an interesting move as a result of this phenomenon as well. Arias-Maldonado distinguishes four types of truth, delineating between revealed truths, factual truths, scientific truths, and moral truths (p. 74). For Arias-Maldonado, truth operates differently contingent on the content being discussed. Although an intriguing approach, the clean delineations of such a taxonomy seem problematic. For instance, while Arias-Maldonado distinguishes between revealed truths and scientific truths rather clearly, making such a clean distinction between revealed truths and moral truths seems questionable since many people derive their morals from their faith and spirituality. Arias-Maldonado separates factual and scientific truths predicated on facts being records of what happened and scientific truths being established theories that cannot be disproven, but the line between these two is not as neatly demarcated as such an explanation makes it seem. While the attempt at such a categorization is beneficial to a degree, these categories could be more of a hindrance than an aid as a result of their overlap.

This is where *stasis* theory may be more helpful. *Stasis* theory refers to the question under discussion, the point on which a debate hinges (Carter, 1988). For Hermagoras, there were four main *stases*: questions of fact (or conjecture), definition, quality (or value), and jurisdiction (objection) (Kennedy, 1963; Nadeau, 1959).¹ Generally speaking, the relative strength of each *stasis* is weaker than the one before it. In legal terms, defense attorneys prefer to keep the argument pertaining to fact, if at all possible (my client did not do it), rather than definition (what my client did does not fit the definition of the crime) or quality (my client was right to have done it) (Kennedy, 1963). Such a desire has an obvious correlation with epistemic certainty. It is easier to prove conclusively that someone did or did not commit an act than it is to prove that the act was right or wrong. The former has a reference to an objective reality, even if it cannot be known for certain; the latter is a subjective evaluation.

This does not mean that *stasis* theory is predicated on distinguishing cleanly between objective facts and subjective values. Danielle DeVasto et al. (2016) do believe such a distinction to be the case to some degree, as they are concerned that “*stasis*—both as a theory and methodology—remains indebted to a more modernist epistemology” (p. 136).

¹ While jurisdiction (objection) is seen as the fourth, it is not germane to the current discussion and thus will not be employed here.

Such modernist approaches tend to become problematic when *stasis* theory is followed in a more regimented manner, moving through the questions that demarcate each *stasis* in a linear fashion. However, Michael Carter (1988) has argued that *stasis* theory is inherently social in nature, that it is contextual and helps to define the rhetorical situation rather than dictate it. Carter emphasizes the manner in which “*Stasis* was a corrective, a way of identifying, controlling, and resolving that conflict within the community” (p. 101). Even within classical rhetoric, Carter believes *stasis* is viewed as a negotiation, as a community determining exactly what is under discussion.

This is my intention in using *stasis* theory as a heuristic for analyzing the epistemic certainty of rhetorical claims. The goal is not to neatly resolve the epistemic questions pertaining to the discourse but to provide a method for determining whether the knowledge under discussion can be known in a more or less certain fashion and can be seen as well-established or less-established among those involved in the discussion. This heuristic operates with two continua that are related but that do not necessarily correlate; the first employs the three main *stases*, with value existing as a representation of knowledge that is less certain and fact representing knowledge that is more certain.² Nevertheless, placing a claim close to fact on the continuum does not necessarily mean that the topic of debate is known with certainty (although it could be); rather, placing a claim on that point means that—with perfect knowledge from every possible vantage point, which is admittedly often unobtainable—the issue could be resolved definitively. For instance, while whether a defendant actually killed a victim may not be capable of being known precisely, such a claim still resides with fact on the continuum since it *could* be known objectively. The defendant either did or did not do it (even if they are the only person who can know this for certain).

Conversely, a topic placed more toward value on the continuum is not necessarily incapable of reaching consensus, yet it is a topic for which there can be no semblance of an empirical or objective answer. Furthermore, within this heuristic, the *stasis* of definition is extended as well. Here, definition is reflective not just of questions of definition (What is it?) but also of knowledge that is reliant on socially agreed-upon parameters, even if that knowledge is indeed empirical in nature. Such knowledge is predicated upon definitions rather than just pertaining to a definition. Empirically, we can conduct research pertaining to ADHD in regard to how many children are diagnosed with it and whether certain variables correlate strongly with it, but such research is reliant on the definition and diagnostic criteria of ADHD used, the definitions of certain variables that might correlate with it, definitions of methodological approaches, etc. In this way, much research that is predicated on

² Although both quality and value are often used to refer to the same *stasis*, here I am employing value since it more accurately captures the meaning intended within this heuristic.

USING STASIS THEORY AS A HEURISTIC

assumptions to one degree or another would fall within this definitional realm since it relies heavily on socially agreed-upon definitions and assumptions in order to proceed.

At this juncture, an example of claims that might fit well at various points on the continuum will be helpful. Claims such as *Vaccines do not cause Autism* exist close to the fact end of the continuum. There is objective, empirical evidence to support the claim that can be tested using rigorous, proven scientific methods which can isolate variables and provide results that are highly replicable. Toward the value end of the continuum is a claim such as *It is morally acceptable to lie about a small mistake to avoid an unfair punishment*. Such claims exist in the realm of values and are highly predicated on assumptions and personal beliefs about morality. They can be debated endlessly. And, more toward the middle of the continuum (although a fascinating debate could be had as to where to place this on the continuum), exists a claim such as *Employing community policing practices reduces crime better than increasing the size of the police force*. While empirical evidence can be generated to prove or disprove this claim, this evidence is reliant on defining particular parameters; the structure of validation here is going to be more reliant on social consensus among researchers, even if it generates empirical data. How to measure crime reduction, what constitutes community policing, and what changes in police force size matter would all be issues of debate (and represent just a few of the possibilities for such debates). If those involved reach agreement on these matters, objective facts could be achieved within the structure of validation. Still, disagreements are likely to emerge in regard to the structures of validation themselves.

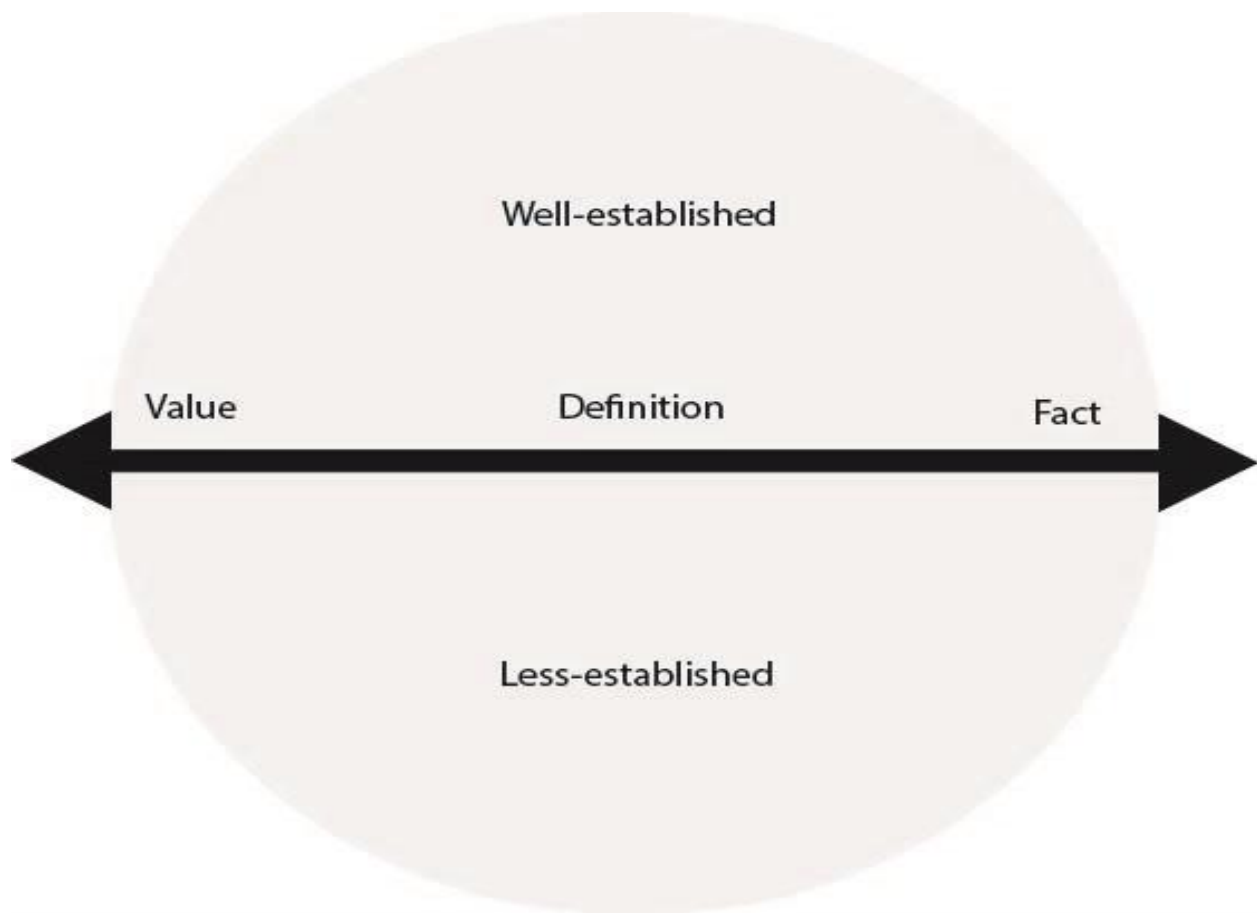
In each scenario, the strength with which the claim could be made would be different, and other contextual variables could further complicate these claims. The point is that the degree of certainty with which one could make—and defend—each claim is not the same. The certainty that rhetors can ascribe to their claims should factor into how they engage with others, and their degree of confidence should vary contingent on the *stasis* of the claim in question. Obviously, the points at which various knowledge claims reside on the continuum will always be a matter of debate to some degree. Nevertheless, interlocutors can use the continuum as a heuristic to provide a starting point for such discussions, increasing the chances of reaching a general consensus as to where the claim would reside on the continuum.

The other continuum introduces a more social element predicated on how well-established the knowledge claim is considering the social context and rhetorical situation. Here, the question of epistemic certainty is considered in relation to the perception of the interlocutors along with overarching communities of knowledge. This continuum is not meant to necessarily counterbalance the continuum predicated on certainty. Rather, it is more reflective of the burden of proof within the particular rhetorical situation, an additional element to consider. Hence, a knowledge claim could be a fact (almost certain epistemically) yet not be accepted knowledge amongst those involved in the rhetorical situation, necessitating that it be a major point of discussion (e.g., scientists communicating new

discoveries to the general public). Conversely, a knowledge claim that exists in the realm of value, such as the aforementioned *It is morally acceptable to lie about a small mistake to avoid an unfair punishment*, could be considered well-established and then not operate as a hinge point of the conversation. This would allow the rhetor to treat it as a matter of certainty in that particular context, even if predicated on a value-based judgment. As an illustration, the above claim about the ethicality of lying to avoid unfair punishment would probably be considered well-established among utilitarians but would be overtly controversial for deontologists.³

Figure 1

Visual Representation of Heuristic for Determining Epistemic Certainty of Rhetorical Claims



³ This example is solely for illustrative purposes. The two ethical camps may indeed present more nuanced defenses and critiques than afforded here. Nevertheless, the general sentiment is likely to hold.

USING STASIS THEORY AS A HEURISTIC

As seen in Figure 1, the epistemic certainty of rhetorical claims exists along a continuum from value to fact. This continuum is malleable, allowing for rhetorical claims to be placed at various points on the continuum. Thus, a rhetorical claim does not have to be placed with fact, definition, or value but can reside at the multiple points between them as well. A value-based claim that is predicated upon socially agreed upon definitions of the good might sit between value and definition while a claim of value that is more tethered to interpersonal belief systems will reside closer to value; a factual rhetorical claim that requires significant agreement as to definitions of concepts and is predicated on certain assumptions may exist between definition and fact while a rhetorical claim predicated on established, rigid science will reside closer to fact. Additionally, the circle consisting of well-established and less-established is meant to represent the rhetorical situation itself. As a result, it has a bearing on the manner in which the rhetorical claim is approached in that specific rhetorical situation, but it has no direct correlation or impact on the actual epistemic certainty of the claim. Nor is the heuristic itself meant to reach definitive conclusions upon which all interlocutors can agree. It is instead meant as a tool for analysis and negotiation. In many circumstances, contemplating where the rhetorical claim should be placed is a valuable exercise in and of itself, an exercise that can add nuance to analysis and clarity to negotiations.

The heuristic presents the main reason why the current definition of post-truth is so problematic. The definition is positioned near the fact end of the aforementioned continuum, viewing truth as precisely knowable and objective. Any deviation from this perceived objectivity is then framed as an egregious error. Many of the discussions that move against this definition commit a similar mistake by placing all knowledge more toward the value end of the continuum. These arguments fail to account for variations in the degree of certainty to which specific claims can be made. Truth itself is treated as a static concept across all discourse and contexts.

Thus, I propose an alternative definition for *post-truth*:

Referring to or depicting rhetorical discourse and behaviors that fail to apply the appropriate amount of epistemic certainty considering the stasis and epistemic context of the discussion.

This definition presents two primary advantages. First, truth is no longer viewed as a monolithic concept and is instead tethered to the content—and context—of the discourse. Such a definition acknowledges that the process of rhetorical mediation is more or less pronounced given the topic under discussion and the circumstances. This is what is meant by inappropriate epistemic certainty. When the degree of rhetorical mediation is high (i.e., claims closer to the value end of the spectrum), epistemic certainty should be seen as limited. When the degree of rhetorical mediation is low (i.e., claims closer to the fact end of the spectrum), the rhetor can be more certain of their position. Inappropriate epistemic certainty, then, either claims that rhetorical mediation is low when it is actually high (i.e.,

arguing value as fact) or claims that rhetorical mediation is high when it is actually low (i.e. arguing fact as value).

Second, it leaves room for interpretation, discussion, and debate. An accusation of post-truth rhetoric using this definition is not a pejorative, as Fuller (2018) surmises, that automatically shuts down conversation; instead, it can be an invitation to stop and reflect on the certainty with which particular claims are being made. It is a prompt toward metacognition, toward interlocutors pausing to contemplate the coordination of the discussion at hand. And, in a post-truth landscape, this metacognition is crucial for avoiding endlessly frustrating debates, whether they emerge as a result of someone trying to argue well-established facts as less-established values (the most common critique of post-truth discourse) or attempting to argue less-established values as if they are well-established facts, as will be addressed in the next section.

The latter of the two is the issue that is not attended to as much as it should be in the scholarship pertaining to post-truth. It is, in many ways, reflective of Vivian's (2018) argument that the major concern regarding post-truth is not a plurality of truths within a democracy but rather a singular truth that attempts to dominate. Often, the method by which this occurs is the conflation of value with fact. Unfortunately, while converting well-established facts into less-established discussions of value (e.g., climate change denial) tends to be a rhetorical tactic employed by specific disingenuous actors, the tendency to conflate less-established values and definitions with well-established facts is a tendency to which almost everyone is vulnerable. As the next section will demonstrate, post-truth is not just a problem plaguing "the other side." Post-truth tendencies are often present in discourse among well-meaning interlocutors with benign intentions.

WHAT IS FAT SHAMING?: A CASE STUDY IN SHIFTING AND CONFLATING STASES ON *ARMCHAIR EXPERT*

Juan Pablo Bermúdez (2018) argues that post-truth thinking and discourse is significantly tied to threats to one's identity. In their theory, post-truth is a defense mechanism, of sorts, for dealing with evidence—a form of motivated reasoning that seeks to find a way to distort or deny the new evidence so as to protect belief and ideology. For Bermúdez, post-truth does not indicate an absence of reasoning but "should be conceived as reasoning in the service of a preexisting motivation or goal" (p. 90). Seen through this lens, then, post-truth is not inherently tethered to unintelligent people or irrational thinkers even; in fact, Bermúdez believes that highly educated, careful intellects may actually be better at accommodating or dismissing new evidence in order to conform it to their own world view.

In a similar fashion, Chris Heffer (2020) views this tendency as a form of epistemic irresponsibility that extends from a strict adherence to dogma. They argue that such discursive practices attempt to fit the world to what rhetors desire rather than modifying

USING STASIS THEORY AS A HEURISTIC

what they desire to reflect reality.⁴ Heffer makes clear that such behaviors are often not conscious or intentional—they tend to be reflexive. Heffer also takes care to refer to these discursive practices as discursive pathologies, since they “come about when the speaker is focused not on open inquiry but on fitting the world to his beliefs and desires” (p. 80). Many disingenuous rhetorical tactics, in Heffer’s view, are unintended reactions to arguments and evidence that threaten one’s world view; rather than being open to debating them, the interlocutor finds ways to dismiss or mold them to a preexisting viewpoint.

Applying the aforementioned heuristic predicated on *stasis* theory to an episode of the podcast *Armchair Expert* (Shepard & Padman, 2022) shows how such tactics can be used by interlocutors who are striving to be genuine and honest in nature. I chose to analyze this particular exchange from the podcast for a variety of reasons. First, I am a fan of *Armchair Expert* and of the work of the guest on Episode 480, mathematician Cathy O’Neil.⁵ I listen to the podcast regularly, and I have cited Cathy O’Neil twice in my own scholarship. Second, although co-hosts Dax Shepard’s and Monica Padman’s political views are nuanced and even differ from one another, neither is right wing and most listeners would be inclined to classify both as being left leaning at the least. Too often, scholarship that critiques post-truth aims toward obvious examples of disingenuous right-wing actors; for this analysis, I wanted to explore issues of post-truth and conflating *stases* by analyzing those with whom I am inclined to agree. Third, Shepard is known to be a rather amicable host with his guests. *Armchair Expert* is not a debate show. Usually, Shepard plays the role of the inquisitive everyday person, asking questions of the hosts that allow them to discuss their area of expertise. While he may push back on claims of a guest here and there, he usually does so politely, and the exchanges almost always remain cordial. This episode, then, is atypical of the podcast and represents a breakdown in communication that was not desired by the host. And, finally, this particular exchange is an apt example of iconic rhetoric, which Michael Leff and Andrew Sachs (1990) refer to as “a regularly occurring phenomenon of language use that reveals a cooperative interaction between form and meaning” (p. 260). This exchange, I argue, is indicative of such “a regularly occurring phenomenon of language use,” one in which the form of the conversation—employing inappropriate epistemic certainty by conflating value with fact—impedes meaning and causes conflict. In essence, the lack of any understanding or resolution to the dispute is a direct result of the form the discussion takes. Furthermore, the communication breakdown that occurs in this episode is rather common rhetorically and worth exploring.

⁴ Although this position appears to reflect a correspondence theory of truth, Heffer’s views are actually quite nuanced as to what can, and cannot, be known with certainty.

⁵ The portion of Episode 480 that will be discussed here occurs between the 21:45 and 32:55 mark of the podcast.

On this episode, Shepard and guest O'Neil get into a prolonged debate about whether Shepard's and Padman's *Race to 270* podcast is an example of fat shaming. *Race to 270* documents a competition between Charlie Curtis (a CrossFit trainer who starts the contest at 230 lbs.) and Shepard's best friend Aaron Weakley (a recovering addict who starts the contest at 306 lbs.) to get to 270 lbs.: Curtis by adding muscle and Weakley by losing body weight. After briefly describing the contest to O'Neil, Shepard mentions the backlash they received as a result and their disappointment at being accused of perpetuating diet culture and fat shaming. Shepard then proceeds to ask O'Neil to weigh in on this issue as O'Neil is discussing her book *The Shame Machine: Who Profits in the New Age of Humiliation*, prompting this exchange:

Dax Shepard: What's your take on that? Do you see their point of view?

Cathy O'Neil: Oh, sure. First of all, a lot of people don't recognize fat shaming even when they're doing it. But I do think you are fat shaming the audience. Because you're framing it as a choice. So now we're just diving deep into my book where I talk about what is inappropriate shame. I call it punching down shame. And the answer is it's inappropriate if the person that you're shaming has no voice or no choice.

Dax Shepard: Well, that's not the case. So, the person is on the show...

Cathy O'Neil: ...yup...

Dax Shepard: ...They've expressed this interest...

Cathy O'Neil: ...uh hmm...

Dax Shepard: ...I've not told anyone they need to lose weight. So that right there, just your first criteria has not been met.

Applying the heuristic, this opening exchange becomes critical to the manner in which the rest of the conversation plays out. Shepard's initial questions, "What's your take on that? Do you see their point of view?," are framed as discussions of value, asking O'Neil to offer an opinion on a value-based judgment that is less-established between them and, most likely, across the audience of *Armchair Expert*.

Afterward, Shepard shifts toward discussing the definition of punching-down shame that O'Neil offers, asserting that this was an example of choice. This shift in *stasis* in-and-of itself is not problematic. However, it does set up an adversarial stance to a form of knowledge that resides closer to the value end of the continuum. Whether *Race to 270* is an example of fat shaming is going to be a value-based judgment; it can be a judgment predicated on how one chooses to define fat shaming, but—from an epistemic standpoint—there is no right or wrong answer that can be known with any certainty. Shepard's questioning whether it fits that definition is fair, but before O'Neil can further clarify their definition (which is less-established between the two interlocutors), Shepard responds by adopting a posture of fact, noting that the first criterion of the definition is not met. What started as a question eliciting a value-based judgment has now proceeded to be framed as a factual refutation of O'Neil's position. Shepard's defensive shift places O'Neil in a defensive posture as well, automatically

USING STASIS THEORY AS A HEURISTIC

creating a situation where both will want to argue from a vantage point of high epistemic certainty—closer to the fact point on the continuum—rather than delve into discussions about the definition of fat-shaming or moral debates about agency and choice.

Immediately after this exchange, O'Neil picks up on the need to define choice, offering this response:

Cathy O'Neil: Let me define choice. Everybody has a choice to go on a diet. You're right. And many people can maintain a diet and even lose a lot of weight for some amount of time. The statistics on success of diets are non-existent. I go to a lot of trouble in my book pointing out how bad the science is on losing weight because people who fail just drop out of the studies. And so, the very few people that are followed are the people who are successful, at least for the length of the study, which is usually not very long. Because people gain the weight back. And it's just a fact, a statistical fact that almost nobody successfully diets long term, almost...

Although this response begins with definition, it quickly draws upon two factual claims in order to illustrate O'Neil's manner of defining choice. The first claim about the drop out rates of such studies being exceedingly high is 100% accurate. The second claim about almost no one dieting successfully, however, cannot be derived from the first. While the data on such studies is complicated by the aforementioned drop out rates, the science is conclusive that if caloric expenditure exceeds caloric intake, people will lose weight (C. Wilborn, personal communication, September 8, 2022).⁶ It is difficult to know the success rate of diets as a result of the first, accurate factual claim that O'Neil makes; nevertheless, this does not in any way lead to the conclusion that dieting is ineffective for most people.

This is not to say that O'Neil is beyond a shadow of a doubt wrong. Science operates on the assumption that new knowledge can always be presented. Still, O'Neil does present their opinion on these studies as unassailable fact when it runs contrary to well-established facts in the field of exercise science. The level of epistemic certainty with which O'Neil presents this information is instead the key issue. O'Neil's final assertion is not the statistical fact that O'Neil claims. Rather, it is an interpretation of statistics that runs counter to prevailing views, placing it much closer to the definition point on the continuum. This is a common conflation of the *stases*, too. Data are facts—interpretations of data often exist more in the definition realm of the continuum unless they are beyond contestation. Such interpretations are almost always based on assumptions and agreed upon methods. They can be viewed as more or less valid contingent on these assumptions and agreed upon methods, as well as the degree to which such interpretative practices are well-established or less-established in

⁶ Dr. Colin Wilborn is a leading researcher in the field of exercise science with over 100 peer reviewed articles, abstracts, and book chapters.

a particular field. But they are not irrefutable facts. In O'Neil's case, they are also moving against well-established premises in the field which is being critiqued.

Neither Shepard nor O'Neil are being intentionally disingenuous by shifting the *stasis* of the conversation at these junctures. They are protecting their identities. When faced with an argument that the podcast *Race to 270* could have been unintentionally engaging in fat shaming from the perspective of an author who just published a book on shaming, Shepard sought to invalidate O'Neil's value-based judgment by quibbling with the definition of punching-down shame that O'Neil provides rather than allowing O'Neil to fully explicate their argument. When O'Neil's definition of choice is called into question, O'Neil responds by framing their argument for a lack of choice as a statistical fact that is beyond refutation. Both interlocutors seek to bolster the degree of certainty of their positions so that the threat to their identity is neutralized.

The interview proceeds to shift *stases* repeatedly as Shepard compares fat shaming with addiction, attempting to define choice through the analogy, while O'Neil continues to argue that choice is illusory in many circumstances which makes shaming behavior inappropriate. Toward the end of this section of the interview, O'Neil emphasizes the need to not pile on with shame. At this juncture, the antagonism seems to subside and the two switch to other topics even though the disagreement was never fully resolved.

Neither Shepard nor O'Neil was promoting shame in any way. In fact, the true *stases* of the discussion actually appear earlier, about midway through this section of the interview:

Cathy O'Neil: ...Back to your example. It's like, hey, this is fun. My friend wants to do it. It's a fun choice for him to make. It's the healthy choice. If you frame it that way, then the people are like, "I've tried dieting twenty-five times. It never works. I end up sicker and fatter. And I really don't appreciate you making this seem like it's an enjoyable entertainment."

Dax Shepard: See, that's where we will fundamentally disagree. I'm not making a show about you, person who's saying that. This isn't a show about you. Not unlike if you have a show that's called—what do they do? They do sober October. I'm not sitting at home saying, "You're saying I could just quit in January." They're not talking about me. I have nothing to do with that. If my friend Aaron wants to lose weight, and he says it. He's a person with full agency. And he's expressed that he wants to do it. And now we figure it out and we go on his ride as he does, what does that have to do with anyone but Aaron?

In this exchange, it becomes abundantly clear that the main core of the disagreements between Shepard and O'Neil are predicated on two definitions that are less-established. The first definition is readily identifiable throughout their exchanges: fat shaming. For Shepard, fat shaming is being clearly pejorative towards someone with weight issues; for O'Neil, fat

USING STASIS THEORY AS A HEURISTIC

shaming can occur simply by implying that people have a choice in losing weight. But neither ever really tries to rectify this disagreement during the exchange; rather, they fixate on claiming epistemic certainty at the level of fact. The other definition that is critical to this discourse, but not as apparent, is agency. Underneath almost every other *stasis* Shepard and O'Neil take up is a fundamental disagreement about what it means to have agency. As Shepard notes about his friend Aaron, "He's a person with full agency." For O'Neil, that is definitely not the case. Establishing what it would mean to have agency in terms of the choice to diet may never have resolved Shepard's and O'Neil's disagreement. All the same, such a discussion would have definitely allowed for a more nuanced exploration of agency in relation to shaming, a discussion that would have been beneficial for the interlocutors and—just as importantly—the audience to contemplate.

As Stuart Blythe et al. (2008) observe, "reaching agreed upon stases is difficult because people often switch unexpectedly from one type of stasis to another" (p. 290). This is definitely the case in the exchanges between Shepard and O'Neil. Yet this analysis moves beyond merely identifying the appropriate *stases* for discussion and noting such shifts. The more significant point is that neither Shepard nor O'Neil is entitled to the certainty they claim unless their definitions are agreed upon. They are both "right," in a sense, in relation to the definitions they are operating from and the assumptions from which they begin. If fat shaming needs to be pejorative in nature and people have agency over their health decisions (even if it is not complete), then *Race to 270* is a fun journey toward getting healthy that is not harmful to the participants nor the audience. If fat shaming is implying choice where there is none, and people have limited to no agency over such health decisions, then *Race to 270* can be seen as fat shaming by implying that people have a choice in losing weight. The issue cannot be resolved with an appeal to precise facts, and it is critical to acknowledge this—the issue can only reach a degree of certainty and closure if consensus is reached regarding definitions.

As such, this exchange is an example of post-truth discourse by the newly established definition. Shepard and O'Neil are not attempting to turn well-established facts into less-established values as the common definition of post-truth implies; instead, both are trying to take their own values predicated on less-established definitions and turn them into well-established facts (of one sort or another) beyond refutation. In short, they are applying the wrong amount of epistemic certainty—claiming to have access to factual knowledge when the claims they are making are predicated on definition or value—considering the stasis and epistemic context of the discussion. When dealing with such arguments, resolution may not always be possible. At such a juncture, definitions need to be agreed upon, or the interlocutors might just need to agree to disagree. Although such a sentiment is not always popular, the alternative is oftentimes attempting to impose one's values and idiosyncratic definitions as well-established facts. These moves often accomplish nothing more than antagonism and a false pretense of being "in the right."

In this exchange, no matter the changes to the way they approached the discussion, Shepard and O’Neil may have never come to a firm agreement about the nature of fat-shaming. Despite this, as previously mentioned, the exchange could have yielded a rather enlightening discussion about fat-shaming and agency, allowing for a more thought-provoking exploration of the disagreement, especially for the audience. Such an exploration could bring to light hidden assumptions and underlying values that will allow for more meaningful discourse in the future. Instead, the opportunity became stilted by attempts to argue from fact in order to protect one’s position from being criticized. There is also another danger in shifting values and less-established definitions to well-established facts. This type of rhetorical behavior can alienate those who do not share the same assumptions and beliefs and is often a source of repression for minority viewpoints.

THE NECESSITY OF EXPANDING, AND COMPLICATING, DISCUSSIONS OF POST-TRUTH BY APPLYING STASIS THEORY

For many rhetoricians, post-truth is nothing distinctly new. Predicated on both the standard definition and the definition offered in this article, this sentiment is difficult to argue against. Throughout human history, objective facts have often been subverted by emotions and beliefs; value-based judgements have been masqueraded as cold, hard facts. This does not, however, mean that these issues can be ignored. Post-truth may not necessarily be a new phenomenon, but it is indeed an accelerating one. While post-truth discourse has predominated during various periods of history, the Overton window for such disingenuous rhetorical behaviors has expanded drastically over the last decade. When the legitimacy of American elections can be called into question—and argued with such blind certainty—without a shred of credible evidence by such a large portion of the American population, the problems of post-truth have reached new heights. When a major aircraft accident immediately gets blamed on DEI, with the assertion being labelled as “just common sense” (a major conflation of fact and value), the desire to better understand what has happened in order to avert future catastrophe is weakened in favor of throwing out value-based judgements under the veil of reasoned, fact-based evaluation. When the values and beliefs of certain groups are treated as unassailable facts and used to impose the will of those groups on others, the cause of liberty that has been a benchmark of our democracy is harmed.

This is why it is vital not to attend to these issues through either a positivist or relativist lens—why it is important for rhetorical theory to make significant contributions to such discussions. Positivist approaches tend to close rank around a particular version of truth, emphasizing a singular truth that should predominate. Yet, as Vivian (2018) demonstrates, such approaches often become fascist in nature, imposing a version of truth on citizens that is viewed with an absolute certainty that is not warranted, frequently predicated merely on uncontested values. This certainty is then used to control others, to impose the will of a specific group on everyone else as less-established values are conflated with well-

USING STASIS THEORY AS A HEURISTIC

established facts. Relativist approaches also contain flaws as they open up issues for which there is overwhelming evidence and scientific certainty to unnecessary and inappropriate debate, as McIntyre's (2018) discussion of global climate change makes clear. Here, well-established facts are converted into less-established definition-based arguments and values so they can be presented as needing litigation. This can be another strategy of social control and oppression—decaying the notion of truth itself (Snyder, 2017). Once truth is undermined, unverified beliefs can gain traction in public discourse in ways that are, epistemically speaking, not warranted.

The former—conflating value with fact—has been the primary focus of this article since it is the lesser acknowledged tactic of post-truth. In these situations, a singular truth is presented as irrefutable, as beyond question when a plurality of truths (so to speak) is warranted from an epistemic standpoint. The impacts of this strategy are problematic to say the least. When it comes to issues of value, rhetors need to remain humble and check the egotistical instinct to operate off of the assumption that their values are “correct” and beyond reproach. Even when values have a referent—whether it be a religious text or a moral-philosophical axiom—they only hold if that structure is unassailable among the interlocutors. And, so long as religious texts and moral philosophical axioms are predicated on either faith or unverifiable assumptions about the good, they will always be well outside the realm of certainty. This does not mean evaluations cannot be made as to the merits of specific values and which values will bring about better consequences; it only means that agreements need to be established between interlocutors as to what those merits are and what consequences are desired. What should be valued, and what consequences should be desired, are not unassailable facts and should not be treated as such. Doing so dogmatically closes off important discussions that need to be had, that need to continue to evolve, that need to be revised.

This dogmatism also tends to have a rather repressive feature built into it. While positivism is often blamed for oppressing minority groups and suppressing their viewpoints, reason and science—when practiced ethically—rarely are the guilty parties in these situations. Instead, the culprit often is the conflation of values with facts. Values that are antithetical to a certain minority group are portrayed as fact, as irrefutable. Reason and science are not to blame in these situations since what is being proffered cannot be known solely through reason or science, yet the veneer of science and reason are used to mask this lack of certainty. Approaches for “proper parenting” operate in this way frequently. Certain approaches to parenting are deemed correct when there really can be no correct way to parent without assumptions about the nature of parenting itself as well as the outcomes that are desired. But the ways that certain minority groups parent are deemed “bad” or “problematic” from some objectivist standpoint that is wholly illusory, leading to repression and oppression.

This does not alleviate the necessity to remain vigilant about attempts to shift fact toward value as well. Particular strains of anti-intellectual pseudo-science and other factually incorrect ideas gain prominence as a result of a desire in the media and general public to be diplomatic, to present “both sides of the story.” In these cases, allowing for epistemic uncertainty is a major mistake; it creates an illusion of debate over issues for which there is remarkable certainty. Facts are facts—they are the easiest of the *stases* to defend. The more interlocutors are allowed to shift the discussion towards definition and value, the murkier the argument gets. Opening these facts up to debate is not a matter of charity toward an opponent or a strategy for gaining the sympathy of an audience—it is a rhetorical mistake, pure and simple.

While using *stasis* theory as a heuristic for epistemic certainty cannot provide definitive, concrete answers to complicated discussions of rhetoric and epistemology, it can help to frame such discussions in pragmatic and useful ways. Such conversations engage interlocutors in honest discussions of what is truly at issue and give cause for reflection on how knowledge is generated. Perhaps even more importantly, it can aid rhetors in finding the appropriate balance between being strident about issues for which there is certainty while remaining open-minded in relation to beliefs and value-based judgments. This can be a difficult tightrope to balance on, and if this heuristic can make us even slightly more cautious in the evidence we use, just a tad humbler in the claims we make, it is worth employing. Although I cannot be certain of it, I am inclined to believe that such metacognition can have a beneficial impact, even if it only minutely blunts the all-too-human instincts toward self-righteousness and epistemic closure that appear to be at the heart of the post-truth dilemma.

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