

Ontology of the Difference Between Truth and Fiction

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Abstract

This article proposes an ontological approach to the distinction between truth and falsehood, shifting the debate from moral and epistemic registers to the material plane of language. Drawing on a critical reading of metaphysical traditions—from Plato to Kant—and their contemporary crisis, the text argues that truth is not a static property but a degree of exposure to the real, measured by the symbolic reorganization that occurs in response to friction. Falsehood, in turn, is treated as a structural possibility of language, characterized by the suspension of proof and temporal economy. The distinction between truth and fiction is explored through its temporal, ethical, and political dimensions, engaging with the Ontology of Emerging Complexity, pragmatist philosophy, and critiques of symbolic acceleration. The article defends that to think today is to inhabit friction, resist performative efficacy, and cultivate institutions capable of sustaining the duration required for proof.

Keywords: Ontology of language, Symbolic friction, Truth as reorganization, Structural falsehood, Philosophical temporality, Emerging complexity, Ethics of exposure, Post-truth, Symbolic economy, Resistance to the real

The distinction between truth and falsehood has historically been approached from diverse registers—moral, epistemic, theological. Yet before being a matter of judgment or correspondence, it is an ontological question of language. It is within the scene of enunciation that truth and falsehood become possible as differences. Both emerge from a shared inaugural gesture: symbolic inscription.

By treating language as a material operation rather than merely a vehicle for transmitting content, the discussion shifts away from the axis of subjective intentionality or mirror-like correspondence, and toward the plane of symbolic production. An utterance is not, from the outset, either true or false: it is a proposition inscribed in a field of possibilities governed by logical, grammatical, social, and material conventions. The ontology of language precedes its moralisation or validation.

Plato, in distinguishing between the “lie of the soul” and “lies in words,” already indicated this ambivalence: logos is always susceptible to dissimulation because it is mediation, not transparency. Aristotle, in defining truth as “saying of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not,” instituted a criterion of ontological correspondence that confuses the performative function of language with a direct

mirroring of being. This tradition, furthered by the Scholastics and reframed by Kant under the guise of a regulative ideal (the thing-in-itself as limit), founded a metaphysics of truth anterior to enunciation.

However, this metaphysical conception collapses upon the realisation that there is no immediate access to reality. Every enunciation is a symbolic mediation, subject to failures, displacements, and suspensions. Language does not mirror the world directly, nor does it materially organise it; it merely structures the symbolic domain through which we interpret and relate to experiences of the real. Thus, the difference between stating that “the Earth is flat” and “the Earth is spherical” does not lie in the logical form of the propositions, but in their consequences: in confrontation with proof, in the response imposed by the world, in the utterance’s capacity to reorganise itself in the face of friction. In this framework, truth is not decided within the structure of language, but in its consequent exposure to the real — in the manner in which a symbolic inscription adjusts, resists, or transforms before the resistance of the world.

Nietzsche breaks with the assumption of an originary truth and denounces language as a field of stabilised illusions: “truths are illusions we have forgotten are such.” For him, all language is displacement; all categories are constructs. Arendt, in her analysis of political falsehood, demonstrates how entire regimes of discourse can suppress friction with the real and institute narratives devoid of confrontation with evidence. In both cases, what is at stake is the scene of enunciation as a material and historical field.

The pragmatist tradition, with figures such as Peirce and Dewey, had already intuited this shift. For them, truth is that which resists through time, which continues to make a difference across variable contexts of action and inference. In the present framework, proof is not merely a technical or consensual procedure: it is the name for the confrontation between symbolic inscription and material alterity. When a statement withstands such confrontation, reorganising itself without disintegrating, we say it is true. When it evades or suspends that confrontation in the name of efficacy, adhesion, or convenience, it belongs to the domain of falsehood.

Falsehood is not an accident: it is a structural possibility of symbolisation. All language, by being autonomous in relation to the immediate real, can be used to avoid proof, to bypass resistance, to fabricate effects of truth without foundation. In this sense, falsehood is a specific use of language that suspends or indefinitely postpones its exposure to the real. Its structure consists precisely in avoiding reorganisation.

It is essential to reject the relativist temptation that would dissolve all distinction between truth and falsehood into mere questions of perspective or convention. Proof — as resistance of the real and consequent reorganisation of the symbolic — remains the criterion of distinction. This is not to posit an absolute truth, but to recognise that certain utterances endure more friction than others, reorganise themselves more deeply, and inscribe themselves with greater durability. Truth, in this sense, is a degree of exposure to the real.

The distinction between truth and falsehood manifests itself decisively in their temporalities. Time does not act here as a mere external context to language, but as an internal operator that shapes the very regimes of enunciation. Truth requires duration, resistance, iteration. Falsehood survives through speed, saturation, or ephemerality.

Gaston Bachelard offers an essential contribution here. In describing science as a “continuous rectification of error,” he introduces a dynamic conception of truth: not as initial adequacy, but as a path of correction. Truth is not born perfect; it is constructed through time, by the hands of epistemic communities that organise duration—archives, laboratories, protocols, peer review. Its temporality is one of postponement and reinscription.

By contrast, falsehood operates within the logic of the instant. It is a tactical inscription whose aim is not reorganisation but to avoid the collapse of immediate interaction. The false compliment, the automatic response, banal courtesy—these are examples of that ephemeral and relational regime. Its efficacy is transient, but when systematically repeated, it can accumulate noise and obscure the value of the word, contaminating the semantic field.

When strategically deployed, falsehood aligns with cumulative repetition. Its efficacy lies in ubiquity, in the incessant iteration of a narrative that imposes itself not by the truth it contains, but by the frequency with which it is uttered. Disinformation campaigns, ideological slogans, media manipulation—all function by eroding resistance and by occupying the totality of symbolic space.

Truth is structurally disadvantaged. While it demands slowness and memory, falsehood adapts more efficiently to conditions of technical acceleration and attentional compression. Bernard Stiegler shows how digital devices compress symbolic time, favouring the logic of immediacy. Truth, with its constitutive slowness, becomes dissonant in an ecosystem saturated with instantaneous flows.

The materialist ontology of complexity reinforces this reading: if truth is symbolic reorganisation that responds to the friction of the real, it depends on preserving a temporal thickness that permits hesitation and reinscription. Falsehood settles where that thickness is abolished—either by dissolving time into instantaneity or by colonising it through repetition.

To understand the difference between these temporalities is to grasp the ontological regimes at stake. Truth subsists where there is room for critical iteration; falsehood thrives where language becomes pure performance.

The distinction between truth and falsehood exceeds the epistemological domain and unfolds within the ethical-political field. It is not merely a matter of content or intention, but of a symbolic economy, of collective management of time, resources, and legitimacy. Truth demands institutions that sustain the long temporality of proof: libraries, archives, universities, courts, investigative journalism. These devices are not ancillary; they are what render the persistence of truth possible as a collective process.

Falsehood redistributes the cost of language asymmetrically. While truth requires the labour of validation, falsehood displaces that burden onto the other. The one who lies gains time; the one who responds loses it. This asymmetry generates an ethical imbalance: language ceases to be a common space of construction and becomes an arena for the unilateral consumption of cognitive energy.

The so-called “post-truth” is not a time without truth, but an era in which falsehood has gained greater symbolic profitability. As Arendt demonstrated, the danger lies not merely in false content, but in the dissolution of the criterion for distinguishing true from false. If everything can be said with the same appearance of validity, nothing needs verification. Falsehood becomes the dominant operation.

In this context, truth demands institutional protection, collective cultivation, and a subjective disposition toward the interval. To inhabit friction is to accept that language can lie, but can also reorganise itself—and that this reorganisation, though slow and arduous, is the only path through which the symbolic remains inhabitable.

To think, today, is precisely this gesture: to keep alive the difference between truth and falsehood, not as fixed categories, but as regimes in dispute. And in that struggle, to affirm friction as the condition of meaning, delay as the condition of justice, and reorganisation as the minimal form of care for the real.

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