



Technology and Truth in Post- Modern Age: A Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract: The present paper explores the notion of Truth in the digital era. The notion of truth in philosophy is generally interpreted in the transcendental sense where it becomes the ultimate reference for judging the things. However, with the advent of digital technology, the notion of truth has come under crisis. Overwhelming information, social media posts and fake news has now blurred the distinction between truth and falsehood. The present paper will try to show that the crisis in Truth is the result of the enframing nature of technology as proposed by Martin Heidegger. The enframing tendency of the technology converts every aspect of existence into calculation and control. The way out of the calculative thinking is through return to poetic thinking. Poetic thinking restores the essence of humans and helps them to overcome the obsession with calculative thinking. This Heidegger proposes through the notion of Truth as unconcealment. The existential notion of Truth establishes the relation of man

Cite as: Todariya, Saurabh. (2021). Technology and Truth in Postmodern Age: A Phenomenological Analysis (Version 1.0). Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies, Jan-June 2021 (Vol 25/1-2), 249-261. <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4459906>

with Being.

Keywords: Truth, Technology, Post-Truth, Enframing, Alethia

Introduction

The question of Truth has become the contested issue as we have moved from the ‘hard technology’ of the modern age to the ‘soft technologies’ of the postmodern age (See Scharff and Val Dusek (2003)). While the earlier technologies of communication maintained clear cut differences between the personal and the social spaces, the new technologies have almost erased the distance between the personal/public, sacred/profane, real/virtual. In postmodern age, any private or intimate moment could become the public spectacle thanks to the ubiquitous presence of social media. As there is no gatekeeper or authority to differentiate between the fake or real, truth or falsehood, the force of truth is being replaced by the rhetoric of propaganda. Rapidity of news and infodemic is blunting the ‘reflective capacity’ of humans and reducing them as the passive consumer of the information. The flood of information and the absence of authority which controls the truth has resulted in calling our age as the post-truth age. In the age of post truth there is the declining role of traditional gatekeepers of truth like reputable news outlets, journalists, scholars etc. In the post truth age, there is decline of all these authorities and there is kind of free play of the interpretations. Therefore, today’s age, which is called the post truth world, is marked by superficiality, emotions and rhetoric.

However, we need to see whether our age actually can be called the age of post-truth or is it the crisis in the particular notion of Truth? Apart from being the property of proposition, Truth also holds great existential importance because it gives meaning to our existence. We would like to explore whether the so-called post-truth age has really divested the truth of its existential function?

For this, we will mainly underscore the two views regarding Truth: the transcendental notion of Truth and the postmodern view of truth. The former view is mainly upheld in the philosophy of Kant who argues that humans are endowed with the special faculty called Reason and it enables us to transcend our localities and see the things from what he calls, 'enlarged mentality'.¹ Therefore, as rational beings, we can claim objectivity and universality in our judgments.

Postmodern view rejects the possibility of any such universality and argues that human beings are fundamentally embodied and situated subjects who remain under the influence of history, culture and ideology, therefore it cannot claim the universal truth. Even if it claims any universal truth, it can only be formal like mathematics and therefore implementing it in a variety of contexts always remains problematic.

Two Notions of Truth

The rational notion of truth mainly found in Kant's philosophy. Kant's philosophy has mainly come as the response to Hume's skepticism. Skepticism denies any foundationalism. Since human knowledge is ultimately based on the sensory inputs therefore it cannot be finality in the human's knowledge. The skeptic philosophy of Hume challenged the certainty and the universality of scientific knowledge.

The first Critique is basically a response to the challenge thrown by David Hume in *Treatise of Hume Nature*. Kant responds to Hume by showing the necessity of knowledge, what he calls the Copernican Revolution. Kant's main project in epistemology was to establish the 'spontaneity' of mind in the process of acquiring knowledge. In this way, he was able to come out of the empiricist's notion of passivity of mind in the process of acquiring the knowledge. Once the passivity of mind is assumed, one cannot be sure how the particular representation corresponds to reality. Hence, knowledge acquires merely an ad-hoc status in Hume which is merely contingent and based on the

sheer habit of our mind. Kant challenges this passive notion of mind by arguing that we need an active faculty of understanding to explain the knowledge. He starts with claim that “though all our knowledge begins with experience, it does not follow that it all arises out of experience” (Kant, 2003). For the experience to take place, two kinds of faculties are required, sensibility and understanding. At the very outset of Transcendental Logic, he makes the oft-quoted statement.

Our knowledge springs from the two fundamental sources of the mind. The first is the capacity of receiving representations; the second is the power of knowing an object through representation (Kant, 2003: 66).

By granting an active role to the faculty of understanding in the process of acquiring knowledge, Kant is able to respond to the challenge posed by Hume. Hume denies any role to the mind in the process of knowledge acquisition. It also led him to the conclusion that there is no self. It is only a fiction which is produced through abstracting from the experiences we have. There is no self which unites or connects the various experiences. Ideas combine themselves on their own on the basis of the law of association. There are certain principles like causality, contiguity in space and time and resemblance, which are responsible for the combination of simple ideas into the complex one. Although he admits that imagination and memory do play a role in the combination of simple ideas but he grants them an empirical function, not transcendental (See Hume, 2003). Kant, on the other hand, establishes the spontaneity of mind in the process of knowledge acquiring. This alone can guarantee the necessity in knowledge and will keep the skepticism at bay. If we wish to endow knowledge with necessity and universality, we need to find it in us, not in the external world.

Modern thinkers since Kant call the faculty of organizing the discrete sensations into the meaningful whole as Reason. They argue that through the faculty of Reason humans can rise above the particulars and can come to the Universals; hence modernity

argues for the essence of humanity as rationality, where the people can give up their particularities and become the rational agent for upholding their true essence.² In fact, in the moral philosophy of Kant reason even acquires the motivating force in order to act morally.³

Postmodern philosophers reject the transcendentalist notion of Truth. They argue that what modern philosophers dubs as the 'transcendental' is basically the fallout of the more fundamental situation which modernists ignore. This fundamental situation they call the 'immanence'. According to the postmodern philosophers, thought tries to represent the immanence through the categories of reason, idea, universal so forth but it cannot do so because the immanence is basically fluid, multiple and playful. Therefore, the unifying thought always produces the margins and the outsides.⁴

Therefore, the postmodern view rejects the possibility of any such universality and argues that human beings are fundamentally embodied and situated-selves which itself is the effect of history, culture and ideology, therefore it cannot represent the Truth.

The aim of delineating these two contrasting notions of Truth is basically to explore the source of ethics which has a deep relationship with Truth. Theoretical certainty regarding Truth informs the practical involvement with the world. Transcendentalists offer the robust defence of ethics by making human dignity, freedom and respect as essential to the nature of man. Therefore, they would see the discourse of post truth basically as propaganda which blurs the capacity to distinguish between the right and wrong, good and bad. The ruling ideology and capitalism take recourse to the propaganda to blur the critical abilities of the people. The way out is to recognize our false consciousness and see the propaganda as propaganda in order to come out of it.

Postmodernists do not deny ethics rather they argue that the Reason is just the formal category and it is not capable enough to motivate to act with justice. Therefore, it tries to ground ethics

in relation to the otherness. Derrida says that self is infinitely responsible towards the other. Recognition of one's fluidity makes one more open towards the alterity. Therefore, postmodernist gives more importance to the singularities, differences and margins than the general rules or the metanarrative of emancipation.⁵

Heidegger and Technology

However, we see that the possibility of both kinds of engagement with truth has been seriously challenged in the era of images and social networking where we are spending more time in the digital world than the real one. Both modernists and postmodernists world view assumes the encounter with the concrete world as the condition to come out of our closures and become open towards the other. The voluptuousness and the mystery of the other always surprise me and I become vulnerable towards the other. However, our digital age has resulted in the situation where the self can totally withdraw itself from the other in the virtual world and yet can have the relationship with the other without having any concrete, embodied experience. The rapidity and overwhelming nature of the images is dulling what Hannah Arendt says the capacity to judge between the good and bad, beautiful and ugly. It is not just the psychological problem of addiction but rather the formation of the subjectivity where we start to perceive and evaluate myself via the online experience. The overflowing images and the messages which often are false claims, propaganda and full of malignity has been taking over the criticality and the values. The absence of any depth in life either from religion or politics has resulted in the addiction towards social media.

Martin Heidegger describes the technological age as the decisive turning point in the history of humane existence. He argues that Technology is not simply the technique or know-how rather it is enframing. Enframing is fundamentally the way of ordering the world (Heidegger 1993). According to Heidegger, we do not see the world as it is. There is always the paradigm

by which we see and interpret the things. Heidegger calls this as Enframing.

In his essay *The Question concerning Technology*, Heidegger asks the question that constitutes the essence of technology. In his characteristic style, he says that we should not understand the technology as the product of human beings. Rather technology is *Gestell*, enframing. By enframing, Heidegger means the framework in which we see and understand the things. Technology is the 'framing' which presents the things in the form of 'standing reserve'.

The essence of modern technology shows itself in what we call enframing...It is the way in which the actual reveals itself as standing-reserve....Enframing is the gathering together which belongs to that setting-upon which challenges man and puts him in position to reveal the actual, in the mode of ordering, as standing-reserve. As the one who is challenged forth in this way, man stands within the essential realm of enframing (Heidegger (1993: 328-9).

In this technological age everything is converted into the resources for the exploitation. This obsession with converting everything into resources is 'calculative thinking'. Calculative thinking is in fact not 'thinking' *per se*. It is rather the thoughtlessness of our age. As Heidegger says, "Most thought-provoking is that we are still not thinking." In the technological age, the world turns into a commodity for calculation.

calculation is the mark of all thinking that plans and investigates. Such thinking remains calculation even if it neither works with numbers nor uses an adding machines or computers. Calculative thinking computes...calculative thinking never stops, never collects itself (Heidegger (1966: 46).

Calculative thinking has resulted in the impoverishment of thinking. The man has lost his roots, which Heidegger calls 'autochotony'⁶. The Being has been forgotten and we are totally involved with the things. It has resulted in the loss of essence

for humans which is fundamentally to remain in the openness of beings.

According to Heidegger, the only value which the technological age promotes is manipulation and control. Therefore the crisis of Truth in the digital age has to be more seen as the result of the enframing tendency of the technological age which converts every aspect of our life in terms of calculation and control. The value of friendship can be calculated through the number of likes and comments made online; the validity of news depends on how frequently it has been shared among the people. In other words, everything including relationships and values is now available for counting and calculating.

Heidegger proposes that the way out is not to give up technology but recognizing the danger of its Enframing nature. We should realize how the enframing of the technological age is closing off our more open relationship with the world. As such, it is taking away the essence of man and reduces it in terms of calculable resources. There are various modes by which the world can be seen and interpreted like poetic, religious, aesthetic but technological age impresses its particular way to see the world. This is the kind of overriding influence of technology on human life.

Truth and Ontology

Hence the crisis in Truth is induced by our particular age which is technological. Its emphasis is on converting everything into the calculable entity. Heidegger, therefore, calls for a more primordial relationship with Truth which he explains through his novel conception of Being. According to Heidegger, the fundamental mistake of the western philosophical discourse is to reduce the Being into an entity. The metaphysical tradition calls it as Idea, God or presence (Heidegger (2002)). As a result of it, Truth has become propositional as it can be demonstrated through the logical procedure. The propositional conception of Truth presupposes rational subjects which logically distinguish

between the truth and falsehood. The propositional nature of Truth makes scientific truth as its model and relies on it for its validation.

The crisis in Truth which we see now after the upsurge of the social media and internet is fundamentally the crisis of the procedure whereby we reach to the Truth. Every 'fake news' now provides the twisted data, false references and concocted facts for confusing the person. As our rational capacity has been trained to interpret the truth as fact so the fake news or propaganda machine always gives access to the 'undisclosed facts' to propagate their version of truth. This shapes the opinion of some people and the debate now shifts from truth to interpretation. It is therefore more important to give ontological value to the truth than merely providing the function of intellectual clarity. Truth is significant because it gives meaning to my existence by giving it coherence. In the absence of coherence, our life loses its significance and value. Therefore, Truth has existential bearing on humans and restores its essence. Therefore, Heidegger tries to explore the essence of human nature in his work but this essence is not something teleological which defines the purpose of human life. Rather the essence restores the 'place' of humans and brings him to the openness.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger's analysis of Death shows the specific characteristic of humans in relationship with death, viz., its ability to be singular, to individuate itself. Everyday life covers up the authentic dimension of its being, where it let itself go in the publicness. The self of everyday is therefore inauthentic, unowned. According to Heidegger, we tend to flee from ourselves as it is more comfortable to us. On the one hand, inauthenticity enables us to be part of the intersubjective community, which Heidegger calls as *they*. But on the other hand, it conceals the fundamental truth about our own being. However, in the ontological mood of anxiety, we realize that the public world loses into insignificance and we cannot respond to this situation through 'chattering', viz. through everyday discourse. We try to evade it by losing ourselves in the everydayness again. However, the fundamental

attunement of anxiety discloses the real possibility of Dasein's being. Dasein's essence gets manifested during anxiety, where it can really 'own' up itself (Heidegger (1962). This owning up oneself makes Dasein authentic. The real possibility of Dasein lies in the authentic moment where it is no longer covered by the everyday chattering. We can also say that the everyday self is not the 'free' self. Its choices, decisions and opinions are shaped by the socio-cultural ethos. The depth or authenticity requires a breakdown of the everydayness. Dasein should be exposed to the situation where all the entities of the world whether present-at-hand or ready-to-hand lose into insignificance. Only in the rare mood of anxiety, the real possibility of Dasein comes up. The possibility of freedom can only be encountered in these moments.

According to Heidegger, the true possibility of freedom lies not in doing something but in transcending it. The possibility of this transcendence realizing our essential relationship with Being. Being reveals the original nature of man which is poetic and non-appropriating. The obsession with representing everything through language has made us lose our essence and which is now culminating in a technological age where even humans are also turning into resources. According to Heidegger, this can only be possible through the return to poetic thinking. Poetic thinking restores the essence of humans and helps them to overcome the obsession with calculative thinking. Heidegger gives importance to poetic thinking because it reveals the qualities which are necessary for letting truth to emerge. Heidegger calls Truth as *Alethia*, unconcealment (Heidegger 2004). This brings the altogether different notion of truth as Truth can happen though passivity rather than the emphasis on the logical procedure. Such kind of truth affirms the internal validity rather than the external procedure for establishing the truth.

Conclusion

Heidegger's notion of *alethia* as truth highlights the existential importance of Truth. Truth does not only have the epistemological

function. This is due to our obsession with ‘knowing’ and representing rather than ‘experiencing’ which involves the whole of our being. There are other ways of knowing as well as practical knowing, aesthetic experience, religious experience etc. The truth of these experiences requires the internal validity rather than adhering to some logical procedure.

Technological age has dislodged the things from their essence and turned everything into the usable resource. While the hard and mighty technology of the modern age has alienated the people, the soft postmodern technologies like smartphones, social networking promises joy and fulfilment. However, obsession with these technologies has been gradually eroding the need of an embodied mode of interaction and therefore blunting our reflective capacity. Particularly, technology is reducing the multiple ways of experiencing the world in to a typecast manner. This is the encroachment of the ‘tech-power’ in our life which has now become the dominant way of interpreting the world. Heidegger’s invoking of ‘poetic thinking’ shows the way to restore the essence of man which lies in wonder and openness towards existence.

(Acknowledgments: Author acknowledges the support from Tata Trusts for funding the research project in NIAS which sustained this research)

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Notes

1. The notion of ‘enlarged mentality’ has been used here in the context of Hannah Arendt who argues that the true political thought should be more representative and it can only be possible when the persons involved have the ‘enlarged mentality’ i.e. to see the issue from the various possible ways. For details see Arendt (2003).
2. For example, thinkers like Jurgan Habermas give the idea of communicative rationality by which he believes that the reason will grow through mutual communication.
3. Kant in his second Critique explores the question of what motivates the reason to get involved into the domain of ethics? He argues that it is the ‘respect’ for the moral law. The respect for the moral law marks the transition from the pure reason to the practical reason. For details see Kant (1997).
4. Postmodern philosophers like Micheal Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze argue against the metanarratives of philosophy which produces the coherent and complete image of the philosophy.

They instead focus on the margins and differences which interrupts the self-sufficient image of the philosophy. See Mullarkey (2006) for the details on this point.

5. The idea of ethics has been developed significantly by Derrida who argues, following Levinas, that ethics is basically the infinite responsibility towards the other. Otherness has been defined as the limit of understanding, which defies any theoretical conceptualization. For details see Derrida (1982).
6. Heidegger defies human beings as the place where Being reveals itself. Since Being cannot be the metaphysical entity therefore it becomes the openness, a kind of clearing which gathers the world of humans. Humans must have the patience to let the Being emerge rather than in hurry to represent it through the concepts. Heidegger defines it through his notion of Gelassenheit, see Heidegger (1966).

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Article Recd: Nov 2, 2020

Article Accepted: Dec 22, 2020

No of Words: 3080



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