

TRUTH, VALUE AND POLITICS

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Abstract

Whether truth is independent of human perception or not is a matter of philosophical debate. But any idea, concept of truth or value should not really matter unless they have direct relationship to human life. We always have had multiple notions of truth and value. Attempts to universalise certain truth or value have been relentless and philosophical or ideological schools in the past have attempted to address universal concerns of human beings.

In the contemporary world, the endeavour to seek universal solutions to human problems have not ceased. Certain ideas and values do have if not universal but dominant appeal and legitimacy that shape lives of people. These values and notions of truth are products of circumstances and are not free from power and politics of our time.

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Introduction

Fact and morality are considered as most important elements of truth. While fact is all about what is, what exists and what is real, morality is understood mainly through notions of good and bad. The notions of good and bad are primarily concerned with the question of desirability. Wrong values and immoral acts or even thoughts are considered by many as opposite to truth. Some of Important thinkers in the past considered truth as a fixed notion which has to be discovered by human intelligence. Conformity or unity with this truth used to be considered as the highest value. Achievement of this, as they thought, would result in highest manifestation of human potential. Population's Idea about truth and value are crucial to any social arrangement and its sustenance. Thus, It is important to try to understand how a particular value gets societal approval, how notions of truths get shaped and how desires of people are created and altered.

Values in the Past and Present

It is well known that in the course of history many non-facts were perceived as facts. Also many episodes of history are considered as cruel, inhuman and undesirable in today's context which ironically took place for the sake of prevailing perception of morality and truth. Acts of killing, enslaving and torturing people through systemic methods were sometimes in conformity with the prevailing ethics. Slavery, suppression of women, religious wars and deprivation induced deaths are few examples to mention in this context. To be precise, many notions of truth in the past were illusory and some of the predominant concepts and practices of morality and ethics resulted in terrible sufferings of human beings. What we need to learn from history is that truth, morality and ethics both as concept and practice are social constructions and may be used as instruments of dehumanisation. For example, in one of his essays Bertrand Russel tells us how in the past the ethics of hard work was upheld and popularised by those who did not have to work at all, had all the leisures and thoroughly enjoyed industries of others by the virtue of their wealth. He also describes how the 'ethics of hard work' is linked with the practice of slavery and shows us that in modern times, our ethical endeavour should be towards leisure and freedom rather than hard work.

In the present era too, we do consider many concepts and practices as moral, truthful or normal. And most of the sufferings and violences occur partly because society in general considers

certain practices and structures as 'normal'. Dominant perception of what is normal and what is acceptable is sometimes the source of arrays of structural and direct instances of violence we witness. (Galtung, 1990) It is very likely that some of the accepted and legitimised practices of present may be rejected in the future.

However, the endeavour to understand the world and the efforts to transform it have always been associated with nuances of truth and values. Remarkable progress towards a better world has been made possible because of efforts in the past to know the 'truth' and create or realise better or correct 'values'. But on the other hand, if a seemingly 'true' or 'valuable' idea can actually be used for a derogatory practice then usefulness of a concept needs to be understood not by analysing its theoretical claim but by the result of its implementation.

Understanding of concepts should not be devoid of real life conditions and usefulness of an idea or a concept must not be accepted because of its abstract or so called inherent value. The 'value' of a concept is directly related to how it is used and in whose interest.

Universality and the Dichotomy

All most all religions propagate some idea of universal truth and value. Religions have profound influence in shaping perception and moral understanding of people all over the world though in different ways. In recent history, theories of liberalism and Marxism had tremendous influence in creating and popularising two different accounts of universalism. Both the schools of thought provide different accounts of truth, different sets of values and methods to realise those values. Both the theories claim universal validity and legitimacy and major economic and political happenings in the world in recent times have been influenced by principles of either of these theories.

For liberalism, by nature, any human is rational or conscious. And individuals by nature seek to maximise or attain values which are important to them. Since individuals know what is best for them, it is best for individuals to be left alone. An ideal society would be one where individuals get the liberty or freedom to exercise their own choices. In liberal tradition human freedom basically refers to liberty which very simply means when no external agency interferes in the

affairs of an individual unless he or she harms the interests of others. Right to equality in enjoying this liberty and the right to acquire property are crucial foundations upon which the whole liberal philosophy is based. Social and political arrangements are then needed so that rights and freedom of individuals are not violated. Political and economic arrangements of democracy and capitalism, it is understood, can only provide the needed freedom to the individual to be at his or her best self. Arrangements of democracy and capitalism are understood to deliver values or promises of liberalism and this belief is so widely accepted that it seems values of democracy and free market have almost universal legitimacy.

Rejecting liberal notion of human nature, abstract individualism and rationality etc. Marxism provides an alternative perspective on real essence of human being. Human essence for Marxism, is not a uniform and universal quality but an 'ensemble of socio-historical relations'(Byron, 2016). There is no scope for human beings to enjoy or express their essence in capitalism under conditions of alienation. According to Marxism, universal liberal values in capitalism and democracy like freedom, right and legal equality etc. are empty promises. In reality all the working people in the process of production are subjugated and exploited and their lives are reduced to a mere struggle for survival. Unlike liberalism, Marxism visualises a society where an individual is not exploited and enjoys true freedom as his or her actions and choices are not determined by the compulsion of survival but by creative freedom which according to Marxism is the essence of a human being. This shall be made possible, according to Marxism, by abolishing the institution of private property and by collective ownership and management of resources of society.

The post-war world was deeply divided between these two ideologies. The ideological division for a long time resulted in societies and governments either prioritising human need or freedom but not both. In the wake of Cold War, idea of human rights got popularity. Human rights project was supposed to have universal appeal and free from any prejudice; ideological or otherwise. But soon the project of human rights got bifurcated as the USA did not initially agree to recognise economic and social rights proposed by the then USSR to be human rights. In the later stage, the universality of human rights project was challenged. Claims emerged like the supposed universality of human rights actually put forward a European understanding of human nature and

society which was not applicable to other societies. Similarly, many activists argued that the 'universal' understanding of human rights ignored many aspects of women and was primarily based on the experience of men. Thus, the understanding of human rights too remain bifurcated and fractured.

The Role of Politics

Politics about a concept is about who uses it and in whose interest. Contradictory understandings claim universal validity and significance. If there are incompatible concepts and all have claims to universal validity then usefulness of an idea can be grasped in practice. This is applicable for the concepts of truth, value and ethics as well.

Majority of the population in the past for a long time believed certain ideas to be true or moral which helped the then power structures to maintain control over the society. Role of majority of intellectuals, priests and story writers etc. in medieval societies was to justify the validity and usefulness of the prevailing societal and political arrangements. As long as ideas propagated by power were accepted by people, institutions of power were safe. The same is true in the contemporary times too. As Gramsci observes 'man is not ruled by force alone but also by ideas'(Bates, 1975). If people accept the ideas propagated by power it becomes much easier to rule. In general people in a particular era tend to accept the values propagated by institutions of power. Injustice and suffering prolong as long as people do not question usefulness of their societal arrangements and the legitimacy of the institutions of power. Oppression and sufferings of people continue not because of fear of physical force as much as due to the legitimacy of oppressive values and practices in a society. By 'internalising the values or image of the oppressor' (Freire., 2005) the oppressed accepts what he or she receives through education and information and in process aspires to be like the oppressor. In the contemporary world too, what we dominantly receive in the form of information, truth or value are actually 'manufactured' and 'constructed'(Herman1988). And the notions of truth and value are not free from interests of power. The ideological conflict between Marxism and liberalism had actually more to do with geopolitical interests of the erstwhile USSR and the USA than ideological conflict for their respective values. Oppressive regimes have used concepts from either of the theories to justify their existence and practice. There are instances in past where, lives of people have been

systematically destroyed in the name of freedom and ideal of equality has been used to subjugate people by different regimes.

In the post Cold War era , ideas of human rights, globalisation and civil society got prominence. End of Cold War was celebrated as victory of the ideology of liberalism and democracy. Not long ago, all most all the intellectuals and media houses proposed that the end of Cold War had offered an opportunity for global peace and global economic development. It was claimed that freedom and human rights of all in the world would enhance under the conditions of globalisation and global civil society. In reality however, processes of globalisation destroyed states' economic capacities and unemployment and poverty increased in most of the places in the world. Dominant project of human rights, democracy and civil society in fact helped to legitimise global expansion of market forces and their pursuit of profit. (Evans, 2005) Thus, it was generally propagated that human rights can only be protected in a democracy and in practice a state was considered to be undemocratic if it did not adhere to the principles of globalisation and free market. The present trend of protectionism especially in the USA which few years back championed cause of free market and globalisation prove that dominant understanding and usage of truth and value has more to do with power and interest than philosophical or conceptual value.

Conclusion

There is no abstract or unquestionable validity of any concept. The validity or utility of a concept must be tested in practice and action. A critical understanding of our real life conditions, the practice that sustains these conditions and how the concepts of truth and value are being used in this practice may help to grasp the dynamics of social and political constructions of truth and value. Meaning and implications of truth and value may change depending on who uses these concepts and for whose interest.

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