

Believing Truth

Michael Polanyi's conception of truth as an antidote to post-truth

by

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ABSTRACT

Post-truth has recently become a popular term. Scholars conceive of post-truth in a myriad of ways, but mainly as epistemic dysfunction, requiring explanation and novel solutions. This thesis aims to determine whether Michael Polanyi's conception of truth proves antidotal to the problem of post-truth.

In order to test this hypothesis, I first examined post-truth by studying its manifestations, supposed origins and the proposed solutions to post-truth. The results showed that post-truth manifests mainly in the breakdown of social trust, that its origins are disputable but can arguably be found within recent technological and sociological developments and that most proposed solutions adhere to critical thought – a focus on radical doubt, suspicion and objectiveness.

Then, I inquired into Polanyi's thought in order to extract his conception of truth. In order to accomplish this I studied his works, mainly the books *Personal Knowledge* and *Science, Faith and Society*, as well as interpretations of Polanyi scholars. I found that Polanyi's conception of truth is complex. It culminates in *contact with reality*, implying that truth is only partially knowable. The driving force towards truth is belief, manifest in the framework of commitment.

The results suggest that Polanyi exposes a large epistemological gap in the proposed solutions for PT, since the proposed solutions are unable to deal with the role of passion, belief and emotion in epistemic inquiry. Additionally, Polanyi's conception of truth partially explains the breakdown of social trust, but doesn't provide a direct antidote. On this basis, I find that Polanyi's conception of truth offers clues for an antidote to post-truth, but doesn't provide a direct and ready-made solution.

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GLOSSARY

Contact with Reality	A Polanyian term that, lying at the heart of his epistemology, implies that reality harbors unnamable and unexpected possibilities. When we make contact with reality, it unfolds and manifests unforeseen consequences.
Deepfake	Synthetic media in which existing footage of a person is replaced with someone else's likeness by use of machine learning, artificial intelligence and neural networks.
Epistemic context	The context in which knowledge is gained. An <i>epistemic context</i> has its own cultural and intellectual heritage as well as epistemic obligations. Assenting to these obligations yields justified beliefs.
Fake News	Dis- or misinformation being presented as real news.
Fiduciary Mode	An idea in Polanyi's philosophy. A way of making statements about reality starting with "...I believe that...", thereby accounting for the inherently personal character of knowledge and stressing the importance of personal responsibility when stating beliefs.
Focal Awareness	Conscious perception that the individual can directly access. <i>Focal awareness</i> is always mutually exclusive to <i>subsidiary awareness</i> .
Indwelling	The act of becoming subsidiarily aware of an instrument or framework. See <i>subsidiary awareness</i> .
Personal Knowledge	The title of Michael Polanyi's <i>magnum opus</i> . With this description of knowledge, Polanyi tries to account for the passionate participation of intellectual powers in the act of knowing.
Post-Critical	A Polanyian term denoting the style of his epistemology, trying to envision an alternative to modernity's devotion to critical thought.
Post-Truth	An ambiguous and convoluted term that generally implies the disappearance of shared objective standards of truth, the breakdown of social trust or the increasingly influential role of appeals to emotion and personal belief in shaping public opinion.
Social Trust	Belief in the honesty, integrity and reliability of other people and overarching institutions.
Subsidiary Awareness	The subsidiary plays an instrumental role in understanding and perceiving a focal aspect, like a telescope with which we study the heavens, or when using the doctrine of the trinity to speak about God. In these cases, we are subsidiarily aware of respectively the telescope or the doctrine. <i>Subsidiary awareness</i> is always mutually exclusive to <i>focal awareness</i> .

1 INTRODUCTION

Nearly 2000 years ago, we find Pontius Pilate questioning Jesus' claim that He is witness to the truth, by asking Him the famous question: "What is truth?" Later that day, Jesus would be crucified as an innocent man. The Truth itself was violated, beaten and killed – but rose again on the third day. A few centuries later, Augustine bolstered Christianity towards a philosophically resilient religion. He envisions the trinitarian God as the ultimate source of supra-rational Truth. Only when Christ is present in our soul, we are able to understand truthfully.¹ The divine became fundamental to truth. In the late nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche questioned the *value* of truth.² He wrestled with the issues that arise when one detaches truth from the divine. In order to deal with the death of God, he argues to use the word *truthfulness* instead. For him, truth was no longer strongly correlated to the divine, but instead became a measure of strength and power. How does the idea of truth fare in contemporary society?

1.1 RELEVANCE

Nowadays, when a man like Donald Trump argues about the size of his inauguration crowd, the realness of COVID-19 on the basis of alternative facts or even claims former president Obama to be the founder of the Islamic State³ – facts seem to become irrelevant, for all that matters is the narrative and your feelings about it. Or, think of a Dutch politician like Thierry Baudet, who calls the debate on corona a circus⁴ and actively discredits expert opinion on the matter. The neologism 'post-truth' has been coined in order to describe phenomena like these. From now on, when speaking about post-truth, I will use the abbreviation 'PT'. In 2016 PT was dubbed Oxford Dictionaries' word of the year, as well as gaining attention by scholars, popular authors and in political debate. In the past decade gobs of books and articles on the subject have appeared, with ringing titles like *The Death of Truth* or *Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World*. PT is often associated with politics – dubbed PT-politics - and polarized political beliefs. Additionally, contemporary technological developments in the digital sphere such as *Deepfakes* and *Artificial Intelligence* seem to go hand-in-hand with PT, for these developments alter our trust in the reliability of sensory perception. The idea of an absolute truth, related to the divine, seems to be dwindling nowadays and might be replaced by personal truths based

¹ Augustine, *The Teacher*, 38-39.

² Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 9.

³ Siddiqui, 'Donald Trump calls Obama the 'founder of Isis'', <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/aug/11/donald-trump-calls-barack-obama-the-founder-of-isis>

⁴ AD, 'Thierry Baudet over corona: 'Er is geen reet aan de hand'', <https://www.ad.nl/video/productie/thierry-baudet-over-corona-er-is-geen-reet-aan-de-hand-236995>

on feelings and whim. Developments like these make PT a relevant and present-day subject. It requires an explanation and, if PT poses real problems, it also requires real solutions. The aim of this thesis is to provide an explanation as well as a solution to PT by use of the thought of Michael Polanyi, a chemist turned philosopher, who conceived of a novel idea of truth embedded in *personal knowledge*. Truth has been one of the major topics in philosophy, from Plato who stated the theory of forms, to Foucault who held that truth manifests in *regimes* embedded in structures of power. In this thesis, I will use Polanyi's philosophy, which characterized by attention for the personal aspect in epistemic activity, as well as integration of subsidiary and focal awareness when searching for truth. I will research whether Polanyi's conception of truth can provide an adequate solution to the problem of PT. This hypothesis prompts the central question of this thesis:

Does Polanyi's conception of truth offer an antidote to post-truth?

In the following part I will explain the method which I employ in order to answer this central question adequately.

1.2 METHOD

Before diving into the theory, I want to explain the method I use in this thesis. The objective of this thesis is to construct an answer to the central question mentioned above. In order to achieve this objective, I have structured my thesis into three main parts. This research will be conducted as qualitative research, since it involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data such as texts and video in order to understand concepts and problems and to propose solutions to these problems.

In the first part, I analyze PT by distributing its many sources in three modi of being – the epistemological, the fiduciary and the ethical. I will then evaluate the proposed reactions to PT and assess the proposed origins of PT. This first part culminates in an answer to the first subquestion of this thesis:

What is the problem of post-truth?

This first subquestion is *descriptive* in nature; it aims to describe the perceived problems of the phenomenon PT. In the answer to this subquestion I will take into account the ambiguity of the term PT as well as an evaluation of the proposed solutions to PT. When answering this question, I take into account the fact that PT has been coined recently and thus might still be undergoing conceptual reform.

In the second part, I examine Polanyi's philosophy. The objective of this second part is to provide an answer to the second subquestion of this thesis:

What is Michael Polanyi's conception of Truth?

This second subquestion is also *descriptive* in nature, since it aims to describe Michael Polanyi's conception of truth. I will tackle this topic by first elaborating on the characterization of Polanyi's thought as *post-critical*, thereby placing his thought in the correct historical and philosophical context. Subsequently I will discuss his fundamental idea of *personal knowledge* which in turn leads to the heart of his epistemology, which we find with the notion of *contact with reality*. We will find out that truth, in Polanyian terms, is discovered and grasped by belief manifest in the framework of commitment.

Finally, in the third part, I synthesize both previous subquestions and formulate an answer to the central question that prompted this thesis:

Does Polanyi's conception of truth offer an antidote to post-truth?

The central question of this thesis is of *comparative* and of *evaluating* nature; the aim of the central question is to compare the problem of PT with Polanyi's account of truth, while also evaluating the strength of Polanyi's account of truth in combating the problem of PT. I will answer this question by comparing the first and second subquestion. This means I will compare my concept of the problem of PT with my concept of Michael Polanyi's idea of truth. I evaluate whether Polanyi's conception of truth actually connects to the problem of PT, or whether they pass each other without touching. By comparing the data I have gathered I will ultimately come to a well-balanced answer to this question.

2 PART 1: THE PROBLEM OF POST-TRUTH

In this chapter I will seek to find an answer to the first subquestion of this thesis: *What is the problem of post-truth?* This question will be addressed systematically. First, I will start with an introduction, in which I will elaborate on some complications regarding the study of post-truth (which I will refer to as 'PT' from now on), as well as further explanation on my method and process. Then, a compact overview of present discourse and definitions of PT is provided. Following this overview, I will illustrate PT by use of the *epistemological, fiduciary* and *ethical mode*. Consecutively, I will portray the proposed reactions on the problem of PT bilaterally as either *denialistic* or *confrontational*, as well as analyze and evaluate these proposed reactions. After this analysis and evaluation, I will turn to the proposed origins of PT. Authors have set forth a number of possible origins. I have chosen to discuss three of them; *postmodernism, contemporary* origins and the ideas of *Nietzsche*. When my depiction of these origins is resolved, I will evaluate them and make my own choice in the matter. Finally, I will conclude this chapter with a summary, concluding remarks and an answer to the question that prompted this chapter.

2.1 INTRODUCTION ON POST-TRUTH

There are a number of complications that arise when studying PT. First of all, PT is a concept that was coined recently⁵ and quickly rose to fame after *Oxford Dictionaries* coronated it 'Word of the Year 2016', where it was given this definition: "*Post-truth is an adjective defined as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.'*"⁶ Because of the recent upsurge of the use of this concept and because I am describing contemporary phenomena it is complicated to justify a certain description of PT. The term is not as fixed yet as other concepts which have been around for a longer time. Another complication arises when we find out that authors, who use the term PT, do so in varying ways with a myriad of definitions. It also seems that PT is a western-oriented notion, for it is almost exclusively used in the European, Australian or American context. These are countries with a shared cultural heritage which emphasizes enlightenment ideals and a (post-) Christian culture. PT is hardly ever mentioned in Asian, African or South American contexts. These continents not being mentioned doesn't mean that PT is reserved for western countries, but methodological soundness requires me to assume here that PT is aligned with western culture.

⁵ For the first use of the term post-truth according to the contemporary meaning see: Tesich, 'A Government of Lies', <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/A+government+of+lies.-a011665982>

⁶ OxfordLanguages, 'Word of the Year 2016', <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/>

To able myself to describe and explain PT accurately, succinctly and in a coherent manner, I will use a categorization that honors the context in which PT is used, while simultaneously trying to transcend the context in order to provide a clear-cut meta-analysis. I will try to reach beyond the ‘symptoms’ of PT as seen in media, politics, science and societies. This description will be based on three *modi* of being as described in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication: Post-Truth and Critical Communication Studies* by Jayson Harsin.⁷ The aim of using this arrangement in three *modi* is not to work out a complete philosophical conceptual analysis, but to provide a way to arrange and distinguish the abundance of sources regarding PT. The three *modi* in question are the *epistemological*, *fiduciary* and *ethical* mode. I choose this blueprint because it allows me to order and structure the many different sources regarding PT in a clear manner. It also builds on the previous research of Harsin, who can be regarded as somewhat of an authority on the concept of PT.

So, the first operating mode of PT is the *epistemological* mode. Examples of this mode can be seen in competing truth-claims and the assertion of unfounded and unwarranted knowledge. A central theme in the study of epistemology is the nature and justification of knowledge in a fully general manner. Tension arises rapidly when PT is introduced; if epistemology ascribes to truth as being “the body of real things, event and facts”⁸ and “the property of being in accord with fact or reality”⁹, this description will collide with instances of PT such as competing truth-claims and poor esteem of a shared reality and communal facts.

The second operating mode of PT, the *fiduciary* mode, has much to do with trust and confidentiality. It’s interesting that Polanyi also uses the term *fiduciary* extensively in his philosophy, though I will come back to his conception of the fiduciary later. Nowadays most commonly used as a nominative in concepts of law and organization, the word ‘fiduciary’ can and will be used as an adjective in this thesis, meaning trust or confidence. In PT, this mode is characterized by a general decline of social trust. Until the 60’s and 70’s of the twentieth century the trust and perceived credibility of religions, overarching institutions and grand narratives was relatively high, after which this trust slowly started eroding. This erosion can be seen as a trademark of postmodernism. PT seems to valorize more extreme instances of this decline of trust such as *fake news*, a disintegrated media landscape and *alternative facts*. These notions can be used to provide justification for a divergent narrative. The problem arises not with the rise of divergent narratives, since those narratives are essential for a

⁷ Harsin, Jayson, ‘Post-Truth and Critical Communication Studies’, 5.

⁸ Merriam-Webster, ‘Definition of truth’, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/truth>

⁹ Ibid.

functioning democracy but insurmountable problems seem to arise when a certain common ground starts slipping away, and a loss of a shared perception of truth, justice and beauty is felt.

The third operating mode in which I will distribute sources regarding PT is the *ethical* mode. By ethical I don't mean or intend to shape a general meta-ethics of PT. Rather, my aim with this ethical mode is to accommodate for the *moral* aspect of PT; the intentions, decisions and actions which can be distinguished between proper and improper, vice and virtue or even good and evil. Some first-hand examples of PT phenomena in the ethical mode are intentional disregard for factual evidence, the creation of falsehoods and insolent lying and dishonesty. Before we dive into an analysis of PT in the three modi, I will give an overview of the present discourse on PT in the following part.

2.2 PRESENT DISCOURSE

Before I will discuss PT in the framework of the epistemological, fiduciary and ethical mode, I will provide a brief overview of the different descriptions of PT as available in contemporary literature, in order to get a 'taste' of present discourse.

Most authors conceive of PT as a relatively neoteric phenomenon. "We have entered a new phase of political and intellectual combat (...) Rationality is threatened by emotion, diversity by nativism, liberty by a drift towards autocracy. Science is treated with suspicion and, sometimes, open contempt. At the heart of this global trend is a crash in the value of truth, comparable to the collapse of a currency or a stock.", D'Ancona writes.¹⁰ Or, as Lewandowsky does, conceive of a society in which "...experts are derided as untrustworthy or elitist whenever their reported facts threaten the rule of the well-financed or the prejudices of the uninformed."¹¹

McIntyre provides a more epistemological definition in his book *Post-Truth* for he asserts that the core of PT is "...the overarching idea that—depending on what one wants to be true—some facts matter more than others."¹² Think of people only accepting facts that justify their own ideology while simultaneously doubting contradictory facts *ad extremum*.

Harsin, however, rejects the idea that selective apprehension of facts is a distinct aspect of PT, for he argues that PT is ultimately "...a breakdown of social trust"¹³, effectively moving PT towards the social sphere. Another more 'social' definition of PT is found with Waisbord, who holds that PT "...captures new conditions for public communication that signal the impossibility of truth as shared assessments

¹⁰ D'Ancona, *Post truth: the new war on truth and how to fight back*, 11.

¹¹ Lewandowsky e.a., 'Beyond Misinformation: Understanding and coping with the post-truth era', 5.

¹² McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 10.

¹³ Harsin, 'Post-Truth and Critical Communication Studies', 1.

about reality. (...) It lays bare the crashing down of the modern, rationalist model of a well-defined, accepted model of truth-telling grounded in reason and science.”¹⁴

In other words: speaking about truth requires shared norms in the understanding of reality. If those norms diverge too much - a development Waisbord attributes to PT - we won't be able to speak meaningfully about truth anymore.

Stuart Sim defines PT from the sphere of power. For him, it is all about “...establishing a worldview and then refusing to back down from it, or accept any evidence that questions its rightness (...) Ultimately, PT is about exerting power and control over others...”¹⁵ James Ball echoes these findings when he claims that a state of PT is reached when “...public discourse is simply a clash of competing narratives: a contest which can then be won by the side willing to make the boldest plays towards emotion and mass-appeal...”¹⁶

Summarized, when we take a glance at contemporary literature on PT, we find a gamut of definitions and descriptions. I hope to provide more clarity in the following chapters, in which I will try to systematize the literature on PT in the epistemological, fiduciary and ethical mode.

¹⁴ Waisbord, 'The elective affinity between post-truth communication and populist politics', 3.

¹⁵ Sim, *Post-Truth, Scepticism & Power*, 13-14.

¹⁶ Ball, *Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World*, 205.

2.3 THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL MODE OF POST-TRUTH

In this chapter I will discuss PT as it seems to present itself in the epistemological mode. With epistemological mode I mean the relationship between PT and knowledge as well as the relationship between PT and sources of knowledge such as perception, reason, memory and testimony. Questions regarding PT and *belief* will be discussed in the following chapter, 'the fiduciary mode of post-truth'. I will start by drafting some epistemic developments from the enlightenment to more recent times, thereby constructing the epistemic décor. This will serve as the contextual background when illustrating the epistemological mode of PT. Then I will discuss, in the part 'perception in a digital age', the influence of technological developments when conceiving of truth. Subsequently I will consider the relationship between politics and PT. Finally, I will make some concluding remarks.

2.3.1 Epistemic décor

I want to start painting the epistemic décor with Immanuel Kant, who suggested that reality *an sich* can't be perceived, because the human mind needs the concepts of time, space and causation to make sense of reality. This doctrine, called *transcendental idealism*, essentially states that we can't cognize things as they are in themselves, but merely cognize the things by the appearances they impose on our senses. His ideas played an important role in enlightenment epistemology. Empiricist ideas, like those of Locke and Hume, were also developed in this era. Empiricists regarded perception by the senses as the optimal source of knowledge. Enlightenment epistemology can accordingly be characterized by an emphasis on empiric perception, doubt and rationality as well as advancement of the natural sciences.¹⁷

From Kant, Locke and Hume we leap towards postmodern epistemology. With postmodern I imply philosophers such as Wittgenstein, (parts of) Heidegger, Rorty and Kuhn. It's here that epistemic differences appear. We find a turn towards the language-game with Wittgenstein, who is emphasizing the importance of language when making epistemological statements. Heidegger lectures us about the subject as *Dasein*, who is making sense of the world and acquiring knowledge of it by means of being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*). A pragmatic approach, in which values like truth, justice and knowledge are historically contingent and dependent on their utility, was developed by Rorty. The importance of paradigm shifts in science was elaborated by Kuhn, making truth *de facto* relative to the reigning paradigm. Postmodern epistemology is thus characterized by ideas like subjectivity, constructivism and pragmatism.

¹⁷ Bristow, "Enlightenment", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/enlightenment/#TruSciEpiMetEnl>

Summarized, the way we nowadays conceive of ideas like knowledge, truth and justification is related to historical developments in epistemology. When we take a closer look at PT in this chapter and in the following chapters, we will recognize both typical enlightenment as well as postmodern epistemological values.

2.3.2 Perception in a digital age

When we refer back to the definition of PT as defined by Oxford Dictionaries, we find that objective facts are deemed less influential than appeals to emotion and personal belief. This leads me to question the role of facts in the context of PT. When questioning someone in what way facts are established, many people will probably point at the role of perception by the senses. However, perception by the senses as a reliable way to knowledge has become increasingly difficult in a digital age. The evidentiality of empirical data seems to be dwindling. Take, for example, video images: those used to be seen as a 'sacred' and almost direct view into reality – a direct representation of an actual state of affairs. "It must be true If I see it with my own eyes and hear it with my own ears", was often said. Times have changed however, as trust in video is eroding quickly as a result of technological developments such as deepfakes, computational creativity and synthetic media, leading to distrust of video footage. Sophisticated special effects, which used to be reserved for Hollywood with its budget of millions, have been made publicly available and affordable by the use of A.I. – a democratization of synthetic technologies. The distrust following these advancements seems warranted: if we find out that video footage can be faked by anyone and convincingly so, we might reach a state of mind in which any footage can be deemed delusive.¹⁸

The internet brought an overwhelming amount of information to the individual, which resulted in the individual sheltering himself in *news silos* or *echo chambers* – online spaces in which beliefs are amplified by repetition inside a closed system, immune to rebuttal. Users retreat into these online spaces, both by choice as well as nudged by algorithms who recommend specific news stories or videos. When people seek for facts and knowledge in these secluded groups, they might become detached from society. One could of course argue that groups outperform individuals when searching for truth – after all, persons operating in a group might complement each other as well as detect epistemic blind spots. McIntyre asserts that because groups are often better at problem-solving than individuals, it is essential to subject "...our ideas to the scrutiny of others."¹⁹ The problem however, according to McIntyre, emanates from the "...luxury of choosing our own selective interactions."²⁰

¹⁸ VPRO Tegenlicht, *Zien is Geloven*, 16:40 – 19:30.

<https://www.vpro.nl/programmas/tegenlicht/kijk/afleveringen/2020-2021/zien-is-geloven.html>

¹⁹ McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 59.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 60.

We wind up in *echo chambers* and *news silos* and surround ourselves with like-minded others, which ultimately renders the group advantage in search for truth into a severe handicap.²¹

Another problem of acquiring news and facts in a digital age is the sheer volume of available sources. According to Kakutani, the enormous size of the world wide web enables individuals to “...cherry-pick facts or nonfacts that support their own point of view”, which in turn leads to “...academics and amateurs alike to find material to support their theories rather than examining empirical evidence to come to rational conclusions.”²²

2.3.3 The political context

Many authors place PT in the context of the political²³, where it is often referred to as *post-truth politics*. These politics are represented by appeals to emotion which are disconnected from policy details and the repeating of talking points. However, the relationship between politics and facts has been dubious for some time already. More than fifty years ago, Hannah Arendt already pinpointed the problematic relationship between truth and politics in her 1967 eponymous essay *Truth and Politics* and in her 1971 essay *Lying in Politics*. In these writings she argues that we’ve never been able to expect truth from politicians anyway, since truth-tellers reside outside the political realm - “...the conflict between truth and politics arose out of two diametrically opposed ways of life – the life of the philosopher, as interpreted first by Parmenides and then by Plato, and the way of life of the citizen.”²⁴ These two both have a different aim: the philosopher is searching for truth and wants to find out how the world *is*. The citizen, who represents the political, is concerned with shaping the world and changing it in a certain way. Arendt distinguishes different kinds of truth, because to her, *the Truth* doesn’t exist; truth only exists in reference to something particular. In the context of PT, we should take a glance at her concept of ‘factual truth’ – the artifacts of living together in society which are needed for a common ground to stand on and are political by nature. Think of events like the second world war or the Brexit, think of monuments like Leopold II’s statue in Belgium or the Dam Square in Amsterdam and consider the Sinterklaas tradition in the Netherlands.

Arendt is worried, however, that factual truth may not survive the onslaught of power, since “Facts and events are infinitely more fragile things than axioms, discoveries, theories – even the most wildly speculative ones – produced by the human mind; they occur in the field of the ever-changing affairs of men, in whose flux there is nothing more permanent than the admittedly relative permanence of the human mind’s structure.”²⁵ What do Arendt’s observations imply for the context of PT? At first,

²¹ McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 60.

²² Kakutani, *The Death of Truth*, 54.

²³ Cf. Davies, ‘The Age of Post-Truth Politics’, D’Ancona, *Post-Truth: the new war on truth*, 17.

²⁴ Arendt, *Truth and Politics*, 232-233.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 296.

we might gain a better understanding of PT by historical perspective; facts have always been politicized, uncomfortable events written out of history books - like the Turks have done with the Armenian Genocide, and monuments are still being toppled.

Factual truths, events that happened and monuments that were raised, are often instrumentalized and being used for political gain. This 'abuse' of factual truths is arguably as old as politics itself, so we shouldn't be surprised when we see it happen nowadays. Thus, recent abuse of factual truths provides no excuse to dub said events PT. This leads me to conclude that characterizing PT as mainly political is inaccurate, for truth and politics have always been at odds.

2.3.4 Concluding the epistemological mode of post-truth

Summarized, we find that the emphasis on empirical perception as propagated by enlightenment epistemology is increasingly being deconstructed as a result of technological developments that fool the senses by fabricating a reality that presents itself as authentic but in fact isn't. To speak with Baudrillard, "...simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum..."²⁶, rendering reality, originality and truth a meaningless concept, since the distinction between reality and representation vanishes. Additionally, the internet has spawned *news silos* and *echo chambers*, effectively hindering the epistemic agent in his or her search of truth. With Hannah Arendt, we find that politics and truth have always been at odds. Hence, episodes of lying in politics are not signs of PT but rather a manifestation of the inherent incompatibility of politics and truth. In the next part I will discuss the second mode of PT – the fiduciary.

²⁶ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 6.

2.4 THE FIDUCIARY MODE OF POST-TRUTH

In this chapter I will elaborate on PT in the context of the fiduciary mode. With fiduciary mode I mean the relationship between PT on the one hand and the notions of trust, belief and assurance on the other hand. I want to introduce this chapter with a very important question that we have to ask in the context of the fiduciary mode; Who or what do people trust, and *why* do they trust that source as being reliable and trustworthy? The importance of this question lies in the fact that the perceived reality of many, if not all people, is influenced significantly by sources they trust and reckon being reliable. On the 6th of January 2021 a crude case of this problem eventuated in the storming of the United States Capitol, resulting in five deaths and many more injuries.²⁷ The perpetrators were an angry mob of Trump supporters who were fueled by the false claim that the elections were stolen. They *trusted* their president and were willing to violate the law. In this chapter I will consider two indicative traits of the fiduciary mode of PT; (dis)trust and emotion. I choose these two traits because they seem to be the most prevalent in literature on PT in the fiduciary mode.

2.4.1 Distrust

The first trait I want to discuss is distrust. Disintegration of the trust people place in others, in institutions and in leaders has been mentioned as a characteristic feature of PT. At the deepest level, Jayson Harsin considers PT to be the breakdown of *social trust*.²⁸ This portends that former major institutional truth-tellers - like the church, the scientific community and governments – are no longer the gatekeepers of truth. Still, our knowledge is mostly determined by that which is accepted as popular truth, and thus based on those who we trust. Harsin considers decline of trust in these traditional truth-tellers as a hallmark of PT. He argues that this decline of social trust was mostly caused by political developments encompassing a professionalization of communication and upsurge in political marketing, resulting in emotion and attention management, while neglecting policy education and exchanging arguments with the electorate.²⁹ In other words: politicians' communication with the public turned from a serious exchange of arguments to entertainment. Harsin additionally mentions that an important aspect of PT is sowing confusion, which makes it difficult to discern different strands of information and subsequently making an informed choice.³⁰ These arguments correlate with the fiduciary mode because they provide an explanation for the decay of trust in traditional truth-tellers and news sources.

²⁷ For a detailed investigative report, see: The New York Times, 'Day of Rage: How Trump Supporters Took the U.S. Capitol | Visual Investigations', <https://youtu.be/jWJVMoe7OY0>

²⁸ Harsin, Jayson, 'Post-Truth and Critical Communication Studies', 1.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 15-17.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 8-9.

The presence of confusion can generally be traced back to a notorious pair: *disinformation* and *misinformation*. Misinformation entails spreading inaccurate information without realizing its inaccuracy, while disinformation can be seen as deliberately spreading false information. With that many and different sources available, the public becomes increasingly suspicious of truth-tellers and tends toward a partisan epistemology, which renders knowledge subsidiary to the context in which said knowledge is attained. In other words: in the context of PT, truth is increasingly becoming context-dependent.

Additionally, it has been argued that suspicion of truth-tellers as being dishonest is indicative of PT.³¹ It's not just about the increasing variety of news sources and storytellers, but also about the increased distrust and suspicion people inhabit. Trusted authorities which are commonly shared in a society seem to decrease in number, resulting in political polarization. What could the cause be?

Ever since the upsurge of the internet, it has become increasingly easier for *individuals* to spread news. Before the internet, traditional media like radio, television and newspapers were the major sources of influence. It is no doubt that these sources had a certain degree of subjectiveness, but they seemed to share a common reality, a conjoined consensus and a common ground. These sources are not dependent on an individual's whim, but are mostly managed by corporations. This doesn't directly make them morally superior or better news sources. The point I want to make here is that the individualization of news sources by means of the internet resulted in a more fragmented media landscape. At times this leads to a single person emerging as more influential than an institution or broadcasting station – think of the number of followers some celebrities have. When many people trust this influential single person, he or she has a substantial impact on the perceived truth of the audience. Ergo, the ubiquity of the internet increased the impact of individuals on perceived truth *and* increased the number of truth-telling sources.

2.4.2 Emotion

The second trait of the fiduciary mode is emotion. While Harsin and Lewandowsky consider PT to be primarily about distrust, D'Ancona perceives PT to be a predominantly emotional phenomenon, since "...it concerns our attitude to truth, rather than truth itself."³² What does he mean by this? D'Ancona seems to focus on the emotional aspect of PT because he thinks that merely stating and repeating facts is not enough in combating PT. Facts are never perceived neutrally; when people perceive facts many other factors are taken into account. Think of the trustworthiness of the source that states the facts, the narrative in which the facts are embedded as well as individual concerns and interests.

³¹ Lewandowsky e.a., 'Beyond Misinformation: Understanding and coping with the post-truth era', 5.

³² D'Ancona, *Post truth: the new war on truth and how to fight back*, 71.

It makes all the difference in perception when facts contradict or affirm an individual's worldview. People simply don't register facts in the same way a machine does. Sim mentions that the *modus operandi* of PT is the faculty of emotions, and not reason, for PT is "...expressly designed to bypass your reasoning faculty, hence its appeal to the unscrupulous, who are out to arouse deep-seated prejudices that spring more from our emotions than our rational thought-processes."³³

The role of emotions in PT can also be psychologically explained in terms like *cognitive bias* and *ego defense*. This approach assumes that human beings are not as rational as they think they are, and that most people will go a long way to avoid psychic discomfort. The discomfort arises when we are confronted with information that conflicts with our beliefs. It can be extremely difficult to actually change these beliefs in the light of counterfactual evidence, especially considering factors like peer-pressure, pride – which is endangered when admitting mistakes – and confirmation bias. McIntyre argues that confirmation bias and the underlying mechanism of *motivated reasoning*³⁴ in particular make us vulnerable to those with a malicious agenda to push, and to those who are telling us what we *want* to hear.³⁵ Conceiving of human beings as biased by nature is found in more literature on PT. James Ball, for example, thinks that these tendencies are "...ingrained in our psyche – an underlying tendency in many of us to trust elaborate theories more than the institutions at the core of our nations."³⁶

When people's subjective reality starts to deviate too much from a common and shared reality, fueled by information which they perceive as reliable, dangerous situations might crop up with people living in 'alternative' realities. This observation, however, raises the question when one's reality deviates too much, or when someone is just being critical with justified distrust. How we can an individual, an organization or even a society separate the lunatic from the critic in this regard? I will leave this question for now, for the sake of efficiency, relevancy and length.

³³ Sim, *Post-Truth, Scepticism & Power*, 14.

³⁴ Kunda, 'The case for motivated reasoning', 494-495. "...a form of biased reasoning used to produce justifications that are desired rather than reflecting evidence."

³⁵ McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 60-62.

³⁶ Ball, *Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World*, 130.

According to Stuart Sim, truth and PT are opposed to each other as rationality and emotions are. He effortlessly makes the distinction: “Where no proof exists of a claim (and this applies to all areas of human activity, not just religion), and it can be proved not to have happened, then we are in the realm of post-truth.”³⁷ Sim argues that emotion in PT has its roots in religion, since the Bible, Qur’an or other sacred texts have to be taken as revealed truth and have to be believed despite any evidence on the contrary. Absolute certainty is required. For these reasons, Sim argues that faith and reason will ultimately not mingle and should be separated. He thinks that religion is based on post-truths and survives because it provides people with meaning and purpose.³⁸

2.4.3 Concluding the fiduciary mode of post-truth

Recapitulating this chapter, we have found that the fiduciary mode has everything to do with (dis)trust. Truth-telling has moved from the institutional to the personal realm, making truth increasingly context dependent. Emotions are often seen as a negative factor in epistemic activity and as an aggrandizing influence on PT. Scholars also claim that people are biased and quick to accept falsehoods which affirm their presuppositions. In the next chapter I will elaborate on the ethical mode of PT.

³⁷ Sim, *Post-Truth, Scepticism and Power*, 69-72.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 73-74.

2.5 THE ETHICAL MODE OF POST-TRUTH

In the ethical mode of PT, I am concerned with the moral implications of this mode. By moral I specifically mean the *mores*; the behavior, conduct and actions related to PT. It is ethical because this behavior and these actions are *judged* - they are deemed good or bad, false or wrong, rational or delusional. It is here that we make a move from the theoretical to conduct. In this chapter I will examine several authors who address PT in its practical and ethical elements. After this examination, I will provide a summary of these authors as well as my own thoughts on this element of PT.

2.5.1 The political

When giving practical examples of PT phenomena, a big deal of authors on PT point at the Trump presidency and its effects on American society.³⁹ They mention his lies about the size of his inauguration attendees, claims of ‘stolen elections’ and his denial of global warming. The frequent usage of these examples makes the notion of PT predominantly political and *americanized*. The first question I want to ask here is this: Are the moral effects of PT merely a political and American phenomenon, or is there more to it? When viewed from a moral point of view, PT is often associated with false statements, misrepresentations, misrecognition of facts or even blatant lies.⁴⁰ It’s about communication and the misuse of it. Buzzwords like *Fake News*, *Alternative Facts* and *Rumour Bombs* lie in the same semantic field. Some might claim that these buzzwords can be reclaimed by a single word; *a lie*. Harsin, however argues that these buzzwords – which he deems elements of PT – differ from plain lies. He argues that a lie is a deliberately false *statement*, while *fake news* or *alternative facts* “...suggest a story, an article (...) fake news is often characterized by a core falsehood surrounded by factual statements or details.”⁴¹ A rumour bomb – which extends the rumour into a political communication concept – differs from the lie in its scale and political nature.

According to McIntyre, postmodern relativism of the concept of truth made its way to ‘right-wing politicians’ and ‘other science deniers’, resulting in their viewpoint that science does not have a monopoly on the truth. In addition, McIntyre suspects that ‘right-wingers’ are using postmodern techniques to berate “...scientific claims that clash with their conservative ideology.”⁴² He argues that academic postmodernism has misfired since it was employed by ‘right-wing think tanks’ and started

³⁹ Cf. D’Ancona, *Post truth: the new war on truth and how to fight back*, 12-13; McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 2-6; Sim, *Post-Truth, Scepticism and Power*, 14-17.

⁴⁰ Cf. D’Ancona, *Post truth: the new war on truth and how to fight back*, 29; Nichols, *The Death of Expertise*, 112-115 and Higgins, ‘Post-Truth: a guide for the perplexed.’

⁴¹ Harsin, Jayson, “Post-Truth and Critical Communication Studies”, 8-11.

⁴² McIntyre. *Post-truth*, 140-141.

influencing the public, resulting in science denial and conspiracy theories. This led to the rise and importance of alternative media that asks: “If there is no truth and it is all just perspective, how can we really know anything? (...) Whose facts should be dominant?”⁴³

2.5.2 Cyberethics

Henry Ajder mentions the lack of ethical oversight concerning the development of new synthetic technologies such as deepfakes, which are indirectly contributing to the rise of PT in the media. He argues that possible long-term effects of synthetic technologies are not taken into account sufficiently and that we are still unaware of the effects these technologies enact in society.⁴⁴ While *Deepfakes* might have beneficial use in behavioral therapy or art projects, the negative side should not be underestimated: examples are avenging an ex-girlfriend by swapping her face into a pornographic video⁴⁵, or grandparents being swindled by an individual impersonating their grandchildren in WhatsApp video.

A recent example of deepfake usage occurred when members of the Dutch House of Representatives were allegedly misled when they thought they were having a Zoom conversation with Leonid Volkov, an associate of Navalny, the Russian social and political activist. The ‘Volkov’ on screen, however, turned out to be a deepfake.⁴⁶

Another contemporary phenomenon which is mostly observed in politics is the adoption of *selective editing*. This phenomenon consists of slightly editing video footage by omitting specific parts or change the order of the video, or by merely relabeling a video. Examples of this can be found in the Dutch House of Representatives, when the FvD posted an edited video of a clash between Baudet and Omtzigt⁴⁷, or when the party DENK published edited footage of colleagues with a Turkish background⁴⁸ who were subsequently intimidated. Digital disinformation can invoke real-world consequences. This raises an important political question that has to be answered: If you can’t have some shared objective

⁴³ McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 150.

⁴⁴ VPRO Tegenlicht, *Zien is geloven*, 2:45. <https://www.vpro.nl/programmas/tegenlicht/kijk/afleveringen/2020-2021/zien-is-geloven.html>

⁴⁵ Banks, ‘OP-ED | Deepfakes & why the future of porn is terrifying’, <https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/what-are-deepfakes-ai-porn/>

⁴⁶ NOS, ‘Nederlandse Kamerleden misleid door gesprek met nepmedewerker Navalny.’, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2377987-nederlandse-kamerleden-misleid-door-gesprek-met-nepmedewerker-navalny>
Footage by the pranksters was later released; Vovan222prank, ‘Video-prank with the Parliament of the Netherlands (Eng)’, <https://youtu.be/rmeQkGNO2Zs>

⁴⁷ Pieter Omtzigt, ‘Het debat tussen Omtzigt en Baudet’, <https://youtu.be/51iQWnUnvmE>

⁴⁸ NOS, ‘Tweede Kamerleden staan op tegen ‘intimiderende’ filmpjes Denk’, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2275845-tweede-kamerleden-staan-op-tegen-intimiderende-filmpjes-denk>

reality, then how can a western liberal democracy function?⁴⁹ When everyone has their own version of reality, how can we agree on the minor, let alone the major issues?

2.5.3 Concluding the ethical mode of post-truth

Summarized, the ethical mode of PT seems to exist – according to scholars and authors on the subject - mainly in the political and the technological realm. Authors on PT are quick to invoke the Trump presidency as the major occurrence of PT in politics, thereby somewhat *americanizing* the term PT. Tactics employed in PT are comparable to lies but not identical, for PT seems to be more about the narrative that is brought forward instead of merely stating facts. Additionally, emerging synthetic technologies like *Deepfakes* might engender novel ethical difficulties since the use of hyperrealistic images can be used both beneficially as well as maliciously. In the next part I will discuss the duality of proposed reactions to the problem of PT.

⁴⁹ VPRO Tegenlicht, *Zien is geloven*, 22:50.

<https://www.vpro.nl/programmas/tegenlicht/kijk/afleveringen/2020-2021/zien-is-geloven.html>

2.6 PROPOSED REACTIONS TO THE PROBLEM OF POST-TRUTH

Almost every scholar or popular author writing on the issue of PT advances their reactions to it. Merely descriptive accounts on the issue are rare if not impossible to find; nearly all authors voice a distinct opinion. These receptions are more or less varied, but can roughly be harbored bilaterally; they are either denialistic or seek confrontation by posing an antidote or alternative to PT. It is this pair of reactions which I will discuss in the following chapter. Afterwards, I will evaluate and analyze these reactions.

2.6.1 Denial

Some authors and scholars deny the usability of the term PT. Located here we find denial of the perceived problem of PT; they claim that PT is not a real problem to be countered and argued against, or they argue that the term PT is nonsense and prone to abusive usage. They offer a number of reasons in favor of these propositions. I will briefly examine and consider three of these reasons here.

2.6.1.1 *Linguistic Arguments*

The first rationale proposing that PT is not a legitimate problem is the claim that PT is an unnecessary term with a sloppy meaning. This argument focuses on the linguistic elements. Adherents of this rationale think that PT convolutes public discourse while at the same time introduces unnecessary semantics, since there already are enough available words in the English vocabulary to speak of dysfunctional epistemology. This is why PT can be named ‘linguistically defective’, meaning that a stable public meaning of the term is missing.⁵⁰

Habgood-Coote gives a number of arguments in favor of the proposition that PT is a vague term without definite meaning. He starts by pointing out a host of definitions of PT in academic and popular work, which vary wildly. Coherent expert use is nowhere to be found. Additionally, he voices his worries; “‘post-truth’ combines considerable discursive power with a lack of clear descriptive meaning to regiment its use.” Besides being linguistically defective, Habgood-Coote considers PT to be an unnecessary term. He tries to prove its redundancy by advancing an array of established words to speak about lies, distortion of facts and being unreliable. He points out that the people who employ the term PT “...are concerned with a massively heterogeneous set of issues...”⁵¹, for they speak about the problems in news provision, effects of digitalization as well as the fragmentation of public discourse. If PT can mean anything, then all meaning of the term crumbles away.

⁵⁰ Habgood-Coote, ‘Stop talking about fake news!’, 2.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 8-15.

These critical observations are echoed by Carrera, who calls PT nothing more than a “...discursive effect, a rhetorical strategy to make fogs visible (...) by declaring truths not an effect of meaning, but just a fact, a final and unquestionable reality.”⁵²

2.6.1.2 *Ideological Arguments*

The second reason in favor of denying the use of PT as a meaningful term is the idea that its being used in a ‘propagandistic’ way and is legible to ‘bad ideology’, resulting in it being weaponized for political ends. This might be hard to prove, however, because labeling a term ‘propagandistic’ implies a strong judgment from the person making the claim. While admitting to the danger of labeling it ‘propagandistic’, Habgood-Coote sharply indicates that much literature on PT is in the grip of the *return to norms narrative* – a narrative that implies an epistemic crisis in western democracies which is in turn caused by a failure to live up to certain intellectual norms, such as objectivity, accountability and veracity. In order to solve this epistemic crisis, adherents of this narrative propose a number of solutions, which are presumed nonsense by Habgood-Coote. Most of these solutions encompass a return to critical thinking, increased use of fact-checking⁵³ and more reliable news sources. I will deal more extensively with these proposed solutions in a later chapter. Habgood-Coote views these proposed solutions and the *return to norms narrative* as “... indicative of a propagandistic usage of ‘post-truth’.”⁵⁴ In other words: most people who use the term PT have instrumentalized it in order to push their aforementioned agenda – thus making its usage ‘propagandistic’. However, not all scholars agree that instrumentalization of the term PT makes it propagandistic. McIntyre, for example, writes that “...post-truth is not a neutral and indifferent term, as far as words can be neutral at all. He purports that the term PT is “...irreducibly normative. It is an expression of concern by those who care about the concept of truth and feel that it is under attack.”⁵⁵ He, however, deems this concern legitimate and necessary, as opposed to Habgood-Coote, who criticizes usage of the term PT.

2.6.1.3 *Ousting sources*

Thirdly, one might argue that labeling certain news sources, knowledge or ideas as being PT effectively isolates these discursive spaces and thus marks them as *false*. Carrera stresses that discarding others as being PT greatly endangers public discourse, since characterizing certain discursive forms as true against false forms of discourse doesn’t account for truth being a “...result of a specific historical and power-based conjuncture, not of an objective factuality located beyond the historical realm.”⁵⁶

⁵² Carrera, ‘The stratagems of post-truth’, 6.

⁵³ Dobbs, ‘The Rise of Political Fact-checking’, 11-14.

⁵⁴ Habgood-Coote, ‘Stop talking about fake news!’, 19-21.

⁵⁵ McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 6.

⁵⁶ Carrera, ‘The stratagems of post-truth’, 2.

By calling something PT it is ousted from the public realm into the covert – an inappropriate or even dangerous result. She also mentions the utilitarian and pragmatic mode of usage of the term PT. Both Trump and Brexit are almost exclusively used as key events for characterizing PT, and these examples are then used to defend an idea of ‘divine’ truth.⁵⁷ Carrera is not clear about what she means with ‘divine truth’, but she seems to imply a non-contingent, non-contextual and perfectly objective truth. This conception of truth, she argues, is wishful thinking and unable to accord with reality.

2.6.1.4 *Concluding on denial*

Summarized, critics of meaningful usage of the term PT, view it as an idealistic instrument to those who wish to restore a mythical, even divine concept of truth. They argue that PT is a convoluted and meaningless term, prone to propagandistic usage. Additionally, Carrera argues that labeling certain sources as PT is in fact an attempt at banishing them from public discourse. In the following chapter, I will portray some authors who propose a more confrontational method when approaching the perceived problem of PT.

2.6.2 Confrontation

Some authors and scholars choose to confirm PT as being a legitimate, fresh and unique problem that requires novel solutions. They often affirm the urgency of the issue and seek ways to counter its effects. I will label this the ‘confrontational view’. Adherents of this view propose solutions which can be catalogued in three different approaches towards PT; critical thought, technology and the social approach. In this chapter I will discuss and elaborate on this trichotomy.

2.6.2.1 Critical thought

The first proposed solution to PT that I will discuss is the critical approach. This approach is characterized by the encouragement of radical doubt, suspicion towards sources *and* ourselves as well as the importance of fact-checking. This proposed solution is the most prevalent one.

In march 2018, the European Commission published a report on the problem of disinformation.⁵⁸ In this report, a number of potential responses to this problem were advanced. Key points included *enhancing* the transparency of online news by sharing of data about the news systems that enable their online presence, *promoting* media and information literacy of users and *develop* tools for users

⁵⁷ Carrera, ‘The stratagems of post-truth’, 10.

⁵⁸ European Commission. Directorate General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology, ‘A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation.’

and journalists alike to tackle disinformation in a fast-evolving environment. These responses can all be clustered in the idea of critical thought; do not take everything for face value, be wary of your own motivations and passions, and be frugal with your trust in other sources. In this chapter, we will find that many scholars propose a critical solution to the perceived problems of PT.

For D’Ancona, fighting PT is all about preserving the values of veracity, honesty and accountability. This doesn’t imply a return to the classical enlightenment values, for the context has changed dramatically. He argues that people living in the PT era should be taught using their critical faculties in order to meet the challenges posed in a digital age, so that they can “...navigate the web with discernment...”⁵⁹ These critical features should also be embodied by investigative journalism and independent fact-checkers. But facts are not enough, for D’Ancona perceives PT as primarily an emotional phenomenon. Rational as well as emotional imperatives should be recognized.

We should also, according to McIntyre, scrutinize ourselves by means of introspection, since “...we are all prone to the sorts of cognitive biases that can lead to post-truth.” He holds that you can and should aid your critical thinking abilities by consuming various media outlets, and always be weary when “...we are hearing things that we want to believe.”⁶⁰ McIntyre claims that we should bring a scientific approach – checking one’s beliefs against the empirical evidence – into our consideration of other factual matters as well. Ultimately, it’s a choice we have to make for ourselves, since it’s our decision how we will react to ‘alternative facts’, ‘fake news’ and beliefs that conflict with facts.⁶¹ One cannot help but point out the striking similarities between McIntyre’s proposed solutions and enlightenment thought, for they both adhere to a self-scrutinizing agent who proudly proclaims: *sapere aude!* Tom Nichols argues that critical thinking has come under attack in the American postsecondary school system; the ability to “...examine new information and competing ideas dispassionately, logically, and without emotional or personal preconception (...) is dwindling because an increasing commodification of education.”⁶² He thinks that universities should be stricter in this regard and equip their students with better critical capabilities, in order to restore respect for expertise.

⁵⁹ D’Ancona, *Post truth: the new war on truth and how to fight back*, 66.

⁶⁰ McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 163.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 151-164.

⁶² Nichols, *The Death of Expertise*, 72.

Stuart Sim speaks of countering the ‘PT lobby’ by stressing the importance of fact-checking. It has to be demonstrated by fact-checkers that truth matters and that you should care about it. If this doesn’t happen, society could spiral down into “...a post-liberalism that turns its back on universal human rights.”⁶³ Besides, Sim requests that people develop ‘news literacy’ and therefore an attitude shift towards the concept of news: instead of immediately trusting the source, we should try to “...determine the level of accuracy involved.”⁶⁴ In other words: when reading news, especially when involving wild claims, we should maintain a high level of scrutiny and approach those sources with a healthy dose of suspicion.⁶⁵ Sim thinks that governments could play a role in educating news literacy and thus change personal conduct for the better. Ultimately, he argues, post-truthers should be aware of the possibility that they are mistaken or even deluded. The antidote to the disease that is PT would be *doubt*, for doubt is “...the great corrective against post-truth generally, and it is always to be encouraged—as philosophical sceptics keep advising us.”⁶⁶

2.6.2.2 Technology

The second proposed confrontational solution is techno-curative. Proposals in combating PT by use of technology focus on problems like *filter bubbles*, *echo chambers* and the circulation of *fake news*. Some authors focus on a technological solution because they deem PT either the result of digital misinformation⁶⁷, or because they deem the internet and its growth as the great facilitator of PT.⁶⁸

Nowadays, in a digital age, it is easier than ever to spread all kinds of fake information, and this fake information even tends to spread faster compared to true information.⁶⁹ In order to combat PT, authors propose imposing more control on the digital space. For example, Lewandowsky et al. have confidence in the possibilities of technology aiding fact-checking with algorithms and machine learning. They also confide in stricter moderation of comments on news articles and augmentation of social distance in order to burst *filter bubbles*.⁷⁰ For them, change has to come from the top. Either large companies or governments should take countermeasures in digital space in order to fight PT phenomena. These measures don’t have to be rigid; they think that softly ‘nudging’ users out of their filter bubbles by offering them news that deviates slightly might do the trick.

⁶³ Sim, *Post-truth, Scepticism and Power*, 156.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 162.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 155-162.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 76.

⁶⁷ Lewandowsky e.a., ‘Beyond Misinformation’, 11-25.

⁶⁸ D’Ancona, *Post truth: the new war on truth and how to fight back*, 32-34.

⁶⁹ Vosoughi et al, ‘The spread of true and false news online.’

⁷⁰ Lewandowsky e.a., ‘Beyond Misinformation’, 32-34.

In some cases, a special role for the *Tech Giants* is reserved, since they are the most powerful distributors of information. D’Ancona mentions several countermeasures which have been put in place in the tech industry, such as working together with independent fact-checkers or creating systems that flag disputed claims and fake stories automatically. He thinks, however, that the “...battle to defend the truth is all the more daunting...”, for the virtual space is enormous and constantly evolving.⁷¹

Harsin sharply criticizes the proposal of techno-curative solutions to PT. He argues that the ‘attention economy’, which is ingrained in nearly all digital news, undermines the proposed solutions. For example, fact-checking organizations and fact-checking algorithms are already ‘contaminated’ in that they are already distrusted to be heralds of truth. The ideological background of these truth arbiters makes people distrustful of them.⁷² Those fact-checkers have to compete for users’ attention at the same level as fake news, online entertainment and social media newsfeeds – a battle they can only win by becoming the force they oppose.

Additionally, Stuart Sim advocates for increased government control regarding the information that can be posted on websites. The big social media websites must implement countermeasures against the spread of fake news. He doesn’t propose ‘Chinese’ levels of state censorship, but argues for a ‘code of conduct’ with ‘some degree of monitored control’.⁷³

2.6.2.3 Social

I have identified the third type of solutions to PT as *social*. This term should be regarded as overarching – proposed solutions which are not covered by either technology or critical thought are situated here. Authors introduce solutions in the social sphere because they deem PT mainly a sociological phenomenon.

McIntyre holds that we must keep on fighting against the lies – even if it is for the audience, and not to convert the liar. He insists that we should challenge each attempt to “...obfuscate a factual matter and challenge falsehoods...”⁷⁴ If these attempts to challenge are persistent and if the true facts are repeated often enough, he thinks it is possible to change misinformed beliefs for the better – in other words, change *false* beliefs into *true* beliefs. Bruno Latour emphasizes the importance of *transparency* in science: “...if scientists were transparent about how science really functions — as a process in which people, politics, institutions, peer review and so forth all play their parts — they would be in a stronger

⁷¹ D’Ancona, *Post truth: the new war on truth and how to fight back*, 69.

⁷² Harsin, ‘Post-Truth and Critical Communication Studies’, 21.

⁷³ Sim, *Post-Truth, Scepticism and Power*, 157-159.

⁷⁴ McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 157.

position to convince people of their claims.⁷⁵

D’Ancona proposes a counter-attack on PT by promoting scientifically credible charismatic leaders. These leaders should be the one to bring the facts and therefore the truth to the public. He then proceeds by claiming that “...truth requires an emotional delivery system that speaks to experience, memory and hope.”⁷⁶ We need a new myth, a story, a narrative serving as the vehicle to deliver truth in a changed world. These counter-narratives are necessary in order to appeal to the hearts and the emotions of people. But ultimately, D’Ancona thinks that the PT era can only be ended by citizens willing it themselves.⁷⁷ The change that is needed has to rise from the ground up.

According to Harsin, the correct way of challenging PT means first of all the recovery of social trust. He proposes a number of transformations in order to preserve and enhance social trust. These include journalism less driven by attention capture and data harvesting, discussion on the upsurge of *infotainment*, democratization of the resources used in political communication and educating the public on the history of anti-democratic forces.⁷⁸

Stephanie Lepp argues that synthetic media can be adopted in a way that helps us in positive ways, and therefore admit that purposeful fiction is needed to achieve our goals. This accords with a less critical perspective on truth, accepting that truth is not only an end in itself but also a means to an end. Society should also have the capacity to deal with a grey area of truth, including *fuzziness* and a certain degree of disorder.⁷⁹

2.6.2.4 Concluding on confrontation

Most authors on PT adhere to a confrontational view; they argue that PT is a real problem that has to be dealt with. The main antidote is to be critical thought. The public has to be equipped with a mindset and tools in order to adequately dissect and scrutinize truth-claims while maintaining an impersonal, objective and dispassionate attitude. Some authors propose that authorities like governments or tech giants should take control and impose countermeasures or some kind of censorship in order to combat PT. Additionally, remedies in the social sphere, like promoting charismatic scientists or recovery of social trust, are suggested. In the consequent part I will analyze and judge the proposed reactions.

⁷⁵ Kofman, ‘Bruno Latour, the Post-Truth Philosopher, Mounts a Defense of Science’, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/25/magazine/bruno-latour-post-truth-philosopher-science.html>

⁷⁶ D’Ancona, *Post truth: the new war on truth and how to fight back*, 73.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 81.

⁷⁸ Harsin, ‘Post-Truth and Critical Communication Studies’, 22.

⁷⁹ VPRO Tegenlicht, *Zien is geloven*, 35:10, <https://www.vpro.nl/programmas/tegenlicht/kijk/afleveringen/2020-2021/zien-is-geloven.html>

2.6.3 Evaluation of the proposed reactions

Let's start by analyzing the denialistic reactions on PT. I agree with Habgood-Coote that PT is a sloppy term, with vague meaning and many definitions. He concludes that we should keep "...investigating epistemic dysfunctions in the news or social media..."⁸⁰, but only by using different words when doing so. I don't necessarily agree with this conclusion, for the usage of the term PT has only recently been surging. Academic discourse needs more time in order to establish a more stable meaning.

I agree with Habgood-Coote and Carrera that PT is prone to ideological and propagandistic usage, which I will explain in the chapter 'concluding part 1: The problem of post-truth'.

Many authors who employ the term do so in a political context in which the academic left is the victim and the popular right the perpetrator. However, this doesn't imply that PT is a useless idea, for I think PT is about much more than just politics, as I will explain in later chapters.

One of the main problems I find within the proposed confrontational reactions to PT is their attempt to frame truth and truth-seeking as an 'objective' enterprise; to make truth as free as possible from personal interests, passions and feelings. By separating the factual from what is of interest and by seeking impersonal truths, they try to vindicate the idea of non-relative and irrefutable truths. They fail to acknowledge that the subject who is in pursuit of truth will always have their own motivations and interests. Authors who propose the usage of critical thought in challenging PT fail to accommodate for the role of emotion, passion and subjectivity in their apprehension of epistemic activity. Instead, emotions, passions and subjectiveness are, just like beliefs and trust, expelled to the realm of the personal and should only play a minimal role when attaining truth. In my opinion this is problematic, for passions, beliefs, emotions and trust play a fundamental role in any epistemic activity, as I will explain in the chapter on Polanyi's idea of *personal knowledge*. Not all authors adhere to this critical approach, however. Harsin, for example, proposes recovery of social trust. I agree with his observations that attention management and infotainment are problematic, since they increasingly make truth market-driven. In order to gain insight into the emergence of PT I will seek to answer the question to the origins of PT in the next chapter.

⁸⁰ Habgood-Coote, 'Stop talking about fake news!', 22-23.

2.7 THE ORIGINS OF POST-TRUTH

In this chapter I will review some arguments that have been set forth regarding the origins of PT. First, I will consider the claim that PT originated from postmodernism, as a number of authors have claimed. Then, I will portray some arguments in favor of the idea that PT originated from contemporary origins. Consecutively, in a small excursion, I will briefly examine Nietzsche's thought regarding truth, for it has been argued that the origins of PT can be found within his ideas. Finally, after considering these proposed origins of PT, I will analyze, compare and evaluate them.

2.7.1 Postmodernism and post-truth

Several writers and scholars adduce a strong or partial causal relationship between postmodernism and PT. I will briefly discuss a number of these suggestions. Later, I will evaluate them in the final part of this chapter on the origins of PT.

According to Kakutani, the right-wing populists, in their employment of PT, have appropriated "...postmodernist arguments and its embrace of the philosophical repudiation of objectivity."⁸¹ She claims that these postmodern schools of thought – personified by the likes of Baudrillard and Lyotard - used to be affiliated with the left, but have more recently "...been hijacked in dumbed-down corollaries."⁸² Kakutani argues that postmodernist arguments regarding relativism are being used by "...right-wingers who want to question evolution or deny the reality of climate change or promote alternative facts."⁸³ She goes on by proclaiming that "...postmodernism enshrined the principle of subjectivity", and that even science was attacked by radical postmodernists. The problems arose when these postmodern ideas migrated from academia to mainstream society, after which these ideas "... would clear the way for today's anti-vaxxers and global warming deniers...".⁸⁴ In summary, it seems that Kakutani regards the movement of postmodernism from leftist academia to the public as the inceptor and facilitator of PT.

⁸¹ Kakutani, *The Death of Truth*, 26.

⁸² *Ibid*, 26.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 27.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 32.

McIntyre defends the claim that postmodernism is the 'godfather' of PT.⁸⁵ How does he arrive at the claim that PT originated from the postmodernist movement? He starts by envisioning postmodernism as a movement that grew out of literary criticism that was kickstarted by Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*. Literary criticism was then further elaborated by Derrida's theory of deconstruction, in which the interpreter of a text cannot rely on the author's meaning, and instead should examine it as a function of political, cultural or religious assumptions.

Consequently, a leap was made into the social and natural sciences, resulting in many possible answers as a result of deconstruction. According to McIntyre this ultimately led to the thesis of the absence of objective truth - only narrative remains, and "...knowledge claims are really just an assertion of authority."⁸⁶ The end result? The rise of PT in the political, scientific and social spheres.

Stuart Sim is a bit more nuanced, for he holds that postmodernism is not as affiliated with PT as thought. Briefly explained, he uses the work of Lyotard to demonstrate that relativism doesn't imply that *any* meaning is possible and warranted. He claims that an important aspect of relativism is the idea that "...there are various possible interpretations of events in the world, not, as in post-truth, that you have invented something that either is not there or never actually took place."⁸⁷ Hence he concludes that relativism – an aspect of postmodernism – doesn't present us with a basis for PT culture. Sim does notice *some* affiliations of postmodernism with PT. He shows, by pointing at the philosophy of Derrida, that in postmodern thought the idea of 'truth' is problematized because truth can never be pinned down and that only the produced effects of a truth-claim matter; "...as if the appearance of truth was all that mattered, the ability to produce effects to generate the required emotional response."⁸⁸

The philosopher and sociologist Bruno Latour, whose work is regarded as 'postmodern', notes that the current PT condition is less a product of his ideas and more a validation of them, for he insists that the traditional or modern view of facts and truth-attaining was never sustainable to begin with. Latour argues that "...facts remain robust only when they are supported by a common culture, by institutions that can be trusted, by a more or less decent public life, by more or less reliable media." People's tendency to believe a statement depend less on the veracity of the statement and more on the person or institution who is making the statement.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ McIntyre, *Post-truth*, 150.

⁸⁶ McIntyre, *Post-truth*, 123-126.

⁸⁷ Sim, *Post-Truth, Scepticism and Power*, 99.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 104.

⁸⁹ Kofman, 'Bruno Latour, the Post-Truth Philosopher, Mounts a Defense of Science.', <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/25/magazine/bruno-latour-post-truth-philosopher-science.html>

2.7.2 Contemporary origins

When addressing the origins and facilitators of PT, some scholars look for ideas in the contemporary sphere.

The changing digital landscape and its rapid developments are a popular candidate when tracing PT to its roots. The internet has spawned information silos – standalone information systems – which enable the users of those systems to refrain from public discourse. Besides, *Big Data* is analyzed in order to personally target users with ads or news that suits them, muting critical voices as a side result in the process of doing so. While many citizens gather their (political) news from the internet, Harsin argues that the internet infrastructure itself is not very suitable for democratic communication. Instead, consumer capitalism has become normative because of the ‘attention economy’⁹⁰, which treats human attention as a scarce commodity that should be marketed. One might deduce that news on the internet is increasingly being influenced by the market instead of the truth. Add the observation that fake news stories are generating more engagement to the mix, and we might end up with market-based truths, personally tailored truths to users’ whim and wish.

Additionally, political communication has been professionalized in the past decades for use in a digital age, installing ‘image-making’ at the heart of politics.⁹¹ Learning from commercial communication and employing scientific research, highly strategized forms of influence run rampant in politics. These developments were partly forecasted by Hannah Arendt, who reminded us that “...the psychological premise of human manipulability has become one of the chief wares that are sold on the market of common and learned opinion.”⁹² This market-driven approach in politics is deemed possible because she distinguishes historical or political facts from natural facts. We can observe this contrast when we take a look at the natural scientist who deals with matters that are not man-made, as opposed to the historian or the politician who deals with *human affairs* – affairs that own their existence to human acts. This might explain the strong connection of PT with the political, since politicians “... will be tempted to fit their reality - which, after all, was man-made to begin with and thus could have been otherwise - into their theory, thus mentally getting rid of its disconcerting contingency.”⁹³

⁹⁰ Harsin, *Post-Truth and Critical Communication Studies*, 12-13.

⁹¹ Lilleker, *Political communication and cognition*, 86.

⁹² Arendt, *Lying in Politics*, 8.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 12.

2.7.3 Nietzsche: predecessor of post-truth?

Nietzsche has been invoked as being a forebearer of the idea of PT.⁹⁴ There are, however, good reasons to adjust or even refute the claim that Nietzsche paved the way for PT. In this section, I will provide a concise overview of Nietzsche's thought regarding truth while simultaneously advocate a more nuanced rendering of his ideas on truth. It suffices to say that I won't conjure an extensive account of Nietzsche's thoughts on this subject, for that would require me writing a separate thesis.

At first glance, one might argue that Nietzsche supposes an extremely relativistic and nihilistic conception of truth which seems to account for PT. He writes that truths are "...a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms (...) illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are."⁹⁵ However, a more nuanced view on truth arises when we approach his works as an anthology. For Nietzsche, the idea of truth is intertwined with his essential notion of the 'will to power'. The idea of the 'will to power' is a much debated and controversial topic with a variety of interpretations. For practical reasons, I will use Nietzsche scholar Walter Kaufmann's conception of 'the will to power', who interprets this idea psychologically: 'the will to power' is the ideal of self-overcoming, of mastering your own desires, thoughts and actions – regardless of the circumstances. "The power of a will is measured by how much resistance, pain and torture it endures and knows how to turn to its advantage."⁹⁶

Nietzsche claims that 'truths' are nothing more than 'value-creations' which have become dominant.⁹⁷ Values are not there to be found inherently in nature, humanity or in abstract thought; values are created by men. Nietzsche doesn't wish to rationalize contemporary truths, but instead aims at a new means of 'value-creation', in which there is no room for personal convictions – for he considers convictions intellectual and epistemic prisons. This results in a refutation of faith, because the man of faith is necessarily a dependent man who does not belong to himself, for he is a man of self-abnegation who is ruled by his convictions. According to Nietzsche faith might make one feel blessed, but faith is *still a lie*. In other words: believing something does not make it proof of *truth*; it actually obscures and clouds truth. Additionally, he refutes the idea that truth should be pleasurable or useful. Utility or happiness are no arguments for truth.

⁹⁴ Papazoglou, 'The post-truth era of Trump is just what Nietzsche predicted',

<https://theconversation.com/the-post-truth-era-of-trump-is-just-what-nietzsche-predicted-69093>

⁹⁵ Nietzsche, 'On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense', 3,

<https://www.kth.se/social/files/5804ca7ff276547f5c83a592/On%20truth%20and%20lie%20in%20an%20extra-moral%20sense.pdf>

⁹⁶ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 211.

⁹⁷ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 136.

Even science doesn't escape Nietzsche's harsh criticism, for science presupposes a fundamental *need* of truth - it starts with the conviction that truth exists out there, and it is this conviction that is being attacked by Nietzsche.⁹⁸ He vehemently writes that "...it is still a metaphysical faith upon which our faith in science rests (...) - that Christian faith, which was also the faith of Plato, that God is truth, that truth is divine."⁹⁹ Nietzsche wants to relocate truth out of the divine realm into the realm of human affairs where the 'will to power' is the primary driving force.

Ultimately, Nietzsche contravenes a utilitarian or pragmatic view of truth. In his view the truth may irritate, offend or even hurt you. He places the notion of truth in 'the will to truth', which correlates in turn with his 'will to power'. This will to power culminates in the *Übermensch* who is able to deal with the truth, even if that truth is uneasy or harsh. He is able to live his life according to the principle of *amor fati* – "...that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary (...) but love it."¹⁰⁰ Untruth is weakness, and truth is power. For Nietzsche, "...the strength of a spirit should be measured according to how much of the 'truth' one could still barely endure – or to put it more clearly, to what degree one would require it to be thinned down, shrouded, sweetened, blunted or falsified."¹⁰¹

2.7.4 Concluding the origins of post-truth

Most writers and scholars on PT see a relationship between postmodernism and PT. This relationship is problematic, however, because both terms are prone to misunderstanding and confer diverging understandings. This misunderstanding becomes apparent when we see authors either equating postmodernism with absolute subjectivity or misinterpreting Foucault when paraphrasing that knowledge claims are nothing more than assertions of authority. Sim is more nuanced and is parallel with Latour's premise that postmodernism is more of a validation of PT than its cause.

I deem the premise that origins of PT are situated in contemporary origins a stronger one. Harsin convincingly argues that an attention-based economy leads to market-based truths. Additionally, he demonstrates the destructive effects of the professionalization of political communication.

Nietzsche is a case apart. Proposing that the origins of PT are situated in Nietzsche's thought requires a misunderstanding of Nietzsche, for Nietzsche honors the man who can *deal* with the truth, but he disfavors the man who obscures truth by having convictions and faith.

⁹⁸ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 355.

⁹⁹ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 283.

¹⁰⁰ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 258.

¹⁰¹ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 39.

2.8 ANALYSIS

We have seen a number of suggested origins of PT. I will now analyze and evaluate these suggested origins.

Let's start with the claim that postmodernism is a predecessor of PT. Firstly, I want to take a look at the arguments Kakutani has set forth. We find that these arguments revolve around the idea that postmodernist ideas have been 'hijacked' by right-wingers, who subsequently tainted these ideas into a PT mindset. Her main argument here is that repudiation of objectivity, a postmodern idea, has shifted from the political left to the political right. She considers this 'death of objectivity' as the main symptom of PT. The problem with her inquiry however, as I see it, is her inadequate epistemological analysis. She fails to account for the important idea that all human beings are prone to a certain degree of epistemic subjectivity - the idea that interests, feelings, passions and attitudes play an important role in deciding what is allowed in one's cognitions and what is not. Instead, she holds on to the epistemological dead end of absolute objectivity and positivism. By striving for this degree of objectivity she paradoxically ends up at the position she wished to fight against in the first place, since she effectively purports a fundamentalist epistemology in which critical thought must reign supreme.

Secondly, let's take a glance at McIntyre's arguments regarding the affiliation of postmodernism with PT, arguments which I don't find convincing at all. Does he honestly assume that processes of truth-attainment are disconnected from reality, in which politics, power, interpretation and values play a significant if not a pivotal role? McIntyre seems to linger in a worldview that considers postmodernism as a curse of truth and forgets about a more nuanced view of postmodernism: an array of theoretical premises about the nature and justification of knowledge. Additionally, he misconstrues¹⁰² Foucault when he claims that "knowledge claims are just an assertion of authority." I won't discuss Foucault extensively here, but it is clear that Foucault was concerned with the relationship between power and knowledge, as well as pointing at the crucial role of authority in making claims of knowledge. This doesn't imply, however, that knowledge claims are nothing more than assertions of authority; it's just that in making a knowledge claim one can't help but make an assertion of authority *as well*. It seems that McIntyre portrays Foucault in a way that is convenient to his own narrative. Additionally, why should the idea that "there is no such thing as objective truth"¹⁰³ lead to "...full-blown reality denial"¹⁰⁴ and severe relativism?

¹⁰² O'Farrell, e-mail to author, April 14th 2021.

¹⁰³ McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 126.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 144.

Furthermore, McIntyre attacks climate change deniers and supporters of Intelligent Design by their supposed relationship with postmodernism instead of criticizing them on their own merits.¹⁰⁵ I'm not saying that climate change deniers are right, or that Intelligent Design has a monopoly on truth – but, if we take a glance at the history of science, we find out that paradigm shifts were often heralded by out-of-the-box ideas. It seems that McIntyre tends to do injustice to the importance of unconventional ideas and hypotheses in science and instead envisions an extremely static view on scientific progress.

Stuart Sim and Bruno Latour offer a more nuanced view on the relationship between PT and postmodernism. Latour's insistence on the need for a common ground to support facts rings true, as well as his claim that the veracity of statements depends for a large part on the person or institution making the statement. This has everything to do with trust, a theme we will further explore in the second part of this thesis – Polanyi's philosophy.

Sim rightly assumes that most postmodernist thought doesn't imply that *any* meaning or truth is possible. It's more about the subjectivity and interests of agents claiming truths. There is, however, a problem which I think he overlooks: he allows for different interpretations of events or facts, but doesn't allow denying the *existence* of these facts or events. Who will then be the authority who denies or accepts the existence of certain facts or events? According to his own thought, even the authority who establishes facts and events – which can later be interpreted multifariously – is prone to the criticism and suspicion of postmodern thought. Why then should I believe authority X who asserts *P*, instead of authority Y who denies *P*? Who or what should guide me in this choice? I don't think Sim accounts for the fact that choosing whether something happened or not, whether something *is* or not, implies a very personal judgment by the epistemic agent for he chooses to trust or distrust a certain authority.

When we evaluate proposed contemporary origins of PT, we find that many of those correlate with the rise of a digital age, an age of internet ubiquity and social media. I somewhat concur with the arguments Harsin has set forth, especially his argument that 'market-driven politics' and normalization of the 'attention economy' are symptomatic of PT. While he is mainly focused on the political side of PT, I still think Harsin is right when he observes that truths are becoming increasingly subdued to demands of the market. These developments seem to go hand-in-hand with technological advancements catering news sources to the demands of the public by recommending certain sources.

¹⁰⁵ McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 139.

Nietzsche offers us some profound insights when thinking about PT. When he writes about the ‘metaphysical faith’ in which our faith in science rests – the faith that truth is constituted by the divine - I consider him absolutely right. While he is opposed to that faith, since he thinks that it presents us with convictions which hinder our search for truth, he still acclaims its usefulness. I suspect that this ‘metaphysical faith’ in truth is slowly crumbling, resulting in a condition which has been interpreted as PT.

I don’t think Nietzsche’s thought has been an important influence on PT. When he wrote that God is dead it wasn’t a joyful shout – no, it was more like a desperate outcry: how can we move on and live without the basis of our existence and our morality? Ultimately, as I have shown, Nietzsche adheres to a truth that exists independently of our emotions, passions and convictions. The man who can live with the truth – instead of altering it in accordance with his own convictions - is the greatest in Nietzsche’s regard. This leads me to conclude that authors who’ve claimed¹⁰⁶ that Nietzsche and PT are intrinsically related have severely misconstrued him.

Summarized, I find the claim of correlation between postmodernism and PT weak. Authors do not provide convincing arguments of a causal relationship between the two. I tend to agree with the notion that postmodernism is more of an indicative nature regarding PT – postmodernism *describes* PT more than it *prescribes* it. On the contrary, I think that PT is accelerated by technological advancements and market demands. The attention economy has somehow placed profit over truth, leading to truth being subjected to demands of the market.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Papazoglou, ‘The post-truth era of Trump is just what Nietzsche predicted’, <https://theconversation.com/the-post-truth-era-of-trump-is-just-what-nietzsche-predicted-69093> and Higgins, ‘Post-truth: a guide for the perplexed’, <https://www.nature.com/articles/540009a.pdf>

2.9 CONCLUDING PART 1: THE PROBLEM POST-TRUTH

I started this chapter with the first subquestion: *What is the problem of post-truth?* Now, after I have examined PT in three modi as well as its proposed origins and proposed reactions to it, I will try to answer this question coherently.

First, I conclude that one should avoid speaking about PT in a political context. As I have made clear by applying Arendt's thought to the relationship between truth and politics, we find that truth and politics represent two different 'ways of life' – the citizen versus the philosopher. They just don't mingle together very well and will always be at odds. Still, a substantial amount of authors on PT touch on the topic of PT-politics and mainly provide examples of PT in the political realm, thereby leading the topic of PT into a morass. We cannot and should not expect that politics will provide us with truth. Still, politics is related to PT because of the aspect of trust; with Harsin we find a shift from major institutional truth-tellers towards a fragmented landscape, a landscape in which influential individual politicians can gather a large amount of trust from a part of the public and therefore considerably influence the beliefs and worldview of that part of the public.

I consider the breakdown of social trust, as suggested by Harsin, a major facet of PT. Harsin convincingly argues that truth has become increasingly market-driven, catered to the need of the receiver. Additionally, the context in which certain knowledge is attained is becoming more important than the knowledge itself.

Manifestations of PT are enhanced by technological developments, in particular developments that lead toward the fabrication of credible but artificial images and video. Perception by the senses as a major faculty for attaining truth might wane and become increasingly suspicious. This in turn leads to increased distrust and accelerates the breakdown of social trust which I mentioned earlier.

Analyzing the proposed reactions to PT, we find that it is a convoluted concept and prone to ideological usage. Authors who regard PT a legitimate problem often end up at the solution of critical thought; only when the public adopts critical epistemic virtues like doubt, suspicion and an impersonal attitude, we can successfully resist PT. While critical virtues are indeed important in epistemic activity, I still think that these authors fail to account for the importance of faculties like belief, passion and subjectiveness when engaged in epistemic activity. I deem this a major gap in the contemporary proposed solutions.

Looking back at the proposed origins of PT, we find that postmodernism is more indicative of PT than it is causative. McIntyre and Kakutani are examples of the *return to norms narrative* as explained on page 27 and they fail to construct a more nuanced view on postmodernism. I consider developments of a digital age, such as the rise of social media, a fragmented media landscape, increasingly convincing artificial images and video as well as market-driven truths major propellants of PT. Lastly, an honorable mention for Nietzsche who is misconstrued by contemporary authors on PT, because they perceive Nietzsche to be an advocate of truth-deterioration, while in fact Nietzsche adheres to a truth that exists independently of our emotions, passions and convictions.

Thus, if we return to the question at hand; '*What is the problem of post-truth?*', I can offer the following answer:

- The real problem of PT is the breakdown of social trust, enhanced by technological developments which foster increased artificiality;
- Proposed reactions adhere too much to critical thought and fail to account for the role of belief, passions and subjectiveness in epistemic activity;
- While postmodernism is merely indicative of PT, I find that developments of a digital age such as the rise of social media, a fragmented media landscape, increasingly convincing artificial images and video as well as market-driven truths are accelerating PT;

And thereby conclude this chapter. In the next chapter I will expound on Michael Polanyi's vision of truth in the context of his epistemology.

3 PART 2: MICHAEL POLANYI ON TRUTH

In this chapter I will provide the answer to the second subquestion of this thesis:

What is Michael Polanyi's conception of Truth?

Finding an unambiguous and fixed theory of truth in Polanyi's works is an intricate or maybe even an impossible task. Even nowadays it's a topic of debate among Polanyi scholars and most probably will continue to be so.¹⁰⁷ His notion of truth is a multi-faceted one and is sensitive to purpose and context.¹⁰⁸ There are, however, a number of important and central ideas regarding Polanyi's thoughts about truth. I will try to use these central ideas in order to shape something of an *essence* of truth in Polanyi's thought.

I will introduce this chapter with some biographical information on Michael Polanyi. Then, the notion of 'post-critical' will be explained in order to place his thought in historical context. Consecutively I will demonstrate that Polanyi refutes certain typical enlightenment values. Instead of these values he offers the notion of *personal knowledge*, which will be considered in the adjacent part, as well as the notions of *subsidiary* and *focal awareness*. An elementary understanding of these notions is necessary in order to grasp Polanyi's thought. Then, Polanyi will be regarded as an advocate of realism, leading to the next part on *contact with reality*, which lies at the heart of his epistemology. The implementation of *contact with reality* will be discussed in the ensuing part on *the fiduciary mode*. This leads to the part on *commitment* and consecutively to the part illustrating the role of *belief* in epistemic activity. At last, I will conclude this chapter by providing a summary of Polanyi's thought as well as an answer to the very question that prompted this chapter.

¹⁰⁷ Mullins, E-mail to author, 9 December 2020.

¹⁰⁸ Gulick, 'Polanyi's Telic View of Truth and Contemporary Politics', 3.

3.1 MICHAEL POLANYI

Michael Polanyi was a Hungarian-British scientist who started his career in physical chemistry, to which he made several important theoretical contributions such as the adsorption potential theory¹⁰⁹ and fibre diffraction analysis. After he was invited to lecture in the former USSR, Polanyi became aware of the necessity of free debate in science, as opposed to the state-sponsored science prevalent in the USSR at that time. Later in his life, when he was in his 40's, he made a turn towards philosophy. His most important contributions in philosophy are his ideas of *tacit knowledge*, *personal knowledge* and the *fiduciary mode*. He is the author of many articles and a dozen books, ranging from chemistry to philosophy, economics and sociology. Polanyi's personal belief has remained somewhat mysterious, since he denied adherence to a particular denomination, but he undoubtedly was a Christian.¹¹⁰ He passed away in 1976, but studies on his works have been ongoing in scholarly circles, most of them concentrating in 'the Polanyi Society' and the academic journal 'Tradition & Discovery'.

3.2 POST-CRITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Polanyi's *magnum opus*, *Personal knowledge*, has a subtitle called *Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. When referring to the book *Personal Knowledge* in the main text or in the footnotes I will use the abbreviation 'PK'. In order to fully grasp Polanyi's thought it will be necessary to gain an understanding of his notion of *post-critical*; this will paint the background in front of which Polanyi operates as well as place his thought in historical context.

The first traces of Polanyi using the term *post-critical* can be traced back to the start of the 1950's. In the Gifford Lectures, which Polanyi gave at the University of Aberdeen in 1951 to 1952, we find the first occurrences of the term *post-critical*. In his sixth lecture we find our earliest clue towards gaining an understanding of *post-critical*. He writes: "It seems obvious that within the restrictions imposed on it by objectivism, philosophy cannot possibly fulfill the formidable task of justifying the whole realm of valid thought."¹¹¹ The *locus classicus* of determining the meaning of *post-critical* might be where Polanyi states that "My resolve to make philosophy the declaration of my ultimate beliefs will have yet to be stated systemically. But we must first get rid of a prejudice which otherwise will undermine

¹⁰⁹ Polanyi, 'The Potential Theory of Adsorption', <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/141/3585/1010>

¹¹⁰ Torrance, 'Michael Polanyi and the Christian Faith — A Personal Report', 29-31.

¹¹¹ Polanyi, 'Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy', 99, <http://www.polanyisociety.org/Giffords/Gifford-S1-6-Towards-PostCrtcl-Phil-R-opt.pdf>

the morale of our whole enterprise.”¹¹² This prejudice entails the “...philosophical doctrine of doubt that is a first principle of the enlightenment rationalist (or modernist) conception of inquiry.”¹¹³

The prefix ‘post’ is necessary for Polanyi because he claims that the most widely accepted train of thought - the critical – is blocking fruitful philosophical inquiry. The restrictions of objectivism have to be breached, starting with the adjustment that “...all declaratory sentences should be re-cast (...) in the fiduciary mode, which makes it clear that such a sentence stands for an allegation made by the speaker or writer of the sentence.”¹¹⁴ In later chapters I will elaborate on this fiduciary mode. Polanyi thinks that these ideas can be the start for a philosophy that entertains greater freedom of action. It is only then that the scientist may “...profess as well as analyze, be prophetic as well as analytic.”¹¹⁵

Polanyi thought that a pivotal element of critical epistemology is the striving for complete objectivity in the exact sciences. However, he deems this a false ideal and even an illusion. He offers a substitute: ‘Personal Knowledge’.¹¹⁶ I will start, however, with the values and ideas Polanyi doesn’t assent to. In the next chapter I will explain why Polanyi refutes enlightenment thought.

¹¹² Polanyi, *PK*, 283.

¹¹³ Echeverria, ‘Realism, Truth, and Justification in Michael Polanyi’s Thought’, 7.

¹¹⁴ Polanyi, ‘Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy’, Gifford Lectures, 99-100.

<http://www.polanyisociety.org/Giffords/Gifford-S1-6-Towards-PostCrtcl-Phil-R-opt.pdf>

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 101.

¹¹⁶ Polanyi, *PK*, 18.

3.3 REFUTATION OF ENLIGHTENMENT

In this part I will explain why Polanyi's refutes certain enlightenment values such as objective detachment, universal doubt and formalistic thought. Additionally, I will portray part of a discussion held by Polanyi scholars Sanders and Fennell whether Polanyi is to be placed in the tradition of the enlightenment or somewhere else. By portraying this discussion, I hope to disentangle the complex relationship between enlightenment thought and Polanyi's epistemology.

3.3.1 Polanyi contra enlightenment

Fruits of the enlightenment – rational thinking and critical doubt - have led to the ideal of objective detachment. This means that the subject, when studying an object, should purge himself as much as possible of passion, intuition, feelings and motivations. Beliefs are deemed obstacles on the course towards a clear vision of truth. However, this idea was increasingly being criticized near the end of the 19th century, for example by Nietzsche. One of his leitmotifs, as Walter Kaufmann points out, is "...his opposition to the popular dualism of reason and passion and the deprecation of either of these."¹¹⁷ Polanyi is a bit more nuanced in his approach since he acclaims the usefulness and serviceability of the enlightenment values, but also judges them on their flaws.

When explaining elements of the 'post-critical' nature of his philosophy, he addressed Descartes who "... declared that universal doubt should purge his mind of all opinions held merely on trust and open it to knowledge firmly grounded in reason alone."¹¹⁸ Polanyi rejects these ideals for a number of reasons, most notably the reason that critical thought cannot be entirely free of a priori beliefs, as well as the reason that universal doubt is ultimately self-contradicting, for "...an entirely untutored maturing of the mind would, however, result in a state of imbecility."¹¹⁹ Additionally, when Polanyi reflected on his own career as a chemical scientist, he found that skills like the art of guessing right and the value of scientific conviviality¹²⁰ were essential to scientific practice and epistemic inquiry. It seems that Polanyi wants to showcase that the search for decisive foundational justification, an important aspiration which the enlightenment gave birth to, is ultimately futile. Additionally, Polanyi argues, modernistic science holds inner contradictions which are destructive of its own aims, because focus on abstract and formalistic thought separates it from its experience-based *modus operandi*.

¹¹⁷ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 234.

¹¹⁸ Polanyi, *PK*, 283.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 312.

¹²⁰ Cf. Polanyi, *PK*, 224. "The fostering of good fellowship within small groups of people living together, be it as families, as school-fellows, as shipmates, as fellow members of a congregation or of a workshop or office team, is a direct contribution to the fulfilment of man's purpose and duty as a social being."

There remain questions, however, about Polanyi's position when compared to typical enlightenment values. I will provide a brief illustration of two interpretations in one case, where we find Polanyi's ideas construed as either 'rooted in the enlightenment' or as 'occupying a third alternative besides the modern or postmodern'.

3.3.2 Interpreting Polanyi's ideas

Andy Sanders argues that Polanyi remains firmly rooted in the tradition of the enlightenment, which subsequently means that Polanyi would not accept the denial of a master or overarching account of truth – a claim postmodern epistemologists might propagate. Although Polanyi doesn't assent with typical aspects of the enlightenment method such as reductionism, an expressivist theory of language and epistemological foundationalism, Sanders argues that Polanyi nonetheless "keeps the ideal of truth as the regulative standard to which we ought to submit ourselves."¹²¹ Besides, Sanders thinks that though Polanyi has a postmodern element in the shape of his fiduciary thesis – which claims that conceptual frameworks and cultural practices have their own internal standards of rationality – he doesn't subject *truth* itself to this fiduciary thesis.¹²² Polanyi's enlightenment roots emerge when we start to understand his invitation to dogmatism. He is concerned with the question why we should prefer science to other 'truth-seeking' paradigms, such as astrology, fundamentalism or magic as a way to understand reality. Indeed, Polanyi writes, "... the whole of this book is but a quest for a substantial reply to a question of this kind."¹²³ However, Polanyi differs from a dogmatist like a Descartes because "...Polanyi is not concerned with foundations but with methodology", hence making him an advocate for *methodological dogmatism*.¹²⁴

Andy Sanders' position has been disputed by other Polanyi scholars. For instance, Jon Fennell contends his view – according to him the characteristic feature of reality and truth in Polanyi is "...the fact that he [Polanyi] occupies a third alternative that separates him from both the naivete of the critical and the silliness and irresponsibility of the postmodern."¹²⁵ The reason that Fennell envisions this third alternative in Polanyi stems from what Polanyi calls the 'balance of mind', a paradoxical notion about the understanding of truth and justification; "Any enquiry into our ultimate beliefs can be consistent only if it presupposes its own conclusions. It must be intentionally circular."¹²⁶ Fennell explains: It's all about *commitment* and *submission*. Balance of mind is different from enlightenment reasoning in its committedness – taking personal responsibility for a movement towards truth, in

¹²¹ Sanders, 'Tacit knowing – Between Modernism and Postmodernism: A problem of coherence', 16.

¹²² Ibid, 18.

¹²³ Polanyi, *PK*, 158.

¹²⁴ Sanders, 'Tacit knowing – Between Modernism and Postmodernism: A problem of coherence', 19.

¹²⁵ Fennell, E-mail to author, 3 December 2020.

¹²⁶ Polanyi, *PK*, 315.

contrast to the detached truth-seeker as idealized by enlightenment epistemology. Balance of mind also differs from postmodernism in its element of submission; as we proceed upon the path of truth-seeking "...we find that we are increasingly sustained through submission."¹²⁷ Polanyi phrased it in this way: "Within its commitments the mind is warranted to exercise much ampler powers than those by which it is supposed to operate under objectivism; but by the very fact of assuming this new freedom it submits to a higher power to which it had hitherto refused recognition."¹²⁸ In other words: when someone commits to certain beliefs he or she finds that these beliefs help in understanding the world, while at the same time finds him- or herself to be increasingly submitted to these beliefs. Per contra, a modern objectivist way of truth-seeking tries to relieve us from all responsibility and therefore commitment of holding our beliefs.

When studying these two aforementioned paradigms, I find myself relatively conflicted for they both appeal to me as valid interpretations of Polanyi's thought. I am attracted to parts of Sanders' argument stating that the ideal of truth remains the regulative standard to which we ought submit ourselves, since this concords with Polanyi's ideas on truth as being objective and universally valid. There remains a question to be raised however, since why does the ideal of truth as regulative standard imply that Polanyi is rooted in enlightenment thought? I consider this ideal more typical of a Christian worldview than a modern one, as I will later explain in the part on *belief*. Fennell's interpretation however seems to be more in concord with the goals Polanyi had in mind when developing his idea of personal knowledge, for Polanyi himself wished to provide an alternative to the modern ideas on knowledge. Fennell effectively valorizes his standpoint by pointing at the importance of commitment as contrasted to doubt.

Thus, when we consider doubt as a characteristic of modern thought, we see that Polanyi does indeed try to provide an alternative for he doesn't agree that doubt should be the leading principle in the discovery of truth.¹²⁹ This leads me to mostly side with Fennell, although parts of Sanders' interpretation remain valuable to me as well.

¹²⁷ Fennell, 'Can Alasdair MacIntyre Relieve Grene's Polanyian Regret?', 55.

¹²⁸ Polanyi, *PK*, 341.

¹²⁹ Cf. *Ibid*, 292. "The first point in my critique of doubt will be to show that the doubting of any explicit statement merely implies an attempt to deny the belief expressed by the statement, in favour of other beliefs which are not doubted for the time being."

3.3.3 Concluding refutation of enlightenment

Tension between the subjective personal aspect and the objective reality aspect of truth is present throughout Polanyi's writings. For him, the question whether we can know if our beliefs are true or not is of utmost importance. It seems that we need some way to measure our beliefs, a standard, some sort of test. The problem that Polanyi has with this need for a criterion is the idea that "...There is a residue of personal judgement required in deciding - as the scientist eventually must - what weight to attach to any particular set of evidence in regard to the validity of a particular proposition."¹³⁰ In other words: if we are fallible in our beliefs, then we will be fallible as well in believing a certain criterion of truth. How do we proceed from here? In the next part I will elaborate on the concept of *personal knowledge*, hopefully answering this question.

¹³⁰ Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society*, 17.

3.4 PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE

In this part I will explain in detail, without being too lengthy, the notion of *personal knowledge* as conceived by Polanyi. I will start with Polanyi's outlook on the way we deal with knowledge in our daily lives as well as in scientific endeavors. Then, the concepts of *subsidiary* and *focal awareness* will be explained in order to adequately grasp Polanyi's idea of attaining truth.

Personal Knowledge is arguably the most important concept in Polanyi's epistemology. Personal knowledge is *eo ipso* a bold claim, since not everyone will agree that real knowledge has a personal character. Shouldn't real knowledge, which implies it being *true*, universal? In other words, why should the nature and justification of knowledge be tied to the personal aspect, since subjectivity seems to be an irrelevant factor or even an impediment in the search for true knowledge? Polanyi acknowledges this conundrum when he writes: "The two words may seem to contradict each other: for true knowledge is deemed impersonal, universally established, objective."¹³¹ He is convinced, however, that the seeming contradiction can be solved by modifying the very conception of knowing. This is his central undertaking in his book *Personal Knowledge*.

3.4.1 Passionate Participation

Polanyi starts his disquisition of PK with a well-known historical example of the natural sciences; the transition from the Ptolemaic to the Copernican system in astronomy. Where the Ptolemaic system claimed a cosmology in accordance with the Bible in which man was assigned a central position in the universe, so the Copernican system dethroned man of this central position and placed him on a flying speck of dust in an endless universe. The Copernican theory slowly gained in scientific popularity after which it could be said to be 'more objective', as Polanyi argues: "...when we claim greater objectivity for the Copernican theory, we do imply that its excellence is, not a matter of personal taste on our part, but an inherent quality deserving universal acceptance by rational creatures."¹³² Consequently he affirms that a theory can be said to be more 'objective' compared to immediate experience, and that its value lies in its predictive powers. For example: our immediate experience might support a geocentric worldview, but this worldview is nowadays condemned as being uncritical, and for good reasons. However, Polanyi claims that starting with the enlightenment an increased separation between reason and experience was developed, which ultimately lead to a positivist epistemology in which "...scientific theory is denied all persuasive power that is intrinsic to itself (...) scientists must be

¹³¹ Polanyi, *PK*, *preface*.

¹³² *Ibid*, 3.

prepared immediately to drop a theory the moment an observation turns up which conflicts with it.”¹³³ He called this hyperfocus on phenomena and tangible appearances the ‘massive modern absurdity’. This massive modern absurdity effectively implies that science should be strictly ruled by empiricism. How does he retaliate?

Polanyi counters this positivist theory by observing the scientific *community of practice*.¹³⁴ It is here that he finds disagreement regarding positivism – the idea that a system should confine itself to the data of experience and exclude any a priori or metaphysical speculations. He goes on by presenting some examples of the dissonance between scientific activities and positivism: scientists holding on to reigning theories, even when contradictory evidence seems to be presented. Or cases of scientists who fully commit themselves to a theory long before its thoroughly verified. We witness a contemporary example when the esteemed astrophysicist Heino Falcke writes that “As a scientist I only believe what I see, however, I have to start believing before I can perceive.”¹³⁵ This statement affirms the importance of a priori beliefs in scientific endeavor, which in turn opposes the positivist viewpoint.

Polanyi criticizes the prevailing conception of science in his days, which is “...based on the disjunction of subjectivity and objectivity, and must seek to eliminate from science such passionate, personal, human appraisals of theories, or at least to minimize their function to that of a negligible by-play.”¹³⁶ Instead he argues for the passionate participation of intellectual powers in the act of knowing, for example when he acknowledges the “...presence of an emotional factor in all object-directed intellectual performances...”¹³⁷

In the chapter ‘Probability’ in *Personal Knowledge* we find some proof of this passionate participation, when he shows that acts of personal judgment form an essential part of science. A striking illustration appears when we start looking at observations that contravene an established theory – anomalies. Exactly when do we stop seeing contradictory observations as anomalies and start seeing them as pointing towards a dissimilar theory, and suggest a rework of contemporary theory? Answering that very question involves a personal and passionate judgment – since we might hold dear to theories we hold - which in turn aids in modelling the *telos* of scientific inquiry. Thus, an appraisal of order or an assessment of probability can both be considered acts of personal knowledge.¹³⁸

¹³³ Polanyi, *PK*, 9.

¹³⁴ Cf. Wenger, ‘Communities of Practice: A brief introduction’, 1-7, <https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1794/11736/A%20brief%20introduction%20to%20CoP.pdf>

¹³⁵ Falcke, *Licht in de Duisternis*, 387.

¹³⁶ Polanyi, *PK*, 16.

¹³⁷ Polanyi, ‘The Necessity of Philosophy: (b) Intellectual Passions’, 23, <http://www.polanyisociety.org/Giffords/Gifford-S1-2-NccsityPhil-IntellPassions-R-Opt.pdf>

¹³⁸ Polanyi, *PK*, 18-24.

Additionally, Polanyi acknowledges that gaining intellectual control over the external world has a passionate component, for it is “...linked to a satisfaction of gaining control over ourselves.”¹³⁹ However, how does the concept of *personal knowledge* work out in reality – in scientific inquiry, as well as in our daily lives? We have to understand the ideas of *subsidiary* and *focal knowledge* in order to implement the idea of *personal knowledge* into a Polanyian epistemology.

3.4.2 Subsidiary and Focal awareness

Before I can elaborate further on the concept of personal knowledge, I want to explain the concepts of *subsidiary awareness* and *focal awareness*, two important notions in Polanyi’s philosophy. For the sake of the length and comprehensibility of this thesis I will explain them briefly.

Imagine a blind man with his probing stick. From knowing *how* – how to use the stick in an adequate way - we can distinguish a movement to knowing *what* – for example, an obstacle that is in his way and felt by use of the stick. The blind man is *subsidiarily* aware of his probing stick and *focally* aware of the object he is examining with his stick.¹⁴⁰ The same can be said of a pianist who is playing a complex arrangement. As soon as she switches her attention – her focal awareness – *from* playing the arrangement, *to* what she is doing with her fingers, she will probably be forced to cease playing because of the confusion. Hence, Polanyi claims that focal and subsidiary awareness are mutually exclusive.¹⁴¹ Subsidiary knowledge can also be labeled *instrumental* knowledge, knowledge which plays an instrumental role in understanding and perceiving the focal aspect. Thus, “...subsidiary knowledge (...) is not known in itself but is known in terms of something focally known, to the quality of which it contributes; and to this extent it is unspecifiable.”¹⁴² It’s important to note that the subsidiary is always subsidiary *to* a focal pattern – it means that you rely on the subsidiary in order to interpret and grasp the focal.

Thus, Polanyi concludes, when we rely on a tool or probe in a subsidiary way, we can regard them as making them form a part of our own body, since they are not handled as external objects. He calls this event *indwelling*, a crucial and necessary element of scientific inquiry. He then proceeds by explaining that a scientist uses theories in the same subsidiary way as a carpenter uses a hammer. “Hammers and probes can be replaced by intellectual tools; think of any interpretative framework...”¹⁴³ These intellectual tools are the presuppositions which we uncritically accept for the time being in a process

¹³⁹ Polanyi, *PK*, 208.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 98-100. Polanyi’s use of a tool as an example of subsidiary awareness seems to mimic Heidegger’s notion of *ready-to-hand* (*Zuhandenheit*).

¹⁴¹ Polanyi, *PK*, 58.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 92.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, 62.

of assimilation. Intellectual tools, like theories, dogmas and formulas are subsidiary to the focal, which is the object of study. Take, for example, the theory of relativity: it is used *from* a subsidiary manner to explain or predict a focal object or pattern, such as black holes or gravitational waves. Uncritically accepted intellectual tools, which we are subsidiarily aware of, are used by scientists in their inquiries, and by laymen in their everyday life alike. This is a dynamic process which makes room for progress and structural change, and accounts for the fact that an expert badminton player, a great musician or an experienced scientist excels in his or her practice by ‘automatically’ performing particular aspects of the practice – aspects on which the novice still has to focus focally – subconsciously, without thinking. Polanyi names this the ‘lapse into unconsciousness’.¹⁴⁴ Decades earlier we find a striking similarity of thought in Nietzsche philosophy of *attained unconsciousness*, where he describes the man who masters his art by way of acting rationally on instinct.¹⁴⁵ It is in this way that we can speak of the *personal* nature of knowledge.

3.4.3 Lapse into Consciousness

The lapse into consciousness relates to a key idea in Polanyi’s Philosophy: the notion that “...we can know more than we can tell.”¹⁴⁶ This might seem like stating the obvious, but there is more to clarifying the exact implications of this idea than one might expect. We recognize a face, without being able to tell which features made us recognize it. A chess player might briefly inspect a complex position on the board and instinctively tell that white is dominant, although he hasn’t performed the calculations yet. This inarticulate knowledge is, according to Polanyi as interpreted by Esther L. Meek, discredited in contemporary epistemology.¹⁴⁷ According to many modern epistemologists as well as popular belief, knowledge seems to be more about mind, data, facts and information – as opposed to value, belief and body. Esther Meek however, by utilizing Polanyi’s conception of knowledge as personal, wishes to bridge this gap and reconcile the divorce.

As an example, we can take a glance at his conception of scientific inquiry which could be analogous of that of an art. The personal skills of the scientist, by which he shapes his scientific knowledge, are of great importance. He acknowledges the fact that “...the aim of a skillful performance is achieved by the observance of a set of rules which are not known as such to the person following them.”¹⁴⁸ This abstract teaching can be made clear with examples; good swimmers are usually not aware of the underlying principles that keeps them afloat – e.g. the regulation of their respiration. The same can

¹⁴⁴ Polanyi, *PK*, 64.

¹⁴⁵ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 233.

¹⁴⁶ Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 4.

¹⁴⁷ Wipf and Stock Publishers, ‘Knowing | The Esther Lightcap Meek Interview’, 9:15-9:35.

<https://youtu.be/wAt4epHvXQY?t=555>

¹⁴⁸ Polanyi, *PK*, 51.

be said of the cyclist who manages to keep balance, speed, centrifugal force and many other factors in harmony with relative ease.

When observing a skillful cyclist or swimmer, one may distinguish certain rules of art which are very useful, but "...they do not determine the practice of an art; they are maxims."¹⁴⁹ So, even if I explain to you the 'science' behind the skillful cyclist, it still won't make you a good cyclist. You have to experience the act for yourself.

3.4.4 Concluding Personal Knowledge

Summarized, we find that Polanyi wants to break with enlightenment thought. He refuses to submit his epistemology to objectivism, radical doubt and empiricism. Instead, Polanyi integrates passions, intuitions and commitment in his conception of knowing. This emphasis on commitment leads me to believe that Polanyi is to be interpreted as foreign to enlightenment thought. With Fennell, I consider Polanyi to be the composer of an alternative to either modern and postmodern epistemology, which is articulated by the concept of *personal knowledge*. We have seen that this concept accords with the scientific community of practice. Additionally, the concepts of *subsidiary* and *focal awareness* are fruitfully used to gain a better understanding of the framework in which epistemic activity manifests itself. This part on *personal knowledge* has revealed the context in which we now will try to understand Polanyi's idea of truth. In the following chapter, I will explain why Polanyi's understanding of truth consonates with realism.

¹⁴⁹ Polanyi, *PK*, 52.

3.5 REALISM

Roughly speaking, Polanyi can be seen as an advocate of *realism*. Theoretically, *realism* means that statements of fact should be judged by their consonance with objective reality.¹⁵⁰ If the statement is in concord with objective reality it is true, and in the case of discord it is false. This is easier said than done, of course. Polanyi envisions all assertions of fact necessarily of *universal intent*, since we assume the existence of one shared objective reality. We claim to speak of this shared reality when stating a fact. Polanyi, however, is not your typical realist. He brings his own nuances, adjustments and interpretations. One of his core propositions is the idea that out there we find "...truth as existing independently of my knowledge of it, and as accessible to all men."¹⁵¹ Reality exists out there, whether I like it or not, independent of my knowledge of it. This means that for Polanyi truth is not socially constructed, but rather *discovered*. He phrases it slightly different when he claims that "...I deny that truth is demonstrable, but I assert that it is knowable."¹⁵² The idea of discovery is elaborated when he argues that "The pursuit of discovery is conducted from the start in these terms (...) it claims to have made contact with reality: a reality which, being real, may yet reveal itself to future eyes in an indefinite range of unexpected manifestations."¹⁵³ This quote is a *locus classicus* in his philosophy and a crucial element in his epistemology. However, what does it mean to make 'contact with reality'? How does Polanyi address this? Polanyi's notion of 'contact with reality' is much-discussed and controversial. For this reason, I will try to substantiate a conception of this idea that is shared by most Polanyi scholars.

¹⁵⁰ Miller, 'Realism', <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/realism/#Prel>

¹⁵¹ Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society*, 81.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, 68.

¹⁵³ Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 24.

3.6 CONTACT WITH REALITY

In this part I will explain what the idea of ‘contact with reality’ entails. This explanation will start with the aspect of partiality. Then, the indefiniteness of knowledge is expounded on. Consecutively the justification of knowledge will be discussed, in which the separation between truth itself and the justification of beliefs will be made clear. This leads to the emergence of *epistemic contexts*, which will be discussed in the adjacent part. The chapter on contact with reality will be wrapped up with concluding remarks.

3.6.1 Partiality

Contact with reality is always a partial contact; we grasp only an *aspect* of reality. Truth is thus never completely specifiable and complete, and must be gauged personally. This also makes sense on a very practical level, since “...each person can know directly very little of truth and must trust others for the rest.”¹⁵⁴ It is just impossible to know every truth and become the prime *Homo Universalis*. We may not like it, but we are being thrown back on reliance of others. The search for truth through contact with reality is not an abstract activity, but an existential attitude, for Polanyi’s fundamental belief is that “...I am called upon to search for the truth and state my findings.”¹⁵⁵ Persons might capture an aspect of reality, and every person may believe something different to be true, but in the end “...there is only one truth.”¹⁵⁶ For truth to exist no consensus is required. With his conception of truth as contact with reality, Polanyi differs from an epistemic approach to truth. An epistemic approach to truth means that the truth of a proposition is equated with the existence of evidence or justification for that proposition.¹⁵⁷ Instead, Polanyi inquires about the conditions that are needed for someone to claim that he or she *knows* that a proposition is true – when contact with reality has supposedly been made. So, when a person claims a certain fact to correspond with truth, Polanyi is not that interested in the evidence or *apologia*, but he wants to ask that person: what was it exactly that made you regard that fact as being true, and why did you accept these observations as evidence for your stated fact?

¹⁵⁴ Polanyi, *Study of Man*, 68.

¹⁵⁵ Polanyi, *PK*, 315.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 332.

¹⁵⁷ Echeverria, ‘Realism, Truth, and Justification in Michael Polanyi’s Thought’, 2.

3.6.2 Indefiniteness and Reciprocity

A fundamental aspect of making ‘contact with reality’ is its indeterminate nature. Considered negatively it’s never finished, never complete nor absolute. Positively speaking, it is heuristic, full of anticipation and creative. Polanyi tells us that “...whenever we make (or believe we have made) contact with reality, we anticipate an indeterminate range of unexpected future confirmations of our knowledge derived from this contact.”¹⁵⁸ In other words: when we think we gain knowledge of reality, this knowledge opens up new possibilities and it makes us expect confirmations of this knowledge. Note that we should perceive knowledge here in a Polanyian fashion; always personal, though it can be theoretical as well as practical and subsidiary as well as focal. Still, this might seem abstract, so I will give two examples.

For an elementary example, think of a child learning to ride a bicycle. As soon as the child acquires the knowledge to ride a bike – note that it’s personal, practical, bodily and subsidiary – new possibilities are introduced: he can cycle to his neighbors and friends, he can bike without using his hands or even perform tricks with it. When the child explores these possibilities and finds out that he can indeed cycle to his neighbors and friends, maybe even without using his hands or while performing tricks, he is subsequently confirmed of his knowledge – the knowledge how to ride a bicycle. A more sophisticated example can be found in the theory of computing; here we find that the knowledge of simple logic gates, actualized by transistors that can either be turned on or off and are represented by either a ‘0’ or a ‘1’, has in the course of decades opened up marvelous possibilities and discoveries such as operating systems, smartphones and artificial intelligence. Note that in this example knowledge is more theoretical than practical, while previous developments become subsidiary to contemporary focal developments. In these examples there seems to be a certain responsiveness to reality, hence the ‘future confirmations’ of which Polanyi talks about. Thus, when I try to contact reality, it seems to reciprocate that contact by confirming my investigations, almost like an interpersonal relationship.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Polanyi, *PK*, 131. For an extensive account on ‘contact with reality’, see: Meek, *Contact with Reality: Michael Polanyi’s realism and why it matters*.

¹⁵⁹ Wipf and Stock Publishers, ‘Knowing | The Esther Lightcap Meek Interview’, 5:45-6:35. <https://youtu.be/wAt4epHvXQY?t=345>

3.6.3 Justification

Polanyi acknowledges that truth *itself* should be distinguished from what someone is *justified* in holding to be true. This implies that the option of fallibility remains open, making it possible that while I am justified in holding something to be true, there still remains an element of contingency, for my belief *could be wrong*. In conjunction with this idea, he admits that truth itself can never be completely and perfectly known, since Polanyi claims that truth is always in the process of ‘being discovered’ – some part of truth will always be beyond our efforts to know. In order to grasp an aspect of truth we need to be responsibly justified in holding something to be true, while leaving open the possibility of error. The epistemological challenge Polanyi faces here concerns the danger of falling into a skepticism that depreciates justification, and the danger of a realism which implies that truth itself can never be attained. Yes, your belief is justified, but it *could still be wrong*. A pivotal question has to be answered: If any justified belief I have can later turn out to be false, then where does it end?¹⁶⁰ Polanyi’s ideas seem to spiral down into some sort of nihilism in which the ultimate contingent nature of our beliefs undermines any definite contact with reality and truth. He recognizes this problem and attempts to “...resolve by conceptual reform the apparent self-contradiction entailed in believing what I might conceivably doubt.”¹⁶¹

In order to elaborate on the problem of the contingency of justified belief, we may use an example set forth by Polanyi: “Though a Zande tribe witch doctor arguing in terms of the poison-oracle is clearly a rational person, his rationality is altogether deluded. His intellectual system may gain a limited justification within a society which it supplies with a form of leadership and the means for deciding disputes, however unjustly. But as an interpretation of natural experience it is false.”¹⁶² The witch doctor would think that his beliefs are justified, but Polanyi regards them as being false. This doesn’t mean that the witch doctor was irrational – he is rational in believing what he believes, but it’s just that his belief turned out to be wrong (according to Polanyi). An idea like this has interesting implications for the valuation of any epistemic activity, for different groups, cultures and social spheres have different frameworks and consequently varying epistemic obligations. Persons who are considered irrational in their beliefs in contemporary society, like flat-earthers, fundamentalists or conspiracy-theorists, now seem to be – in a Polanyian sense - epistemically justified in their beliefs while simultaneously being erroneous. According to *their* epistemic obligations they are acting rational, but their beliefs are deemed false.

¹⁶⁰ Echeverria, ‘Realism, Truth, and Justification in Michael Polanyi’s Thought’, 11.

¹⁶¹ Polanyi, *PK*, 115.

¹⁶² *Ibid*, 335.

So, when we admit that rationality can result in delusions, we effectively absolve rationality of its duty as the arbiter of truth *par excellence*. Polanyi identifies four grades¹⁶³ of epistemic activity and recognizes:

1. *Correct* inferences reached within a *true system*.
2. Erroneous conclusions arrived at within a true system (like an *error* committed by a *competent* scientist).
3. Conclusions arrived at by the correct use of a fallacious system. This is an *incompetent* mode of reasoning, the results of which possess *subjective validity*.
4. *Incoherence* and *obsessiveness* as observed in the ideation of the insane, particularly in schizophrenia.

According to this scheme, the justified beliefs of flat-earthers and the like are positioned in (3). Note that a fallacious system – which imposes certain epistemic obligations – can both be voluntarily adopted by individuals or emerge as a necessary and unavoidable framework in one’s upbringing or culture. In the case of a necessary and unavoidable framework, like that of the witch doctor, he is epistemically justified because *he didn’t know any better*. This view might come across as patronizing and condescending, but it is Polanyi’s candid interpretation of epistemic activity.

3.6.4 Epistemic contexts

For Polanyi, it’s clear that persons operate in a certain epistemic context, with each context having their own contingencies, intellectual and cultural heritage, and epistemic obligations.¹⁶⁴ These obligations are conceived deontologically as moral duties which emerge in a certain place and at a certain time. Polanyi views *tradition* as an embodiment of an epistemic context that transcends time and space. In tradition, a number of moral duties are passed on to new generations. Assenting to these moral duties results in justified beliefs. The question whether these beliefs are *true* remains to be seen, however. For these reasons, Echeverria claims that Polanyi advances a version of epistemic relativism.¹⁶⁵ This relativism, however, is *not* extended to truth itself, for Polanyi holds that truth itself remains an objective reality that can be contacted. This means that truth is not equal to what we justifiably believe, though parts of what we justifiably believe may assent with truth. Epistemic relativism differs from absolute relativism – in which there can be no truth independent of the systems that attain truth – in that epistemic relativism supposes that there will always be some shared premises and thus a common ground between different epistemic contexts.

¹⁶³ Polanyi, *PK*, 395.

¹⁶⁴ Cf. Polanyi, *PK*, 340. “...so also will I acknowledge that in childhood I have formed my most fundamental beliefs by exercising my native intelligence within the social milieu of a particular place and time.”

¹⁶⁵ Echeverria, ‘Realism, Truth, and Justification in Michael Polanyi’s Thought’, 15.

A new question arises; if Polanyi recognizes the value of different epistemic contexts in attaining justified beliefs, then which system is the true one? How do we make the leap from justified beliefs to *truth*? In answering these questions, we might first consider Polanyi's refutation of the idea that his ideas are subjectivistic. He writes that his position is "...based on a belief in an external reality and implies the existence of other persons who can likewise approach the same reality."¹⁶⁶ Simultaneously, Polanyi strives for an epistemology which doesn't fall prey to skepticism, foundationalism and radical doubt while still accounting for the possibility of error and delusion. He tries to "...stabilize knowledge against skepticism, by including its hazardous character in the conditions of knowledge..."¹⁶⁷ By hazardous character he means his idea of the indefiniteness of knowledge - the possibility of being erroneous. Polanyi acknowledges that mental acts cannot be postponed indefinitely on grounds that we might be mistaken; sooner or later, we have to make our decision with the best information available to us at the moment of choice, since "...every deliberate mental act has to decide its own timing, and the risks of further hesitation must be weighed against the risks of acting hastily."¹⁶⁸ The exact moment when we make the decision and stop postponing a mental act remains an inherently personal judgment.

3.6.5 Concluding contact with reality

Returning to the question whether we can determine the strength of a certain belief system, we will find that ultimately Polanyi rejects criteria like coherency or testimony, since even a coherent belief system may result in false beliefs – coherency doesn't equal truth. He admits that judging a certain belief system will always be a subjective enterprise, for "...the range within which I acknowledge mental activity as competent and beyond which I reject it as superstition, fatuity, extravagance, madness, or mere twaddle, is determined by my own interpretative framework."¹⁶⁹ Consequently, he claims that the belief system of the modern European is superior¹⁷⁰ compared to that of foreign cultures and belief systems - superior in that the knowledge it produces is preferable for it makes better contact with reality. Thus, for Polanyi, science makes more contact with reality than a 'superstitious' belief system would, though both frameworks engender justified beliefs.

¹⁶⁶ Polanyi, *PK*, 333.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 260.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 331.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 336.

¹⁷⁰ Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society*, 11-14.

Summarized, Polanyi doesn't provide any definitive proof why any belief system is objectively better – which means more *true* – compared to others. Subjectively speaking one can and should prefer a certain belief system over others, but this involves personal judgment. It seems that ultimately we are obliged to that leap of faith, for what we consider to “...be rational or warranted depends upon what sort of metaphysical and religious stance you adopt. It depends upon which kind of beings you think human beings are, what sorts of beliefs you think their faculties will produce when they are functioning properly, and which of their faculties or cognitive mechanisms are aimed at the truth.”¹⁷¹ We find now that this epistemological issue is becoming interwoven with metaphysics and theology, since choosing an interpretative framework is an inherently personal act guided by our most fundamental metaphysical and theological attitudes. In the next part we will discuss this personal act by use of the concept *fiduciary mode*, a concept that accounts for the importance of trust and belief when making epistemic propositions.

¹⁷¹ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 40.

3.7 THE FIDUCIARY MODE

In this part I will elaborate on the idea of the fiduciary mode as set forth by Polanyi. After briefly explain what the fiduciary mode is, I will try to justify its usage and discuss some criticism and counterarguments. Then, I will conclude on the fiduciary mode and summarize it.

3.7.1 The Act of Assent

Polanyi uses the concept of the fiduciary mode to free assertions of knowledge of the prison of declaratory sentences. He denies that science is exact and impersonal and seeks to liberate philosophy from these supposed standards of science. On the surface, science might seem impersonal and objective, but Polanyi claims that in fact it has a covert fiduciary character. The assertions that scientists and laymen make have an affective quality attached to them – they express certain convictions. In order to do justice to the importance of intellectual passions, Polanyi urges us to recast all declaratory sentences in a ‘fiduciary mode’, embodying the fiduciary act of definite person made at definite moment of time. Thus, instead of saying “p is true”, we should say “I believe p is true.”¹⁷² The difference between these two utterances may seem small or insignificant, but for Polanyi it is indispensable because this fiduciary mode both accounts for the inherently personal character of knowledge and stresses the importance of personal responsibility when stating beliefs.

When Polanyi speaks about truth he does so in a specific way – the *fiduciary mode*. It is important to ask *why* he chooses this particular mode of speaking, and what the implications of this choice are. He places the word true in the ‘act of assent’, which is exemplified when we say ‘I believe this’ or ‘I believe that’ to be true. This is an example of speaking in the fiduciary mode. When a person is confronted with a statement – let’s say, ‘Genesis is comprised of a historically accurate description’ – he or she is challenged to an act of assent. They can either believe or not believe the statement. It is in this way that we can speak of a Polanyian account of truth, because the act by which truth is declared has an inherent personal character. It is of an inherent personal character because it “...correctly reflects the fact that such an assertion is necessarily attributable to a definite person at a particular place and time...”¹⁷³ This doesn’t mean that we personally *create* truth when assenting to a statement. Our framework of language in which the fiduciary mode is manifested merely serves as a vehicle by which we posit our claims, theories and beliefs.

¹⁷² Polanyi, *PK*, 268-269.

¹⁷³ *Ibid*, 269.

While Polanyi deemed it true that language influences our decisions and thoughts¹⁷⁴, he still held the belief that truth is real, that it is 'out there', and that this belief should be propagated, for "belief in truth and in the love of truth itself (...) is the condition of all free thought."¹⁷⁵ Summarized in a straightforward way one could say that *belief* in truth is a necessary condition for truth to exist. If you believe that others don't believe in truth and aren't seeking it, further discussion will prove futile.

3.7.2 Susceptibility

However, doesn't this fiduciary account of truth make it susceptible to those who want to exert power and instrumentalize truth to achieve any end deemed necessary? How does Polanyi on this account differ from postmodern epistemology, in which the instrumentalization of truth is often a given? In the political realm, for example, the fiduciary mode might seem to license all sorts of unwarranted statements. A politician then might say that "experts claim that *P* is true, but I believe that *P* is false - ergo *P* is false." It seems that Polanyi acknowledged this danger¹⁷⁶, and also fought this idea by pointing out that it undermines the validity of truth and human responsibility. For him, the "...human mind is a seat of responsible choices."¹⁷⁷ Man has responsibilities and is endowed with dignity, and he has to live up to these responsibilities.

Unfortunately, Polanyi remains a bit vague in this regard. I don't find a strong answer in his thought to the question whether human responsibility is a proper response to the problem of arbitrariness of the fiduciary mode. Especially considering a follow-up question by Polanyi himself: How can man, when thought of as "...a material system, as a machine, as a center of appetites, and as part of a society subject to coercion by predominant interests, permit him to make any truly independent choices?"¹⁷⁸ In other words: Polanyi wants us to cast our assertions in the fiduciary mode but at the same time we are subject to biology, our desires and social influences. Hence, the fiduciary mode seems in danger of depriving itself to any claim to objective validity. How can beliefs then be expressed in a way that doesn't reduce their content to mere subjectivity? I have yet to find a satisfying answer to this question.

¹⁷⁴ Cf. Polanyi, *PK*, 118-119. "For different idioms determine different patterns of possible emotions and actions.", and for empirical evidence of language influencing cognitive processes see: Ahearn, *Living Language: An Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology*, 95-110.

¹⁷⁵ Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society*, 67.

¹⁷⁶ Cf. *Ibid*, 68. "I have yet to meet the objection that the position advocated here (...) could be used as a justification for a complete license of beliefs, for arbitrariness and intolerance."

¹⁷⁷ Polanyi, *Study of Man*, 89.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 63.

Additionally, these questions point at a root issue of the fiduciary mode – how does the linguistic mode of speaking in a fiduciary manner relate to truth itself? This problem was first raised by Dorothy Emmet¹⁷⁹, who asked whether a person affirming a proposition p – in the Polanyian style of ‘I believe p ’ – actually adds any quality to p or merely states that the person still believes p . In other words: does me assenting in a fiduciary manner to a statement make that statement any more true? Polanyi scholar Andy F. Sanders replied to this question¹⁸⁰ by pointing out that Polanyi never maintains the tenet that *believing* a proposition makes it true, and instead we may say that when we later realize we were mistaken, that p was not true. It is only that our *commitments* may have been entirely misinformed. In the following chapter I will discuss Polanyi’s idea of *commitment*, and why it matters to his epistemology.

3.7.3 Concluding the fiduciary mode

Summarized, we find that with the fiduciary mode, Polanyi tries to do justice to the inherently personal character of knowledge, as well as the indefinite and partial nature of knowledge. The act of assent, in which the fiduciary mode manifests itself, requires a belief in truth – believe in the existence of a shared objective reality which we can never fully grasp but nonetheless make some contact with. Polanyi’s fiduciary mode, however, seems susceptible to misuse and instrumentalization. While this quandary was recognized by Polanyi as well, I’m not convinced with his response to it. He points at the importance of human responsibility, but I haven’t found any clues on how to develop and cultivate this responsibility.

¹⁷⁹ Emmet, ‘Truth and the Fiduciary mode in Michael Polanyi’s Personal Knowledge’, 33.

¹⁸⁰ Sanders, ‘Truth in the Fiduciary Mode: A Reply to Professor Emmet, 33-35.

3.8 COMMITMENT

For Polanyi, commitment starts with the recognition of a problem, be it practical or intellectual, and results in the effort to find a solution. Originating as personal and creative originality, it later aims for universal and impersonal validity.¹⁸¹ In other words: universal and impersonal reality can only be approached from within the situation of personal commitment. The starting point is most often very personal; a question we're puzzled by, limitations we encounter when interacting in the world or a dispute which we have to solve. Polanyi holds that as human beings and natural inquirers we are fundamentally committed to truth. He claims that "...the shaping of our conceptions is impelled to move from obscurity to clarity and from incoherence to comprehension, by an intellectual discomfort similar to that by which our eyes are impelled to make clear and coherent the things we see."¹⁸² Polanyi scholar Jon Fennell distinguishes that we are always committed to some *content* of truth – truth is not a void concept. And, regarding Polanyi's life, "...That content is the contingent principles and ideals (the culture and civilization) of which he is very much a product and to which he is devoting his life."¹⁸³ This means that our commitment to truth has a contingent aspect. In this part I will first portray the structure of commitment as *deontological*. Then, I will expound on obligation towards truth, which the epistemic agent has to impose on his- or herself. This obligation seems inescapable, as I will briefly explain in the part of *cognitive structure*. Lastly, I will make concluding remarks on this part.

3.8.1 Deontology

The structure of commitment, which Polanyi sets forth, seems to be of a *deontological* kind. Its deontological nature is exemplified in two aspects: *responsibility* and *truth*. Whenever we act cognitively, there are duties and obligations that apply to our acts, such as the obligation towards truth of which I have spoken earlier, or the claims of reality upon the cognitive agent. These duties and obligations are dependent of the epistemic context in which the agent functions; think of duties like veracity, objectivity and suspicion. Plus, reality places claims on the cognitive agent. This means that Polanyi endows us with responsibility: when our investigations discover reality to be of certain nature, we must allow ourselves to be shaped by the claims reality lays upon us.

¹⁸¹ Polanyi, 'Lecture Nine, (b) Commitment, 175. <http://www.polanyisociety.org/Giffords/Gifford-S1-9-Generl-Dbt-Cmmtment-R-opt.pdf>

¹⁸² Polanyi, *PK*, 106.

¹⁸³ Fennell, 'Can Alasdair MacIntyre Relieve Grene's Polanyian Regret?', 51.

In other words: when we make a discovery we may not like it or have trouble believing it, but we have to be responsible and deal with the aforementioned discovery honestly and let it speak for itself.

For Polanyi, commitment is to be accepted as the background we operate in front of. Phrased differently: truth-attaining “...occurs within a context of faith manifest in commitment.”¹⁸⁴ The act of commitment to truth is comparable to the ‘works’ as understood in the context of Christianity: it is the effect, implementation and actualization of faith –faith in a transcendent reality - that preceded it. This implies that we start by believing in truth, that it is somewhere to be found and discovered, and only then we actually start searching for truth. Polanyi scholar Dorothy Emmet remarked that “...commitment is the act of personal acceptance of a conviction made with an orientation towards the reality one is seeking to understand.”¹⁸⁵ This means that epistemic activity starts with believing and a personal acceptance of this belief. Commitment here embodies more than just rational acknowledgement of belief; for Polanyi, the acceptance of belief implies committing oneself to a belief in order to be shaped by this belief – in a passive sense as well – towards a certain outlook on the world, on others and on truth. It has to be experienced personally. But, how does one commit him- or herself?

3.8.2 Obligation towards truth

Committing oneself implies abandoning “... all efforts to find strict criteria of truth and strict procedures for arriving at the truth.”¹⁸⁶ In his disquisition of the ideal of commitment, Polanyi also addresses the problem of committing on arbitrariness and whim. The subject shouldn’t just commit to whatever he or she likes, for “...the freedom of the subjective person to do as he pleases is overruled by the freedom of the responsible person to act as he must.”¹⁸⁷ But what makes it that the responsible person *must* act in a certain way? What makes it deontological? The answer Polanyi provides us has a circulatory and paradoxical element to it, since the agent’s “...whole person is involved in his commitment; the effort of reaching out to reality involves, even here, compulsion of oneself to make oneself conform to reality.”¹⁸⁸ This means that responsibility becomes an essential virtue in epistemic practice.

Commitment is in Polanyi’s philosophy closely related to trust. Consider stated truths like the heliocentric worldview or the existence of atoms – although most of us haven’t perceived these facts in our immediate experience, we nevertheless a-critically accept them by the testimony of others which we trust. In a way, we commit ourselves to the expertise of others whom we trust.

¹⁸⁴ Fennell, ‘Can Alasdair MacIntyre Relieve Grene’s Polanyian Regret?’, 57.

¹⁸⁵ Emmet, ‘Truth and the Fiduciary mode in Michael Polanyi’s Personal Knowledge’, 32.

¹⁸⁶ Polanyi, *PK*, 328.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 326.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 330.

Polanyi holds that, if one is to be serious about knowing, the knower should be guided by a sense of obligation towards the truth, which he equates with an effort to *submit* to reality.¹⁸⁹ This view correlates to virtue-ethics; the moral character of the knower is of vital importance and is thus a *conditio sine qua non*, with the central virtue of the knower being a high esteem for truth. The paradoxical nature of the moral character arises when we realize that, according to Polanyi, this inherently virtuous character is a self-set standard which the knower imposes on himself. However, this paradox can be resolved when we realize that in a competent mental act the agent "...does not do as he pleases, but compels himself forcibly to act as he believes he must."¹⁹⁰ An existential attitude towards the idea of truth has been introduced. The person who wants to know the facts, discover the real and distinguish illusion from reality, has to start by imposing on him- or herself an *obligation* towards truth. Our subjective self-confidence can only *then* claim to recognize an objective reality.¹⁹¹

3.8.3 Cognitive Structure

This obligation towards the truth, as described by Polanyi, resonates in the theory of the so-called *cognitive structure* of the mind.¹⁹² This theory consists of three distinct acts of cognition; experience, understanding and judgment, and it states that the mind must pass through these levels *per se*. Take, as an example, my previous sentence: you *experienced* the words, then tried *understanding* what I was saying and finally you *judged* whether my and your own understanding is correct. John Haught argues that this threefold cognitive structure operates not only in scientific but also in mundane understanding. In fact, he claims that these acts are inescapable and that we "...cannot help *trusting* in the imperatives of our minds."¹⁹³ We *must* make a tacit act of faith in our own critical intelligence. In summary, the obligation towards truth that Polanyi recognizes is elaborated further and confirmed by the likes of Lonergan and Haught, who vow for the inescapability of this framework towards truth. Polanyi scholar Esther L. Meek summarizes this as us being "...committed to pursuit of truth in principle as much as we are in fact."¹⁹⁴

¹⁸⁹ Polanyi, *PK*, 66.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 332.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, 109.

¹⁹² Lonergan, 'Cognitive Structure', 221-239.

¹⁹³ Haught, *Is Nature Enough? Meaning and Truth in the Age of Science*, 33-35.

¹⁹⁴ Meek, "'Recalled to Life": Contact with Reality', 77.

3.8.4 Concluding commitment

Thus, when we make an authentic move towards truth, we can't help but rely on ultimate beliefs and normative insights. These beliefs are not fundamentally demonstrable or provable – they precede any attempt at rational proof. Additionally, we should impose on ourselves an obligation towards truth. This obligation towards truth is manifested in faith and belief. In the following chapter I will elaborate on Polanyi's view of the role of faith and belief when reaching for truth.

3.9 BELIEF

In this part, the idea of commitment as discussed in the previous part will be embedded in Polanyi's idea of the role faith and believe play in epistemic activity. I will start with a bit of historical context of the relationship between knowledge and belief, after which I will explain how belief sets the aim towards the search of truth.

3.9.1 Antecedent belief

According to Polanyi, backing our epistemic activity is an elemental and unshakeable faith in the rational nature of things as well having faith in the human ability to grasp reality with our own concepts. He holds that nobody is able to operate outside this context of faith, or as he calls it, the fiduciary framework. Believing something, according to Polanyi, is manifested in a mental act. Passive experiences can neither be believed nor disbelieved – they can merely be experienced and weathered. Belief is thus involved as an active component.

Additionally, Polanyi claims that objectivism tolerates no open declaration of faith, which in turn forces modern beliefs to become clandestine and implicit.¹⁹⁵ These hidden beliefs are forced to the background, but are still operating in our epistemic activities. Problems arise when an epistemic framework claims itself to be objective and therefore immunizing itself from criticism. For Polanyi, it's of utmost importance to enounce your antecedent beliefs when claiming knowledge, for that allows one to be criticized accordingly.

In order to understand the role of faith and belief in seeking truth, we might join Polanyi in his commemoration of Augustine, for he claims Augustine to be the first 'post-critical' philosopher who "...taught that all knowledge was a gift of grace, for which we must strive under the guidance of antecedent belief: *nisi credideritis, non intelligitis.*" (Unless you will have believed, you will not understand).¹⁹⁶ Augustine championed this viewpoint because of his division between supernatural and natural knowledge - which exalted faith in revelation as the road to salvation – taught that natural science must reflect divine illumination.¹⁹⁷ Centuries later these insights are echoed by Anselm when he adopts the creed *Fides quaerens intellectum* to stress the basis of faith in God, in order to cultivate

¹⁹⁵ Polanyi, *PK*, 304.

¹⁹⁶Cf. St. Augustine, *On the Free Choice of the Will, On Grace and Free Choice, and Other Writings*, 1.2.4.11: 'The steps are laid down by the prophet who says, "Unless ye believe, ye shall not understand".' However, it was Clement of Alexandria who first quoted Isaiah 7: 9 in an epistemological context. See: Clement of Alexandria, 'The Stromata (Book II), chapter 2, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/02102.htm>

¹⁹⁷ Cf. St. Augustine, *Confessions*, XII.xv.35. "...both of us see it in the unchangeable truth itself, which is above our minds."

human reason. Faith here describes the connection between human thought and reality. I think it's safe to say that Polanyi joins in the intellectual tradition of Anselm and Augustine. Elsewhere Polanyi writes that "...truth is something that can be thought of only by believing it."¹⁹⁸ This antecedent belief, however, slowly crumbled away by the work of enlightenment philosophers such as Locke and Hume. Belief was duly reduced to the status of subjectivity and reason was left as the single engine flying the plane in pursuit of truth.¹⁹⁹ In a sense, Polanyi attempts to revisit the pre-enlightenment ideas concerning the pivotal role of belief in intellectual endeavors, thus making his philosophy 'post-critical' in a sense that it doesn't solely rely on the critical faculties of man. In stating the role of belief in epistemic activity Polanyi even claims that belief is the source of all knowledge.²⁰⁰

3.9.2 Aiming towards truth

Polanyi places the pursuit of truth in an unfolding and universal reality. Reality is unfolding because it harbors indeterminate future manifestations²⁰¹, meaning that when we hold a certain belief about reality, we expect reality to confirm our belief. Reality is universal, because "...By trying to say something that is true about a reality believed to be existing independently of our knowing it, all assertions of fact necessarily carry universal intent."²⁰² Reality can be perceived in many ways, but in the end there is only *one* reality, which implies that asserting something about said reality is necessarily universal. An important role is granted to the concept of *faith* in the Christian tradition, which he implements in his fiduciary component of knowing. For Polanyi, faith is necessary in the sense that it sets the *aim* of knowing towards the truth. As Polanyi scholar Richard Gelwick writes: "Dedication and surrender are part of the role of faith in the pursuit of truth and essential to it."²⁰³ This pursuit of truth is of an enduring nature: when the subject is passionately striving for truth it is redeemed when it finds partial understanding. Seeking truth is like a helpful beacon towards a moral life. Gelwick links this to the grace of God where the believer longs for. And, just like men can be obsessed with a problem which seems to be insoluble, so Christianity in a sense "...permanently satisfies man's craving for mental dissatisfaction by offering him the comfort of a crucified God."²⁰⁴

¹⁹⁸ Polanyi, *PK*, 322.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 279-281.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 280.

²⁰¹ Cf. *Ibid*, 122. "When we believe that we have truly designated something real, we expect that it may yet manifest its effectiveness in an indefinite and perhaps wholly unexpected manner. This intension comprises a range of properties which only future discoveries may reveal—confirming thereby the rightness of the conception conveyed by our term."

²⁰² *Ibid*, *PK*, 328.

²⁰³ Gelwick, 'A Clue Toward Knowing Truth and God, and Polanyi's "Forms of Atheism"', 26-28.

²⁰⁴ Polanyi, *PK*, 212.

Polanyi acknowledges that the knower is constrained by his or her own self-centeredness, aptitude and subjectivity, but still the knower is reaching for that which is seemingly unreachable – the truth. This state of mind is framed in a Christian way by designating it as *fallen*. “Fallen Man is equated to the historically given and subjective condition of our mind, from which we may be saved by the grace of the spirit.”²⁰⁵ In his search for truth man is fallible and prone to error, just like man is fallible and prone to error in an ethical sense, condemning man epistemologically as well as morally to a state of fallenness. Can we redeem ourselves from this condition?

For Polanyi it’s clear that it is not by our own faculties of reason that we redeem ourselves in search for truth – although reason is indispensable – but we can *approach*, although never fully grasp truth by “...losing ourselves in the performance of an obligation which we accept.”²⁰⁶ We have to impose on ourselves an obligation towards truth. This is an obligation we have to impose on our institutions as well, because it is in these institutions – churches, universities and research centers – that people are taught of and called to a transcending reality that is knowable yet never fully grasped. Polanyi is convinced that men, unlike other living beings like plants and animals, need a purpose which bears on eternity. “Truth does that, our ideals do it; and this might be enough, if we could ever be satisfied with our moral shortcomings and with a society which has such shortcomings fatally involved in its workings. Perhaps this problem cannot be resolved on secular grounds alone. But its religious solution should become more feasible once religious faith is released from pressure by an absurd vision of the universe, and so there will open up instead a meaningful world which could resound to religion.”²⁰⁷

3.9.3 Concluding belief

Summarized, it seems that fundamental to all our epistemic activity are beliefs. This idea is not new and unfamiliar, since it was already developed by Augustine and Anselm of Canterbury. Polanyi wishes to restore this idea, because he assesses that it was dismantled in the onslaught of modernity. Restoration of this idea is important because faith sets the *aim* of knowing towards the truth, like a helpful beacon. However, this aim towards truth can become blighted, just like the moral life of man is corrupted by sin. Man is condemned epistemologically as well as morally. And, just like we can’t redeem ourselves morally, we also can’t redeem ourselves epistemologically. Our knowing will always be imperfect. Still, Polanyi thinks that we should impose on ourselves the obligation towards truth, for we need a higher purpose which transcends us.

²⁰⁵ Polanyi, *PK*, 341.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 341-342.

²⁰⁷ Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 92.

3.10 CONCLUDING PART 2: MICHAEL POLANYI ON TRUTH

I started this chapter with the second subquestion of this thesis: *What is Michael Polanyi's conception of Truth?* Now, after I have examined and discussed Polanyi's epistemology, I will answer this question.

First, I want to stress the importance of putting Polanyi's thought in its historical context. As we have seen, he argues against modernism and positivism, hence characterizing his philosophy as being *post-critical*. For him, epistemic activity has to be freed from the prison of modernism and positivism which was, in his time, still the prevailing conception of science seeking "...to eliminate from science such passionate, personal, human appraisals of theories, or at least to minimize their function to that of a negligible by-play."²⁰⁸ In order to escape this prison, Polanyi criticizes and refutes typical enlightenment values such as objective detachment, impersonality and critical doubt. His position remains somewhat ambiguous, for Polanyi scholars differ in interpreting his thought; some envision him as rooted in the enlightenment, while others claim that he seeks a third way between the modern and postmodern. If I were to choose, I would say that Polanyi indeed seeks and finds an alternative. I make this decision on the basis of the importance of commitment and belief in Polanyi's epistemology, which are both opposed to the importance of doubt in modern and the prevalence of suspicion in postmodern epistemology.

Secondly, I claim that Polanyi's conception of truth is embedded in the context of *personal knowledge*. This implies that when seeking truth, the passionate participation of the epistemic agent plays a vital role. Additionally, epistemic activities ensue in the framework of *subsidiary* and *focal* awareness, stressing the a-critical acceptance of epistemic tools like intellectual frameworks, scientific theories and instruments when studying the focal. Hence, we always know more than we can tell. Knowledge is much more than just data and facts. This might seem like an obvious statement in the 21st century, but when Polanyi wrote his *Personal Knowledge* in the 1950's this idea was all but a truism.

Polanyi's realist position is elaborated in the idea of *contact with reality*, which is always partial – we can't construct an overarching and complete account of reality and therefore of truth. We can, however, make contact, resulting in us anticipating future confirmations of our knowledge derived from this contact.

²⁰⁸ Polanyi, *PK*, 16.

An important distinction made by Polanyi is the idea that justified belief does not equal truth. He emphasizes the possibility of being erroneous, which relates to his idea that all knowledge is indefinite. This raises a question; how does Polanyi prevent his epistemology in becoming nihilistic, since it seems that regarding all knowledge as indefinite and possibly being wrong prevents us from making any meaningful statements on reality. Polanyi attempts to solve this by showing that it is reasonable to believe what I might conceivably doubt. Hence, the ultimate arbiter when deciding on statements about reality will be belief.

Thirdly, Polanyi acclaims the importance of epistemic contexts. An epistemic context is the framework that imposes epistemic obligations, conceived as moral duties, on the person operating in the framework. Assenting to these obligations yields justified beliefs in their respective framework. While every epistemic framework can yield justified beliefs – even those that employ magic thought and superstition – some make more or better contact with reality than others do. Hence, Polanyi advances a form of epistemic relativism. I find strengths and weaknesses in this approach. Its main weakness is the idea that some epistemic contexts better grasp truth than others do, but Polanyi doesn't provide us with the means necessary to distinguish and rank adequately between different epistemic contexts. Another weakness is the possibility of misuse and instrumentalization of the fiduciary mode - the mode in which all statements of fact should be cast according to Polanyi - since it seems to license unwarranted statements like Donald Trump did, who could claim he believed the elections were won while the polling stations showed otherwise. I deem Polanyi's countermeasure to misuse, which consists of an emphasis on responsibility to truth, insufficient, for it contradicts his conception of man as fallen – he can't redeem himself. The main strength I find here is that Polanyi's theory accounts for the cultural heritage, personal context and the role of tradition when participating in epistemic activity. It also demonstrates that our beliefs about what is true or not are at least partially based on contingent factors like cultural heritage, language and belief.

In the fourth place, I find that Polanyi does justice to the role of commitment and belief when searching for truth. He convincingly argues that in practice, human inquirers are always committed to truth. Polanyi conceives epistemic activity in a deontological way, emphasizing *responsibility* and *truth*. Commitment always starts with a specific problem or issue one faces, and subsequently leads to a belief about what is going on. When a person entertains a certain belief, he or she is forced to either commit to the belief in question or abandon it. Additionally, this implies discarding all efforts to find strict criteria of truth and strict procedures for arriving at the truth. The subtlety of Polanyi's argument becomes clear when he speaks about the epistemic agent who imposes a virtuous character on him- or herself. This makes his theory vulnerable as well, for it requires a certain existential attitude with a high regard of truth, which not everyone can or will attain. Ultimately, it's a matter of belief. If

you want to attain truth, you will have to start by believing truth to exist, hence setting the aim *towards* truth. This is an obligation we have to impose on ourselves as well as on our institutions and communities.

Thus, if we return to the question that prompted this chapter: '*What is Michael Polanyi's conception of Truth?*', I can provide the following answer:

For Michael Polanyi, truth is equal to reality. It exists independently of my knowledge of it. Reality, however, can never be fully understood; we can only make *contact* with a part of reality. When we make contact with reality, it unfolds, manifesting unexpected confirmations of the knowledge we gained from this contact. Truth has to be gauged personally through the concepts of *subsidiary* and *focal* awareness. Belief, commitment, passions and intuition play a vital role when discovering truth. We may claim to possess knowledge of the truth, but we have to be aware that we could be wrong. Additionally, we always operate in a specific epistemic context, which engenders justified beliefs, but doesn't guarantee *true* beliefs. Ergo, from Polanyi's viewpoint, truth consists of contacting a part of reality while being driven by commitment from the framework of belief.

Now I have provided an answer to the first and second subquestion of this thesis, I can answer the central question of this thesis, which I will do in the following chapter.

4 PART 3: POLANYI'S PHILOSOPHY AS AN ANTIDOTE TO POST-TRUTH

In this final chapter I will apply Polanyi's idea of truth - as it is embedded in his philosophy of personal knowledge – to the perceived problems and the proposed reactions to PT. Before we can serve the antidote that Polanyi might offer us, we have to reminisce the poison. Accordingly, I will depart with a brief examination and summary of the problem of PT, as described extensively in the first chapter. Subsequently, I will present the antidote that Polanyi offers us. This will provide us with an answer to the central question of this thesis: *Does Polanyi's conception of truth offer an antidote to post-truth?*

4.1 THE PROBLEM OF POST-TRUTH

I have found a number of main points in examining PT. I want to start here with the viewpoint that PT is a smokescreen, a phantom and not a real problem, as described by Carrera and Habgood-Coote, a viewpoint which I partially assent to. I agree with the idea that PT is a convoluted term with a sloppy meaning, prone to being used haphazardly. Additionally, I agree that PT is being used 'propagandistically' – it's a derogative term used to label certain sources, persons or even institutions as untruthful and thus as wrong. However, I don't deem the subjectiveness and normativity of PT enough reason to conclude that PT is merely smoke and mirrors. The term has seen increased usage only recently, thereby not having had enough time for a more cohesive meaning to emerge. Propagandistic *usage* does not make a term have more or less true; it's about the question whether a term resonates with reality. While PT might include nonsense, there still seems to be elements of truth contained within it. These elements will be considered.

On the one hand, while I think politics might be a playground for PT, I consider it a truism that politics and truth have always been at odds, as elucidated by Arendt. Therefore, I won't characterize PT as political in nature. This doesn't mean that PT and politics are strictly separated; I merely state that epistemic dysfunction, a problem with truth that PT implies, cannot be explained politically since politics' main concern is not to tell truth, but to govern. On the other hand, I judge there to be two main points of PT: the breakdown of social trust as illustrated by Harsin and Waisbord and the influence of technology on our perception of truth. The breakdown of social trust is characterized by increasing distrust in traditional truth-tellers. I suspect that this increased distrust is at least partially caused by diverging metaphysical and theological attitudes in contemporary society. Antithetic views regarding how to live a good life, the existence of the supernatural and what human beings fundamentally are, influence our judgment whether something is true or not. Diverging metaphysical and theological attitudes result in diverging beliefs which result in turn to increasingly deviating epistemic contexts, effectively rendering truth more context-dependent.

Plus, I estimate that the breakdown of social trust is accelerated by technological developments who distort our view on truth by being able to fool us with artificiality, resulting in increased suspicion and distrust of our senses. So, we have distinguished a number of problems which are predominantly about *trust* and *technology*. Can Polanyi's epistemology aid us in solving these problems?

4.2 CONVIVIALITY

When we reminisce the proposed reactions to PT, we find a number of authors²⁰⁹ who advocated for a top-down approach: they want either governments, independent fact-checkers or large businesses in the technology sector to impose restrictions, educate the public or implement moderation and some kind of filter to the media in order to dilute the effects of PT. These authors argue that the public might then be inclined to more 'truthfulness'. Polanyi's approach is different, for in his search of truth he starts from the bottom upwards – from the person who is an epistemic agent towards scientific, religious and other social communities who co-operate in *conviviality*: a cultural life shared by a community in which systems of knowledge are understood and accredited.²¹⁰ Polanyi is extremely cautious with a top-down approach. Totalitarianism lurks when a government or overarching organization has a monopoly on public utterances, including statements of truth. He uses examples of Stalinist Russia and Nazi-Germany as an illustration of the threats which arise when a government imposes a specific notion of truth on science. He mentions the rise of a party-truth and a disproportionate emphasis on applied sciences in order to serve the state's interests as concrete occurrences of these threats.²¹¹

²⁰⁹ Cf. Sim, *Post-truth, Scepticism and Power*, 156; McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 117-120; and Lewandowsky e.a., 'Beyond misinformation: understanding and coping with the post-truth era', 32-34.

²¹⁰ Polanyi, *PK*, 216.

²¹¹ *Ibid*, 190-191.

Polanyi also underlines the necessity of open dissent which is necessary for a free society to function properly. This rivalry of opinions can "...maintain a universe of true facts so long as people can mutually trust each other to observe a proper level of factuality in drawing their conclusions from contradictory arguments."²¹² Thus, for Polanyi the notion of trust is of utmost importance when debating truth and fiction in society. He admits that this network of trust, which is fundamental to a factual consensus in society, is fragile.²¹³ I want to elaborate a bit more on the importance of trust in Polanyi's thought.

According to Polanyi, most of our factual beliefs – beliefs about what *is* and what *is not* – are influenced by our trust in other persons or organizations and in their authority, as I explained in the chapter 'commitment'. Consider the authority of an argument backed by a publication in the journal *Nature*, the authority of pastors in confessional churches or the authority of an esteemed newspaper. When the methods of fact-finding are mutually shared, the authority of these persons or organizations generally is accepted in their respective contexts. Problems arise, however, when mutual trust dissolves, leading to schisms in churches, alienation in society and division in organizations. This doesn't mean that Polanyi always want to keep the peace – he merely states that mutual trust is needed if people want to share factual truths. This emphasis on trust correlates with earlier observations on PT by Jayson Harsin, who proposes a renewing of social trust as the proper reaction to PT. Interestingly, Polanyi argues that a meaningful dialogue about truth can only be sustained "...if both participants belong to a community accepting on the whole the same teaching and tradition for judging their own affirmations. A responsible encounter presupposes a common firmament of superior knowledge."²¹⁴ Society needs a degree of mutual trust when deciding who the authority is to judge their affirmations and statements. If this trust in major authorities breaks down it becomes increasingly more difficult to share a common firmament of superior knowledge. This superior knowledge consists, besides "...the systems of science and other factual truths..." of "...all that is coherently believed to be right and excellent by men within their culture."²¹⁵ Thus, from Polanyi's viewpoint, a shared and communal set of beliefs is necessary in order for a society to operate in roughly the same epistemic context and make meaningful assessments of truth.

²¹² Polanyi, *PK*, 257.

²¹³ *Ibid*, 256. "The widely extended network of mutual trust, on which the factual consensus of a free society depends, is fragile. Any conflict which sharply divides people will tend to destroy their mutual trust and make universal agreement on facts bearing on the conflict difficult to achieve."

²¹⁴ *Ibid*, 378.

²¹⁵ *Ibid*, 375.

4.3 RESTORING TRUST

How then can we keep or renew this mutual social trust, according to Polanyi? He starts by emphasizing the relevance of intellectual passions. These passions can only survive "...with the support of a society which respects the values affirmed by these passions..."²¹⁶ Intellectual life, which according to Polanyi should dedicate itself to the search of truth, is upheld by a cultural life. It is of utmost importance in our quest for truth, as he writes that "...our adherence to the truth can be seen to imply our adherence to a society which respects the truth, and which we trust to respect it. Love of truth and of intellectual values in general will now reappear as the love of the kind of society which fosters these values, and submission to intellectual standards will be seen to imply participation in a society which accepts the cultural obligation to serve these standards."²¹⁷ In other words: a personal passion for truth needs a society that shares this passion in order to fulfill its needs. A society needs to believe in truth, and maybe even has to *love* truth passionately. This forces us to return to the adage *unless you have believed, you will not understand*, since we need antecedent belief in truth before we can meaningfully assess and mutually share it.

Polanyi also offers us a very important clue as to why the breakdown of major institutional truth-tellers endangers truth. He argues that the enterprises of law, art, religion and morality established a certain orthodoxy. This orthodoxy restricted the quest for truth somewhat, because certain teachings required to be accepted as indubitably true. However, this "...obligatory respect for the authority of these teachings implied a deep respect for truth."²¹⁸ Could it perhaps be that in the 21st century, where the acceptance of this orthodoxy is dwindling, respect for truth is also fading away?

Some authors have proposed to use science, in its broadest sense, to combat PT. This has been proven problematic, however, for *trust in* science is needed beforehand. If a group or person is distrustful of mainstream science, then scientific arguments probably won't compel said person in changing their arguments or worldview. Polanyi acknowledges this conundrum when he writes that "...the cultivation of science by society relies on the public acceptance (...) as to what science is and who are scientists."²¹⁹ Scientific thought and its outcomes are not metaphysical or purely objective, but are interwoven with the society in which said science functions. As for using science as antidote to PT, we can infer that some kind of belief in science is needed before it can prove antidotal.

²¹⁶ Polanyi, *PK*, 216.

²¹⁷ *Ibid*, 216.

²¹⁸ *Ibid*, 226-227.

²¹⁹ *Ibid*, 230.

According to Polanyi, the public who doesn't know the ins-and-outs of science has to grant confidence to the whole body of science. The public has to *believe* that science provides us with truths; not ultimate truths, but the best truths available about the natural world, while staying open for correction. Ultimately, this is a *cultural* ideal which only works when it is shared mutually by the members of said culture.²²⁰ If this cultural ideal is upheld successfully, a kind of pact can be made between society as a whole and the community of scientists, resulting in the creation of scientific institutions. Could fragmentation or dissolution of cultural ideals cause devaluation of an ideal like scientific thought? If breakdown of social trust is indeed a major aspect of PT, as I have argued, then this pact and belief in the truth-telling abilities of science is dissolving, and mutual confidence disappears. Unfortunately, Polanyi doesn't provide us with a direct solution to this problem, for he merely observes the importance of the cultural idea of truth.

²²⁰ Polanyi, *PK*, 232.

4.4 REFUTING CRITICAL THOUGHT

In the first series of his Gifford Lectures Polanyi writes about those who advocate philosophic doubt as an antidote to credulity and fanaticism. We find a similar idea with those who confront PT by use of critical thought and doubt, who accuse ‘post-truthers’ of credulity and gullibility. Polanyi criticizes these advocates of radical doubt, for their declared principles conceal what they want *de facto*: that their own beliefs should be taught, because they think that their beliefs will save us from error and delusional thinking. These philosophers – Polanyi mentions Bertrand Russell – view radical doubt as the cardinal way to truth. For the sake of nuance: Polanyi admits that he shares many beliefs held by Russell, but he urges him to express rationalism in a form that faces up to its own fiduciary character.²²¹ This implies that, according to Polanyi, advocates of radical doubt should start with admitting that they are making assumptions on their own as well, while simultaneously conceding to the indefiniteness of their belief. Polanyi wants to eliminate fundamentalist thought while maintaining a healthy dose of doubt.

We’ve seen that many authors have proposed a critical approach to PT. Have they perhaps forgotten the importance of trust by discarding trust as naïve, and instead focusing on suspicion, doubting and being critical? Polanyi teaches us that knowledge always requires a leap of faith and commitment to a certain belief. He requires us to submit to reality by being humble: we could be mistaken and should welcome reality to correct our erroneous beliefs. There is good reason why he named his philosophy ‘post-critical’: he wanted to provide an alternative to modern critical epistemology, while at the same time not falling in the postmodern trap of ubiquitous doubt and radical relativity. Adherents of a critical approach to PT want to banish personal aspects like passions, belief and emotions; those are deemed hindrances in approaching truth. Polanyi, however, takes passions, belief and emotions for what they are worth: indispensable in search of truth. Passions propel and thrust us towards truth, belief provides the *telos* of truth – that truth is there, waiting to be discovered – and emotions guide us in our search of truth by intuitively aiding us. The passionate participation of the epistemic agent plays a vital role. Relying solely on critical thought would be trying to evict the primary driving force when searching for truth.

²²¹ Polanyi, ‘Lecture Nine, (a) General Doubt’, 164-166.

Some authors on PT dispose of the idea that an independent and objective reality existing can be described with the use of facts.²²² They might argue that truth is socially constructed. Polanyi is a bit more nuanced here. He admits to the notion of an objective reality existing ‘out there’, while at the same time it is only personally knowable. Think of two poles: the subjective epistemic agent and objective reality waiting to be discovered. I think Polanyi can bring an element of calmness in the heated debate of PT with his conception of personal knowledge, since knowledge doesn’t have to be definite while still making contact with reality. This leaves open the option for improvement while at the same time undergirding contemporary knowledge.

Denying the power of human thought to discover truth has severe consequences. Doubting and disbelieving every proposition would ultimately “...destroy belief in truth and in the love of truth itself which is the condition of all free thought”²²³, with ‘metaphysical nihilism’ as its bitter result. According to Polanyi, what is necessary for truth to flourish in society can be summarized in these four propositions: (1) That there is such a thing as truth; (2) that all members love it; (3) that they feel obliged and (4) are in fact capable of pursuing and knowing it.²²⁴

An important aspect of Polanyian philosophy is the idea that truth *itself* can and should be distinguished from what someone is holding to be true, an idea which can be labeled *epistemic relativism*. It holds that persons operate in different epistemic contexts, each engendering justified beliefs when their respective moral duties are obliged. Think for example of our western context: only if people oblige to moral duties like suspicion to one’s own passions, critical thinking, savoring empirical evidence, banishing belief and detaching emotionally as much as possible, only then justified beliefs are cultivated and deemed *true*. Research on PT has shown a gap in regard to different epistemic contexts – it’s hardly ever mentioned. Could some of the conceived problems of PT be caused by persons operating in different epistemic context, each resulting in justified beliefs, while at the same time distrusting and ridiculing each other? Or has the notion of different epistemic contexts never been mentioned altogether in the discourse on PT, leaving many scholars with other explanations for the emergence of PT?

²²² Cf. Carrera, ‘The Strategems of Post-Truth, 2. “There are no facts, or, to be more precise, there are no significant facts outside of the discourse that makes them emerge as such. Facts belong neither to an objective world nor to a subjective one, but to the world of storytelling and discourse, and it is as discursive facts that their entity must be valued.”

²²³ Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society*, 62.

²²⁴ *Ibid*, 57.

The idea of epistemic contexts, as set forth by Echeverria based on Polanyi, is ambiguous in regards to PT. On the one hand it can help understand why people conceive of different truths while there is only one reality, since diverging epistemic frameworks produce different justified beliefs. On the other hand, the idea of epistemic contexts could augment the breakdown of social trust, since it justifies a certain degree of relativism and provides some legitimation for extreme beliefs, since even extreme beliefs can be justified in this system as long as one obliges to the moral epistemic duties of that system.

4.5 DIGITAL INDWELLING

Polanyi holds that we contact reality through the indwelling of frameworks, such as scientific theories, a myriad of tools and media like radio and television, as well as internet in the 21st century. This insight offers us clues to an understanding of the role technology plays in the manifestations of PT. If we recall the idea of *subsidiary* and *focal* awareness, we can infer that people increasingly use digital technology in a subsidiary way. In other words: our contact with reality is increasingly being mediated in digital ways, while we are often unaware of the implications and future consequences of our indwelling in these digital frameworks when contacting reality. Additionally, the amount of misinformation and disinformation in digital media is increasing, effectively polluting the digital framework through which we contact reality.

Polanyi, who wrote from the 1940s to the 1970's, doesn't provide us with any direct clues to how contemporary technology operates as a subsidiary framework through which we contact reality. However, his thought makes us aware that technology can and does act as a subsidiary framework towards the focal – think of human interaction, which increasingly takes place by use of digital video and audio. I identified the increased possibilities of creating extremely realistic images and video by use of artificial intelligence as an augmenting factor of PT. It is an augmenting factor because it induces distrust; if I find myself increasingly being deceived by fake video or images, I will become more and more suspicious of footage presented digitally. Polanyi doesn't offer a direct solution to this problem, but his epistemology clarifies that technology is not a neutral concept but acts as a framework through which we perceive and make contact with reality. From this idea I also infer that *if* digital media is playing a major role as a framework through which we contact reality and therefore truth, and *if* this framework of digital media is increasingly being polluted with mis- and disinformation, *then* it will become more and more difficult to contact reality and therefore grasp truth.

4.6 CONCLUDING PART 3: POLANYI'S PHILOSOPHY AS AN ANTIDOTE TO POST-TRUTH

I want to return to and answer the central question that prompted this thesis:

Does Polanyi's conception of truth offer an antidote to post-truth?

The answer I will give here consists of four parts. First, I argued that PT is not a political problem, as many authors have argued, but mainly the breakdown of social trust, augmented by technological developments that enable artificiality and mis- or disinformation. Major institutional truth-tellers are becoming less influential, while individual sources gain authority. Proposed reactions to PT adhere too much to critical thought and fail to account for the role of belief, passions and subjectiveness in epistemic activity.

Secondly, Polanyi offers us a conception of truth in which truth equals reality. Reality can never be fully understood or captured, since we can only make *contact* with reality, making our knowledge indefinite and partial. When in the process of discovering truth, Polanyi awards belief, commitment and intellectual passions with an important role in our epistemic activity – they provide us with a framework of commitment. All epistemic activity takes place in an epistemic context which yields justified beliefs. These beliefs however, are not guaranteed to be true.

Thirdly, when I couple the problem of PT and Polanyi's conception of truth, I find a number of interesting interactions. Polanyi doesn't assent to a top-down approach as some authors have proposed in combating PT; he deems it dangerous because it opens up possibilities to totalitarianism. Additionally, Polanyi refutes critical thought as the main antidote to PT, for he deems critical thought to be ultimately self-defeating as I have explained in the chapter *Refutation of enlightenment*. Instead, he urges us to pay attention to the passionate participation of the epistemic agent when searching for truth, and thereby granting belief, commitment and passions a pivotal role in epistemic activity. Additionally, Polanyi emphasizes the importance of social trust, which manifests itself by a common firmament of superior knowledge. A shared antecedent belief in this superior knowledge and truth is necessary for a society to respect truth. Polanyi's ideas of *subsidiary knowledge* and *indwelling* help us recognize why digital technologies augment PT, since we increasingly use this digital technology in a subsidiary way to contact reality.

In the fourth place, concluding this part, I provide a concise answer to the central question of this thesis: *Does Polanyi's conception of truth offer an antidote to post-truth?*

- Most proposed solutions to PT are based on critical thought while rejecting subjective faculties like passions, emotion and belief. However, these faculties play an important role in all epistemic activity. Polanyi convincingly argues the indispensability of these faculties and grants them an adequate role in the search of truth;
- PT is augmented by technological developments enhancing artificiality. Polanyi's notions of *subsidiary awareness* and *indwelling* can help explain this conundrum, since indwelling in a digital framework that is being polluted by mis- and disinformation hinders our ability to contact reality and therefore assess truth;
- A major facet of PT is the breakdown of social trust. Polanyi's thought can clarify this breakdown, for he offers us clues why belief in truth and mutual trust is necessary for a society in order to cultivate knowledge. Unfortunately, Polanyi doesn't offer a direct solution to this problem, except for the clue that a degree of obligatory respect for the authority of orthodox teachings consisting of superior knowledge, implies respect for truth. It remains vague, however, how this respect for truth can be restored;

And thereby conclude this thesis.

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