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REASON, REALITY AND RHETORICAL TRUTH IN THE DIGITAL AGE

<https://doi.org/10.17234/9789533793337.09>

Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between rhetoric and truth in the context of the digital revolution and the so-called post-truth era. After clarifying the different meanings of “post-truth”, it argues that contemporary challenges to truth are not merely epistemic but also ontological, insofar as digital technologies increasingly reshape our experience of reality itself. Drawing on alethic realism, the paper defends a realist conception of truth according to which statements are true insofar as they are grounded in reality, broadly understood. On this basis, it highlights the crucial role of Aristotle’s principle of non-contradiction as a necessary condition for meaningful discourse, rhetorical persuasion and political life. Far from being indifferent to truth, rhetoric presupposes it as the orienting horizon of judgement and action, especially in political, juridical and communicative contexts affected by digital misinformation and artificial intelligence. In conclusion, the paper argues for restoring the unity between rhetoric, politics and ethics, proposing a virtue-ethical framework capable of addressing the techno-moral challenges posed by the digital age.

Keywords: rhetoric, post-truth, fourth revolution, digital ontology, alethic realism



1. Introduction

How can rhetoric still orient judgement towards truth in a digital infosphere that erodes the very distinction between reality and appearance? This question frames the central problem addressed in this paper, with particular attention to the claim to truth that, according to the interpretation proposed here, accompanies rhetorical persuasion. The argument proceeds as follows. First, the salient characteristics that define the present era, widely described as the post-truth era, are examined. The discussion then explores the possible interpretations of this expression and its relationship to the digital revolution, a phenomenon that is both prominent and consequential in the contemporary world. The subsequent section considers the repercussions of these transformations for rhetorical persuasion, critically addressing the role of truth within it. To this end, the paper adopts the theory of truth known as alethic realism and illustrates some of its central concepts. This makes it possible to focus on the value of the principle of non-contradiction in an Aristotelian sense and on its fundamental role in intersubjective communication and rhetorical persuasion. Finally, some conclusions are drawn by reconnecting rhetoric and ethics from the perspective of virtue ethics, which proves indispensable for addressing the issues that have emerged.

2. Post-truth and the fourth revolution

As is widely acknowledged, it has become commonplace to claim that we live in a post-truth era, a concept that can be used

within rhetorical studies, [to accentuate] two meanings of the word. The first – of post-truth as a description of a specific period – was popularised in 2016 and referred to what was understood as the present state of politics and public debate in Western society [...]. In theoretical discussions, a second meaning of the term “post-truth” tends to surface; namely, post-truth not as a period but as an approach to the world characterised by a denial of truth. When understanding post-truth in this second way, certain connections between the post-truth concept and the rhetorical tradition come to the fore (Bengtson 2024, 206).

This connection is hardly accidental, since “the question of truth – or rather the lack thereof – has been haunting the discussion of rhetoric since its Greco-Roman beginning” (Bengtson 2024, 3). At the same time, for precisely this reason, “there is nothing new with the so-called ‘post-truth era’” (D’Agostini 2019, 266), since the problem of truth is not reducible to “a generalised indifference to fact-checking in favour of emotions or biased beliefs” (D’Agostini 2019, 266).

The question therefore arises: what is genuinely new in the present situation, and why does it require renewed philosophical attention?

From a general perspective, it may be useful to emphasise that we may be living in a kind of “double post-truth” era. As Franca D’Agostini suggests, “we live in a post-post-truth era, as the problem of truth has become generally acknowledged: the notion of truth has gained a new and unexpected importance in our lives” (D’Agostini 2019, 267), especially in political and juridical contexts, which are themselves rhetorical domains. Since the end of the Second World War, the emergence of supranational organisations has fostered a global focus on core values. The right to truth has become widely recognised within transitional justice, referring to the shift from totalitarian regimes to democratic systems. Alongside the development of human rights, there has been a growing legal emphasis on uncovering state and institutional crimes. Moreover, the urgent need to address the uncontrolled spread of online misinformation has significantly influenced the practice



of justice, particularly regarding truth and authenticity. In other words, “humans’ need for truth has received new attention and has been universally acknowledged” (D’Agostini 2019, 282).

This renewed attention to truth is closely connected to a broader process of the democratisation of social life, understood as “a phenomenon variously involving any societies, in the entire world: the possibility of participating, sharing, expressing and defending ideas and opinions, conceded to more and more people, ideally to anyone” (D’Agostini 2019, 282). This process has been made possible by the digital revolution, which shows that we are “alethic animals” (D’Agostini 2019, 282). This expression highlights the fact that “we need truth, and we are aware of our need for truth, just because we have an uncontrollable quantity of truths, falsities, partial truths and partial falsities everywhere, and everywhere we risk being deceived and deceiving ourselves” (D’Agostini 2019, 282).

In other words, the need for truth becomes particularly salient when truth is lacking. In public and rhetorical contexts, we invoke truth when certainty is absent or when we must assess the reliability of others’ claims.

The search for reasons, in this sense, presupposes a commitment to truth.

Despite widespread criticism of the concept, it is therefore worth reaffirming that “the very term ‘post-truth’ puts the question of truth, or rather the lack thereof, at the centre of the post-truth debate” (Bengtson 2024, 3). Yet this occurs at a historical moment in which “language seems to lack reference to facts, truth, and reality” (McComiskey 2017, 40), as evidenced by the increasing difficulty of fact-checking in public communication. This difficulty is closely related to the roles of rhetoric and digital technologies. Rhetorical persuasion can undoubtedly be used to obscure reality and misrepresent facts, and contemporary artificial intelligence tools significantly amplify this risk. The utilization of state-of-the-art artificial intelligence tools serves to facilitate this process, and maybe, to a certain extent, it may decree the definitive crisis of fact-checking, which is overwhelmed by large language models and generative AI systems, as well as pre- and debunking, echo chambers, and so on (see Zollo et al. 2017). We cannot say whether or not this will be the case, nor can we address it here, but we believe that, for the reasons we will explain, none of this overshadows the question of truth; rather, it makes it even more urgent as it is becoming increasingly difficult to ascertain.

These dynamics contribute to a situation in which it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish what is real, even when dealing with highly credible documents and images. As a result, scholars have argued that traditional fact-checking must be complemented by argument-checking aimed at evaluating the quality and validity of reasoning (see Lancar 2023).

While these issues cannot be explored in detail here, they highlight a paradoxical condition: the digital revolution intensifies our need for truth while simultaneously eroding our access to reality.

This paradox becomes even clearer when considered in light of what has been called the “fourth revolution”, which, among other things, is giving rise to a new ontology through a massive transition from the analogue to the digital. “ICTs are transforming the very nature of, and hence what we mean by, reality, by transforming it into an infosphere” (Floridi 2014, 40). We are increasingly living “onlife”, as “with interfaces becoming progressively less visible, the threshold between here (analogue, carbon-based, offline) and there (digital, silicon-based, online) is fast becoming blurred” (Floridi 2014, 43).

According to Floridi, these changes require a new ontology. Our traditional materialist ontology is challenged by the new entities that populate the infosphere, which “is not a virtual environment



supported by a genuinely ‘material’ world. Rather, it will be the world itself that will be increasingly understood informationally, as an expression of the infospheres” (Floridi 2014, 50). “Finally, the criterion for existence [...] is also changing [...] to be is to be interactable” (Floridi 2014, 53). In such a context, both objects and subjects undergo transformation, and identity itself becomes unstable.

In this context, it becomes plausible to speak of a progressive loss of reality. As Han observes, “the digital order de-reifies the world by informatizing it [...] We are today experiencing the transition from the age of things to the age of non-things. Information, rather than things, determines the lifeworld” (Han 2022, 2). In the pre-digital world, we believed that information (basically, statements on certain state-of-the-world) illuminated the world. But now we should rather say that

information by itself does not illuminate the world. It can even have the opposite effect. From a certain point onwards, information does not inform – it deforms. [...] The rapid advance of informational entropy, that is, of informational chaos, pushes up into a post-factual society. The distinction between true and false is erased (Han 2022, 6).

The question thus becomes unavoidable: how can truth be preserved when reality itself appears increasingly elusive?

3. Some implications for rhetoric

Against this background, one conclusion can already be drawn: rhetoric is not indifferent to truth. On the contrary, rhetorical practices are precisely those contexts in which the need for truth becomes most acute, because they are inseparable from power – specifically, the power of words and political influence. The same discourse that enables the affirmation of truth can also manipulate it.

It might be objected that truth would be less necessary outside social contexts, for instance, in hypothetical situations of complete isolation. Yet even such thought experiments reveal its indispensability. Consider the case of an individual stranded on a desert island: believing that a fruit is edible does not make it so. The painful experience of error reveals the need for truth as a guide for action and self-understanding. From basic survival decisions to complex political choices, truth functions as an orienting principle.

Moreover, rhetoric is not limited to interpersonal persuasion. Individuals also engage in self-persuasion, questioning and evaluating their own beliefs through internal dialogue (Arendt 2003). We engage in self-dialogue, creating, through mental language, an image – and therefore a reality – of a certain kind, which we are able to experience and towards which we are able to express evaluations, that is, statements that may be true or false. This reflective activity presupposes the distinction between true and false and confirms that rhetorical and alethic dimensions are deeply intertwined. Human beings are, as Aristotle famously argued, *zoon politikon*: political and linguistic animals endowed with *logos*, the capacity to articulate what is just and unjust, expedient and inexpedient (for a deeper analysis of this conception, see Puppo 2024). The notion of being alethic animals is connected to this phenomenon, without one aspect preceding the other. The linguistic and political dimensions are co-original (Heidegger 2009), as the alethic dimension is.

Rhetoric, therefore, is first and foremost this very human way of being: our way of being *zoon politikon*. From this perspective, truth is not an object that we need to find. Rather, it is what we need when we discuss someone else’s – or even our own – opinion, when someone, or even we ourselves, tell how things stand, and we seek to understand whether what is said is true or not.



We need truth when we ask how things stand, primarily together with others, aware that, as Aristotle observed, we possess *logos* because we persuade and are persuaded, and aware that we can be mistaken, since we can also be persuaded of falsehood.

In this sense, rhetoric expresses a fundamental mode of human existence rather than a mere technique. Truth, accordingly, is not an object to be possessed but a relation between discourse and reality (Agazzi 2014). As classical formulations suggest, “true is the discourse that says how things stand” (Plato, *Cratylus*, 385c) or, as Aristotle states, “falsehood consists in saying of that which is that it is not, or of that which is not that it is; truth consists in saying of that which is that it is, or of that which is not that it is not” (Arist., *Metaph.* IV, 7, 1011b26).

This is a form of realism (though not of the correspondence theory¹); more precisely, it refers to the theory of truth known as alethic realism, first advanced by Alston (1996) and subsequently developed, among others, by Franca D’Agostini. Its main principle states “that if ‘p’ is true, then there must be something that makes it true. The theory is therefore based on the very general and unspecified idea that ‘some existent, some portion of reality’ makes a proposition true” (D’Agostini 2019, 275). In this case, a very broad concept of reality is assumed, in the name of an ontological pluralism that does not require reference only to hard facts (Puppo 2018; Puppo 2024).

This conception of truth is deliberately minimal and “sufficiently bromidic to be acceptable to common sense” (D’Agostini 2019, 275). Its importance lies in the fact that it operates across diverse domains – law, politics, science and everyday communication – providing a shared framework for evaluating claims. Despite the multiplicity of statements that can be made (and consequently a plurality of verification methods), the fundamental structure of truth remains constant and corresponds to the model mentioned above: a statement is true insofar as it conveys how things are. This is the “conceptual function of truth and when it is mentioned or thought, what people normally think and mean is the reference to things (*ta onta*)” (D’Agostini 2019, 275), even though “being is said in many ways” (Arist., *Metaph.* 1003a 34).

The relationship between language and reality thus constitutes the space in which the truth value of discourse is at stake. When the objectivity of reality is undermined, truth itself begins to erode, eventually giving way to forms of relativism that risk engulfing reality rather than merely interpreting it. This condition is not unprecedented. As noted earlier, similar dynamics of “loss of reality” can be traced back to the Sophists, for whom man, rather than reality, was taken as the measure of all things. It is therefore significant to recall Aristotle’s response to this drift, especially in light of the fact that today the role of “measure” appears to be shifting not from reality to the individual, but from the individual to digital technologies. This issue deserves careful consideration, since the digital revolution – and the consequent destabilisation of traditional ontological categories – has also generated a crisis of responsible persuasion. Increasingly, the formation of opinions

¹ “The important point that needs to be stressed now is that there is a certain primacy of realism, as far as T[ruth] is concerned, but it does not seem to imply all the features we normally ascribe to the notion of ‘correspondence’. Actually, another factor of misunderstanding is that the concept T has been taken as implying a conception of reality informed by the idea of language ‘mirroring’ reality or facts, whereby ‘real’ is mainly intended as what is graspable by perceptual means, and/or facts are only static facts and not events, and/or the only world of facts is the natural world, and similar ideas. In fact, our use of the concept of truth does not seem to imply any of these theses. [...] The realism [...] (and of the ancient T-theory) does not involve the main distinctive features of correspondence: it does not imply any isomorphism of reality and language, or any one-one relation between them either; it does not imply any ‘compositional-atomistic’ conception of reality, or any symmetric relation language-world” (D’Agostini 2019, 274–275). A more extensive discussion of the realism under consideration here is presented by D’Agostini 2013. Some aspects of the issue can also be explored in greater depth in the more recent De Caro 2020.



is delegated to large language models and generative AI systems, which now play a pervasive role in shaping how reality is perceived and interpreted. For many, access to the world no longer occurs primarily through direct experience but through the screens of mobile phones, tablets and computers – devices that risk functioning not merely as windows onto reality, but as substitutes for reality itself.

4. Brief notes on the role of the principle of non-contradiction

It was precisely in defence of reality and truth that Aristotle fought, developing his metaphysical conception of the principle of non-contradiction, for which he “fought [...] not as one fights for one’s theoretical ideas, which may be right but are emotionally colourless, but as one fights for vital goods” (Łukasiewicz 2006, 131; my translation). Even critics such as Łukasiewicz acknowledged its fundamental practical and ethical value, describing it as “the only weapon against errors and lies” (Łukasiewicz 2006, 140; my translation).

Without the principle of non-contradiction, affirmation and negation could coexist without exclusion, making it impossible to expose falsehood or to convey how things actually are. Every act of speaking or thinking involves reference and determination: to say something is necessarily to distinguish it from what it is not. If this distinction collapses, discourse itself loses meaning. Aristotle’s defence of this principle was deemed necessary because those

were periods of significant social dissolution in Greece, characterised by national discord and pervasive political corruption at the hands of Philip of Macedon [...]. In that challenging political juncture, the Sophists introduced elements of intellectual and moral dissolution. The attack was of a severity that far surpassed that of Macedonian rule; by dismantling the tenets of reason, the attackers effectively undermined the very foundations of both social life and individual existence (Łukasiewicz 2006, 130; my translation).

Aristotle’s philosophical edifice was erected in defence of this principle, safeguarding the principle of non-contradiction, knowledge and the social nature of human beings as *zoon politikon*. For Aristotle, as is well known, the principle of non-contradiction cannot be denied (e.g. Puppo 2018; 2024): its undeniability depends on its ontological value. This is demonstrated by the fact that every discourse or thought is characterised by the act of designating, that is, by saying or thinking something. This “something”, in order to be precisely that which is said or thought and nothing else, must be determined with respect to everything else and therefore distinguished from it. The link established through the act of designating between language and reality must be non-contradictory. Otherwise, at best, something else would be said or thought; at worst, nothing meaningful would be said or thought. In the absence of this condition, it would be impossible to distinguish one thing from another. “And we thus get the doctrine of Anaxagoras, that all things are mixed together; so that nothing really exists” (Arist., *Metaph.* 1007b).

This line of reflection retains its full theoretical relevance. Thought and discourse are intrinsically intentional and referential: whenever we think, speak or act, we relate to something that is taken to be the case. Even if reality undergoes profound transformations in its ontological articulation, this referential structure cannot be suspended without undermining the very possibility of meaning. The issue, therefore, does not concern the disappearance of reality as such, but the erosion of a shared ontological horizon. Reality increasingly presents itself as fragmented and discretised, in a manner analogous to digital images composed of pixels: internally discontinuous yet phenomenologically seamless.



Digital post-truth dynamics function as a practical denial of the principle of non-contradiction. Under these conditions, reality is no longer experienced as a common framework within which claims can be evaluated as true or false, but as a plurality of relative and self-enclosed constructions, each apparently capable of coexisting with the others (as in echo chambers and self-confirmation phenomena). Such a scenario, however, is incompatible with the logic of public reason and collective decision-making, which presuppose a minimally shared world to which rhetorical persuasion can appeal. Seen in this light, the contrast with the sophistic condition becomes sharper. In the classical context, the loss of objectivity consisted in the substitution of reality with a persuasive narrative that still functioned as a unifying horizon for the community. In the contemporary digital condition, by contrast, the risk lies in the disintegration of any common horizon into a multiplicity of singular, non-communicating ontological perspectives, within which persuasion no longer orients judgement but merely reinforces isolation.

5. Conclusion

This paper has argued that contemporary challenges to truth are characterised by a dual movement: a distancing from truth and a distancing from reality. These movements are distinct yet deeply interconnected, as illustrated by the framework of alethic realism, which links the truth of discourse to its grounding in reality. Against this background, the analysis has highlighted the role of rhetoric as a practice oriented towards judgement rather than mere effect and has emphasised the enduring relevance of the principle of non-contradiction.

This complexity must also be borne in mind when considering another aspect. The Aristotelian view, based on the anthropological concept of *zoon politikon*, links politics with rhetoric (e.g. Tessitore 1996) but also with ethics (Herrick 1992; Johnstone 1980; Rowland and Womack 1985), a triad that has been lost over time – according to Arendt (2003), it definitively disappeared with Kant, who was also responsible for the birth of moral philosophy in the strict sense. However, the time has come to restore this fundamental unity, particularly in light of the complex technological phenomena we are currently experiencing. We have previously seen, in discussing the democratisation of social life, the link that exists between politics, rhetoric, and technology. At the same time, what unites technology and ethics is clear: they are

connected because technology invites or affords specific patterns of thought, behaviour, and valuing; it opens up new possibilities for human action and forecloses or obscures others. [...] Today's technologies open their own new social and moral possibilities for action. [...] Thus, 21st-century decisions about how to live well – that is, about ethics – are not simply moral choices. They are technomoral choices, for they depend on the evolving affordances of the technological systems that we rely upon to support and mediate our lives in ways and to degrees never before witnessed (Vallor 2018, 2).

Of course, the triad referred to above includes the ethical dimension in relation to the Aristotelian model of virtue ethics, which might appear ill-suited to addressing issues related to technological innovation. However, this is not the case, and in fact “with emerging technologies, a virtue ethics approach will generally be more useful than one that relies upon consequentialist or deontological principles” (Vallor 2018, 26). We cannot go into detail here about the different ways in which the main concepts of virtue ethics – particularly *phronesis*, which is also central in the rhetorical-legal context (Tomasini 2024; Mangini 2025) – can be applied to emerging technologies (Vallor 2018; Holmes and Colton 2018).



From this point of view, the issues discussed in this article can hardly be fruitfully addressed without adequate ethical reflection. Communication and rhetorical persuasion in political contexts are never neutral, just as the use of new technologies is not. Adequate reflection on these issues therefore necessarily requires an ethical discussion, which can only be postponed to future research.

In conclusion, this paper has examined the relationship between rhetoric and truth in the context of the digital revolution and the so-called post-truth era, suggesting that contemporary challenges to truth are not merely epistemic but also ontological in nature. Against this background, three interconnected considerations emerge that may serve as a basis for further inquiry.

First, the analysis indicates that rhetorical persuasion presupposes a minimal commitment to the principle of non-contradiction. When this commitment weakens, persuasion risks being reduced to the production of effects or stimuli rather than functioning as a practice oriented towards shared judgement and understanding.

Second, the pervasive role of digital technologies in shaping communicative environments suggests that digital rhetoric cannot be adequately addressed solely through rules or procedural constraints alone. Instead, it calls for a virtue-ethical perspective capable of accounting for responsible judgement in contexts characterised by technological complexity, opacity, and rapid transformation.

Finally, the paper proposes reconsidering the relationship between rhetoric and truth from a realist perspective. Rather than opposing truth to rhetorical practice, truth may be understood as its enabling condition: the orienting horizon that allows persuasion to retain its political and ethical significance, particularly in juridical and public contexts increasingly affected by digital misinformation and artificial intelligence.

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