On Peterson's Truth

Above all, the search after truth and its eager pursuit are peculiar to man.
   – Cicero "On Duties" 1913, 15

Jordan Peterson's remarks on the nature of truth are voluminous. He devotes whole lectures and book-chapters to its analysis. Despite this, widespread confusion persists on the details of Peterson's distinctive understanding of truth. One reason for this that Peterson's treatment of truth is scattered and unsystematic. Another reason is that the scholarly work on Peterson's truth is lacking. It is the goal of this paper to clarify Peterson's views by deploying powerful instruments of analysis from contemporary philosophical literature. Based on the provided clarification, Peterson's truth proves nowhere near as ludicrous as critics make it seem, for it accommodates a long and healthy tradition of theorizing labeled *anti-realism*. The core thesis of this approach is that truth is an inherently mind-dependent notion, so that nothing in the world is true or false without cognitive agents. Peterson deploys this general standpoint and develops it further to include distinctively human-bound commitments, such as the Nietzschean paradigm, according to which truth exists to serve life, and the Darwinian-pragmatist approach, according to which truth is that which is useful to believe and thus aids survival across time.

Much of Peterson's thinking relies on his understanding of truth. From his works, we find frequent remarks on the importance of speaking the truth, and numerous statements on the value of truth as a perquisite for human flourishing. Take the 8th chapter of Peterson's bestseller "12 Rules for Life" labeled "Tell the truth—or, at least, don't lie" where he writes:

> To tell the truth is to bring the most habitable reality into Being. Truth builds edifices that can stand a thousand years. Truth feeds and clothes the poor, and makes nations wealthy and safe. Truth reduces the terrible complexity of a man to the simplicity of his word, so that he can become a partner, rather than an enemy. Truth makes the past truly past, and makes the best use of the future's possibilities. Truth is the ultimate, inexhaustible natural resource. It's the light in the darkness. See the truth. Tell the truth. (2018, 230)

While repeatedly emphasizing the immense value that truth bears for our lives, more often than not, Peterson *assumes* a notion of truth rather than offering an explicit definition. This is understandable. The abstract and exceedingly complex nature of truth makes it a challenging subject of analysis. Philosophers have theorized about its nature from the pre-Socratics to the present-day with no consensus in sight. Far

from it, for views about the nature of truth show notorious variety in the history of western thought, amounting to mutually exclusive definitions of various kinds. Some see truth as a fully objective matter, representing things 'as they are' independent of minds, and others equate it with what science has at any given time proven to be the case. Further complicating matters, definitions of truth are notoriously enmeshed with paradoxes. Perhaps the most well-known example is the liar's paradox, demonstrated by the famous Cretan two and a half millennia ago, who claimed that all Cretans are liars, thereby causing confusion on whether he himself was telling the truth. Complicating matters more, the inevitable challenges with defining truth are in plain contrast with the foundational role it has for our lives. True beliefs enable navigation in the world, and they ground our beliefs to that which is real, in contrast to mere illusion or wishful thinking. Finally, the fundamentality of truth is indicated by its intuitiveness and at least seeming clarity. Children learn the meaning of the word 'true' at an early age, and we do not think that there is any confusion involved with the term, for example, when obliging people to tell the truth and nothing but the truth in our courtrooms.

It is because of such inevitable challenges with defining truth that Peterson is wary of offering an explicit definition of it. This wariness should not be confused with a view about the defectiveness or redundancy of truth. As has become increasingly clear in the political atmosphere of recent years, real threat lies in the decay of appreciation towards truth. When presidents of global superpowers make materially false claims, and when bald-faced lies and deception is tolerated from our leaders, the Petersonian thesis that we should speak the truth, or at least not lie, is plainly contradicted on a grandiose scale. But Peterson is no stranger to defending truth from those who seek to corrode it, for his status as a public intellectual was largely sparked by his opposition of relativism about truth associated with post-modernist thinking. Of course, the threat that Peterson diagnosed with relativism is serious and real, well in line with the interpretation of Hannah Arendt, who diagnosed similar issues with the decay of truth in relation to totalitarian regimes:

> The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist. (1951, 474)

Without a robust notion of truth, societies become exposed to the control of Tyrants, who are first to criticize the notion, bearing the wish that it can be fabricated or molded to aid their means. As the old tale goes, describing virtue as a shield and truth as a sword, the people in power understand that when

resistance is expected, the crowds better be disarmed. It is this task, of exploring, recovering, and defending a robust notion of truth that Peterson commits to both explicitly and implicitly in substantive sections of his work, and it is the task of the remainder of this paper to clarify his project.

The Nature Question

Philosophers and laymen alike have been interested in the nature of truth throughout the history of Western thought. This tendency was adequately summarized by Cicero in antiquity, according to whom humans are by nature truth-oriented beings. But past general interest, not much has been agreed upon regarding truths nature. One central disagreement that cuts across the history of Western philosophy is whether truth is dependent or independent of human concerns, such as our knowledge about it. One manifestation of this disagreement is the old dilemma that asks whether sound is made by a tree falling in a forest when no one is around? More sophisticated iteration of the same problem asks whether there is a truth concerning the even or uneven number of planets in the universe, even if there is in principle no way for us to know about it. While we are inclined to answer that yes, truth exists about this matter, questions about truth seem to emerge only in the context of minds, and speaking about truth past what can be known seems redundant and unworthwhile. The frustration involved with these types of questions is evident in the age-old debate about the existence of God. Whether or not he does indeed exist, there seems to be no way for us to know about it from our limited human perspective, so concluding judgements are better left unmade. It is a matter of faith, and not of knowledge, what position we choose to deploy. In this sense, there seems to be little use for a transcendent, fully objective notion of truth that stands disconnected from our ability to know about it.

Interestingly enough, much of the confusion and critique regarding Peterson's truth directly relates to the question of whether truth is a mind-dependent or -independent notion. It is precisely here that Peterson's famous debate with Sam Harris got stuck on the topic of truth. Conflict emerged when Harris diagnosed a disagreement between him and Peterson, refusing to continue discussion before a mutual understanding about the nature of truth was achieved. But keeping in mind the unavoidable challenges with defining truth and it's widely disagreed upon nature, this strategy rests on a superfluous requirement. Surely, we need not agree on details about truths nature before discussion becomes meaningful. But the worry that Harris bears is not completely meritless. As noted, the possession of a robust notion of truth is a precondition for serious-minded discussion and debate. To illustrate, take the specific phenomena of disagreement that is oftentimes the motivating force behind our debates. When disagreeing on an

important topic, such as climate change or the utility of vaccinations, we do not view these disagreements as satisfactory conclusions. Rather, we make considerable efforts to resolve them by figuring out the *truth*. The worry is that if we operate with incompatible notions of truth, discussion itself becomes meaningless, for we are aiming at different goals. Thus, there must rest some agreement upon the nature of truth that facilitates the possibility of rational discourse in the first place. But I do not think that Harris and Peterson disagree on this point. Surely, they both agree that in one way or another truth describes things are they are, and that truth is that which is in general correct to believe. It is not obvious, however, why this basic intuition is not enough to facilitate meaningful discussion and debate.

But what sparked the conflict between Harris and Peterson might have been a misdiagnosis in the first place. According to Harris, the central point of disagreement between him and Peterson is whether truth is *objective*. Objectivity here means that truth is a mind-independent matter, so that truth is independent of human-concerns, even our ability to know about it. For Harris, every belief that is subject to truth is necessarily true or false, independent of anyone's beliefs about it, full stop. For Peterson, beliefs can be true or false, or true enough, depending on their ability to help achieve our goals. In this sense, the fundamentals of truth are those that guide action, and truth must be studied in relation to achieving success in our practices. Objectivity is of secondary interest. To illustrate this difference, take a map of the New York subway system. In an objective, mind-independent sense, this map fails to be a true representation, for it is a wholly inaccurate misrepresentation of its geometrical structure. It lacks dimension and is crudely simplifying. But in the non-objective, mind-dependent sense, the map is very much a true description, more so than an objective representation would be, for it enables us to navigate the system with great success. Of course, in other situations where you have motives other than navigation, the objective representation could serve your means better. But this is precisely the point that Peterson makes. Truth must be studied in relation to achieving success in our practices. Presumably, this is the context where the phenomena of truth emerged in the first place, as a pre-theoretical understanding of what we should believe to bring the best possible reality into being.

Thus, one crucial point of disagreement between Harris and Peterson is that while the former commits strictly to the minimal intuition that truth's nature is exhausted by its objectivity as demonstrated by the relatively recent theoretical definitions, the latter holds that this is not the case, for more is entailed in the notion, such as the moral constitution of being useful to believe. But what critics have failed to appreciate is that Peterson only objects to the negative claim that *nothing else* is involved with truth than objectivity.

Since Peterson has no qualms with the objective aspects of truth as such, closer analysis proves illuminating.

Truths Human-bound or Unbound Nature

As happens, the views of truth that Harris and Peterson commit to run in line with a broader and much older philosophical debate between *realist* and *anti-realist* approaches to truth. According to the former, truth is a fully objective matter, representing how things are independent of minds, and independent of any human concerns. For example, there is a truth about the even or uneven number of planets in the universe, independent of our ability to know about it, full stop. Harris persists that this minimal intuition captures the essence of truth. There are static truths about the world, known or unknown, and valuable or nonvaluable to believe. But if this were the case, why not just replace the concept of truth with objectivity? For Peterson, objectivity alone does not exhaust the nature of truth, falling short by downplaying the significance of its historical constitution and complexity and the significance it has for our lives. Following the Nietzschean paradigm, because truth is intimately tied to human-concerns as an instrument of serving life, beliefs can be not only true or false, but true enough in relation to their ability to help achieve our aspirations. Indeed, the law of bivalence, the idea that there are *only* two truth-values (true and false) is a hallmark commitment of realist theories, while widely rejected by the anti-realists. For the latter, beliefs can be not only true or false, but more or less true, true enough, or unknown. To illustrate this further, let's assume that Smith has been systematically unfaithful to his wife. Both beliefs that Smith possibly cheated on his wife, and that he has systematically done so are equally true in the realist sense. But surely, when asked about the faithfulness of Smith, one of these truths is truer than the other. The realist might oppose that here we fail to make a distinction between truth and accuracy. Both beliefs are true, yet one is also accurate. But whether or not truth can be so disconnected from other concepts is debatable, as shown in the distinct views promoted by Harris and Peterson.

While Harris presents his realist approach to truth as the standard view, Peterson is surely not alone in opposing it by committing to a form of anti-realism. As Donald Davidson, perhaps the most prominent theorist of truth of the latter part of the 20th century adequately summarizes: "Nothing in the world, no object or event, would be true or false if there were not thinking creatures." (1990, 279). But this intuition about the mind-dependentness of truth is much older, already suggested by Aristotle, according to whom the existence of humans grounds the truth that humans exist but not the other way around. There are truths about things only insofar as there are humans, or thinking creatures, to uphold them. Peterson's

approach is well in line with this general intuition. Whether and to what extent this applies to Harris is debatable, for as noted, he commits to the thesis that truth is fully independent of minds. For Peterson, we have a concept of truth now because it has proven useful to have before, and this ability to aid human aspirations ought to be taken as an essential feature of truth.

Interestingly enough, one consequence of Peterson's approach is that questions about the transcendent, mind-independent or fully objective nature of truth become not only of secondary interest, but somewhat questionable in the first place. Because humans are finite creatures with limited cognitive capabilities, there seems to be no way for us to step beyond the limits of our understanding to evaluate the full objectivity of our claims. But according to the realists, truth *is* independent of our knowledge bearing frameworks, resting outside of them as idealized object. How can we make such a claim immanently from the inherently limited human-perspective? One issue with these types of transcendental arguments is present in the never-ending debate about whether the will is truly free from causal influence. There seems to be no way for us to know, for knowing would imply stepping beyond the limits of our understanding. There is no such Archimedean viewpoint from which the full objectivity of our claims can be evaluated, from which we can determinately explain how thoughts emerge, or whether we possess a 'correct' understanding of truth past what is accessible to us in midst of our practices.

It is more common, however, to understand objectivity in a looser sense as that which is *indicative* of truth, rather than a description of the 'whole truth'. But if understood in this sense, then the criticism that Peterson's view of truth fails to accommodate the basic objectivist intuition is misplaced, for there is a way to account for it just as well, if not better to the realist approaches that render truth an unreachable abstraction that is disconnected from our concrete practices.

Truth as an Instrument to Serve life

Some have argued that Peterson's commitment to a Darwinian-pragmatist form of anti-realism runs in conflict with the basic intuition that truth is objective. One way to understand the Darwinian-pragmatist approach to truth is to see it as arising from the Nietzschean paradigm, according to which truth exists to serve life. By providing pragmatic utility and thus aiding survival across time, speaking and believing the truth amounts to the increase of human flourishing. Regarding truths nature, the key realizations is that both of these approaches are manifestations of anti-realism regarding the notion. Truth is an inherently mind-dependent notion, and its nature derives from the role it has for our practices. Some see this as a problematic conclusion, claiming that it contradicts the basic intuition that truth is objective and

independent of any human-concerns. Simply put, if truth is that which is useful to believe, it cannot be simultaneously independent of anyone's beliefs about it. The subsequent worry is that if truth indeed is dependent of human concerns, this renders it relative. If truth depends on what is useful to believe, yet what at any given time is useful to whom depends on various factors, then truth becomes relative to the circumstance in which utility is being evaluated. Finally, there seem to be truths that are in no way valuable to believe, like the trillionth decimal of π, and falsehoods that provide immense practical utility, such as occasional ungrounded self-confidence. Thus, by committing to his distinctively human-centric form of anti-realism, Peterson subjects his notion of truth to pressing and well-grounded critique.

But the criticism that Peterson's understanding of truth runs in conflict with the basic objectivist intuition is misplaced, for he is free to argue that objectivity is simply one aspect of truth that humans have constructed, and which has proven useful to possess, especially for our scientific understanding of the world. Because Peterson does not commit to the negative thesis that nothing else than this or that is entailed in truth, he is free to include various aspects under his notion, some being objective and others non-objective. This is only intuitive, for surely sometimes truth depends on mind-independent states of affairs, and other times on our human ways of thinking about the world. There are truths about medium sized physical entities such as stones and chairs, and there are truths about ethics and law such as what is permitted or prohibited to do. In this sense, Peterson simply acknowledges the breadth that truth displays in our cognitive lives, so that there is no limit to the aspects it can manifest in the constraints of the Nietzschean paradigm of serving life. All aspects of truth, even the ones that predicate objectivity, arise from the general need for such concepts, the existence of which is justified by their ability to aid our aspirations.

What has been described above is equally tenable conclusion to the disconnected view of truth as a transcendent, fully objective and mind-independent notion that some critics uphold. In their view, because of the near infinite progress of science, *nothing* we ever discover is true in the fully objective sense. Simply put, everyone is always more or less wrong when measured up against an idealized notion of the 'whole truth'. But what use is there for such a disconnected concept? The human predicament is that we are limited creatures and as such, our cognitive capabilities can never match up with the full complexity of the world. Despite this, it is extremely useful for us to hold that some things *are* true, even if not eternally so. What science has proven to be the case now is true, for all we know, and we use these

truths as instruments for fueling further discussions, debate, and the subsequent progress that follows. Again, no higher tribunal of truth than success in our practices.

Nesting Argument

What has been described above is Peterson's (2018, 144) fundamental *nesting argument* that critics have failed to appreciate, resulting in confusion and misinterpretations of his views. Because of truths historically constructed nature, the concept overall is much older and broader than simple objective truth, which is a fairly recent theoretical invention. This historical grounding should be respected when studying truths nature and it is here that the intimate link between truth and our practices is grounded in. For example, in Old English, the term 'true' means that a person or an object like an axe is trustworthy and adheres to standards. But the idea that there is a connection between truth and the good is much older, already discoverable from the works of Plato, who states in the *Republic* that:

> So that what gives truth to the things known [beliefs] and the power to know to the knower is the form of the good. And though it is the cause of knowledge and truth, it is also an object of knowledge. Both knowledge and truth are beautiful things, but the [form of the] good is other and more beautiful than they. In the visible realm, light and sight are rightly considered sunlike, but it is wrong to think that they are the sun [the form of the good], so here it is right to think of knowledge and truth as goodlike but wrong to think that either of them is the good—for the good is yet more prized. (508e).

Thus, according to one prominent view, truth has inherent moral constitution as that which is good to believe, for its nature derives from the *form of the good*, which is the highest ideal, shared by all particular things that are in one way or another good.

But of course, for the concept of truth to be useful in our time, the historical aspects alone, such as the idea of truth as that which is good to believe, do not suffice, for they are potentially blind to the problems that we face here and now. Because of this, we want a concept of truth that respects its origins, but which is also useful in solving the problems that manifest in our time. Indeed, from this project of in one hand preserving the virtues of the old concept, and in the other developing it so that it better serves us now, we get to a result where the objectivity of truth need not be discarded. Objectivity can simply be treated as one of the newer aspects of Truth unqualified that is especially useful for those paths of inquiry that direct themselves towards mind-independent facets of the world. Even the notions of full objectivity or

the whole truth can be accounted for by Peterson's anti-realist approach by treating them as useful *features* or *instruments* of our scientific understanding of the world. The usefulness of these ideas is evident, for example, in situations when something we hold to be true turns out false. We do not say that our beliefs became false. Rather, we say that they were false all along, and that we were simply mistaken in relation to the truth. But to emphasize, the existence of this feature is grounded in our need for it, and the utility it provides for our understanding of the world. In no way need the notions of truth or objectivity be understood as something mind-independent or transcendent. Further, in no way should objectivity be treated as the primary aspect of truth. What should be prioritized is the moral constitution of truth as that which is correct, useful or good to believe. Indeed, the priority of the moral constitution is evident when realizing that we would not have the ideas of truth, objectivity or the whole truth in the first place, were it not for their usefulness and the utility they provide for aiding our aspirations. Thus, if we admit that truth is an inherently human-bound notion, there to serve our aspirations like all other concepts, then the objectivity of truth can be preserved without a threat of a disconnect. Objectivity too, as a useful ideal, exists to serve.

But of course, Peterson's conception of truth is not devoid of problems. Because of its immense breadth, giving a clear, exhaustive, and non-contradictory definition of truth in the Petersonian sense becomes virtually impossible. I think Peterson is well aware of this consequence. However, the issue here might be misdiagnosed, for it is not obvious that such a definition can be offered in the first place. Truth is both a fundamental and exceedingly broad concept, displaying inconsistencies and paradoxes throughout, so there is no guarantee it can ever be defined in a manner that is exhaustive and non-contradictory. Simply put, the assumption that all concepts can be so defined might be where the problem lies. Further, by committing to a form of pragmatism, Peterson positions to oppose this type of theory-first approach that could see the indefinability issues as a sign of truths defectiveness. Indeed, it is pragmatism that saves truth from claims of redundancy in the first place, for our current inability to achieve an exhaustive definition of truth is no argument for its abandonment. The immense utility that truth provides for both daily life and our more theoretical aspirations is of utmost importance, and whether or not the concept can be exhaustively defined is of secondary interest. Supposedly we operate with a concept of truth even before our ability to speak about it, let alone try defining it. All this is very much in line with a philosophical theory called *primitivism*, according to which truth is such a fundamental notion that no exhaustive definition of it can even be achieved.

Some additional remarks are in accord. One thing to note is that as seems to be the case, the conflict between Peterson and Harris is partially cause by them speaking past each other. Contrary to widespread interpretation, the problem point is not so much about whether truth is objective or not. Rather, the disagreement is more about which aspects of truth are fundamental and should be prioritized. The point of Harris and other realists is that the objectivity and throughout mind-independentness of truth must not be compromised. Peterson, on the other hand, emphasizes the broader importance of truth, even at the cost of downplaying the significance of its objectivity. But surely there are approaches to truth that lie in between the minimal objectivist view and the exceedingly broad approach inspired by the Nietzschean paradigm. For example, we could endorse a type of goldilocks principle where not too little nor too much is included in our understanding of truth. It might be that while Harris and other realists risk err by taking the too little side, constraining truth to the extent that it does not adequately cover all the ways in which it manifests in our lives, Peterson risks falling on the too much side, potentially confusing the truth with independent questions about what is useful, valuable, or accurate to believe. Nonetheless, an important lesson from all of this is that both Harris and Peterson clearly see the topic of truth as having great importance, to the extent that they are willing to commit considerable effort to resolving disagreements about its nature. As noted in the beginning of this paper, this attitude is much needed in our time, when truth is once more directed with widespread skepticism and critique in both academic and less formal debates.[1]

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[1] This paper is dedicated to a close friend and talented scholar Jukka Kortelainen who unfortunately passed away during the writing process of this chapter. It was Jukka who first introduced me to Peterson's thinking, and he is one of the only friends that I had the pleasure of discussing Peterson's ideas with. Were it not because of Jukka's influence, this paper would have never been written. I hope this chapter does justice in honoring his memory.

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