

The Fate of Reason in an Era of Post-Truth: Reflections From *The Future of an Illusion* by Sigmund Freud

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The article intends to examine the current conditions of diffusion of the knowledge in the field of the Humanities, exploring the prospects that may be opened for the future. Taking as a starting-point the ideas of Sigmund Freud, we evaluate his diagnosis of the modern era and the roles played by religion and science in it. The concept of post-truth is discussed as a key for the understanding of the present time. Themes such as the crisis of reason, the decline of the Humanities, and the empire of technologies are addressed. The purpose is to point out some possibilities for teaching in the Humanities nowadays. Following the position of Max Weber in *Science as a Vocation*, the need for both enthusiasm and discipline, without exaggerated optimism, but also without resignation or renunciation, is emphasized. We argue that professors in the Humanities are charged with the task of keeping and transmitting an heirloom that is extremely valuable at present and may even be indispensable in the future.

Keywords: crisis of reason, post-truth, future directions in the Humanities

Introduction

This article is an attempt to try a first approach to an issue, without any pretension of exhausting it here. It brings a reflection on our present and on our future, and I do not think it is possible to have an accurate knowledge of the new and still ongoing phenomena, let alone their possible future unfoldings. My main purpose is to share my impressions and my bets: impressions based on my own experience and bets that come from a long reflection on that experience. These impressions and bets arose from my restlessness regarding the present and the future of academic knowledge in the field of Humanities, especially regarding the exercise of the university professor occupation.

Firstly, I want to set out the issues that served as the starting point for the reflection I want to make here. Such issues are found in the essay *The Future of an Illusion*, written by Sigmund Freud in 1927 (Freud, 1990). However, this article is not intended in any way to carry out an analysis of the work cited, Freud being a thinker with whom I am not very familiar.

After posing the questions that constitute my starting point, I will clarify what I mean by an “era of post-truth”. I assume that I have taken over such expression simply because I consider that it accurately designates what I think. I do not intend here to carry out a theoretical discussion about the essential condition of the contemporary world, neither about the nomenclature that must be used to express it: late modernity, liquid modernity, post-modernity, etc. I am not an expert on the subject and therefore I will not engage in the discussion

about the concept of “post-truth”, but simply use the expression in a very unpretentious, almost spontaneous way. I think it is useful for synthesizing a certain diagnosis of our present moment, and particularly for underlining the difficulties that accompany the task of teaching young people today.

Finally, in the third and more speculative part of this article, I will raise some possibilities concerning the “fate of reason”. It will be at that very moment that my impressions will give way to a bet. I use the term “bet” because what I intend to say about the future is not accompanied by any dose of fatalism or necessity, not even probability. Here, I will deal with a possible future, but by no means guaranteed. On the contrary, such a future seems very improbable today. However, it is not impossible. Such future may perhaps come to be, but that will depend on a decision made and an action taken today. It will depend, in particular, on the decisions and actions of people who professionally teach and research in the field of Humanities.

Central Ideas in Freud’s *The Future of an Illusion*

In this essay, written in 1927, Freud develops a reflection on the origin and future of religion. He argues that there is a difference between “error” and illusion”. In his opinion, “illusion” is a mistake that comes to meet a wish or need of ours.

According to Freud, religion is not an “error”, but a kind of “illusion”. And the “religious illusion” approaches the concept of “delusion” because it has no truth-value. Religion provides refuge and protection to a man who is still childish, not emancipated, who cannot bear to recognize his own smallness and lack of meaning in the world. For this reason, he considers religion the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity.

Freud also makes a refutation of Romain Rolland’s view, according to which the origin of religion is found in a kind of “oceanic feeling”. To Freud, such feeling is not universal (he himself did not recognize any trace of it) and, even if someone had it, that would not necessarily lead to an attachment to religious ideas. Religious belief would, in fact, derive from a typically childlike attitude toward that “oceanic feeling”.

In that work, Freud predicted the disappearance of religion. For him, religion would be supplanted by science. However, the disappearance of religion has not occurred so far and the development of science did not necessarily lead to a happier civilization.

Several thinkers (from Rousseau to Nietzsche) have perceived a self-destructive potential in the project of building a civilization of reason. This article is not meant to repeat their ideas. Our purpose is to dwell on a consequence of modernity that has not been emphasized by its critics, but which, today, seems to become more and more evident.

There is an unexpected and contradictory facet of the project of modernity which leads us to recognize that we are, in fact, in a completely new era. The most striking feature of this era, which radically broke with the foundations underlying the previous one, is that it consists of an era of post-truth. But...

What Is an “Era of Post-truth”?

It is an age in which truth has ceased to be a fundamental value. This loss of the value of truth seems to be an inevitable consequence of the very self-reflexivity of modernity. There is a certain disappointment regarding the results to which the rational search for truth has led, and that disappointment is responsible today for a weakening of the disposition for such quest. When the very idea of truth falls into discredit, we see a kind of exhaustion of the project of knowing the truth: Why seek such knowledge? Would it be possible? Would it have

any use? Could it make our lives better? And the heritage of knowledge we have accumulated since the ancients: Would it bear any importance today?

The knowledge longed for by the ancients and the moderns sought to discern between different discourses, judging their legitimacy, so as to establish the true discourse, the one capable of guiding our lives. But today, what discourse can guide an action that is consistent with itself? Nowadays, when the very value of truth vanishes, the discourses seem to level and bombard us in a dizzying speed. Could there be any more believable speeches? In the world of “fake news” and the instantaneous and uncontrolled proliferation of information, there seems to be no place for what the Greeks called *επιστήμη* (correct knowledge) as opposed to *δόξα* (mere opinion). There seems to be no place for the exercise of thought.

Maybe none of this is new. But what seems to be really new is the fact that we are facing a generation that was born at this advanced stage of modernity. Those who are now between 18 and 25 years old are most likely not experiencing the present time as a time of macrohistorical changes. Perhaps for them there is no sense in the history that man, at a certain moment in a distant past, dared to employ his rational faculty to think and build his own world. Perhaps there is no sense in reconstituting for them the countless disagreements that have emerged from that moment, that is, in narrating human history as an incessant succession of possible worlds constructed by thought. It may not make sense to point out that, despite the disagreements, something has always been present: the expectation regarding the knowledge sought, an authentic interest in a type of knowledge that can be expressed by different names: philosophy, science, truth, etc.

So the question that must be asked is such: How to be a professor to this new generation? The ancient Greeks have long ago raised the question of the possibility of teaching and learning something. Today, the questions are: Is there anyone interested in discussing whether or not there is, in fact, any knowledge? Is there anyone willing to devote their time to this question, which has been crucial to so many past generations? Would science, regardless of a possible technical applicability, have any meaning today?

I do not need to repeat here the words of Martin Heidegger in his “Memorial Address”, delivered in 1955 on the occasion of the 175th birthday of composer Conradin Kreutzer. In this almost prophetic text, the German thinker warned of the dangers of the loss of the sense of the search for knowledge. Renouncing a thought that meditates, we take the risk of becoming mere executors of a thought that only calculates and, thus, we cease to be subjects of our own world to be led by an inexorable advance that we can no longer think about (Heidegger, 1966).

In Freud’s view, progress would make the “God of Religion” be replaced by the “God-Logos”. But today, it seems that this “God-Logos” has emancipated and transfigured into “God-Technology”, “God-Power”, or “God-Money”. At this point, I would like to bring to this reflection the fundamental questions raised by Max Weber in *Science as a Vocation*, written 10 years before Freud’s text (Weber, 1946). The questions are:

What Shall We Do? How Should We Live?

Weber enunciated those questions before an audience of students at the University of Munich and, more than one hundred years later, I ask those same questions with the same anguished tone. And I dare to point to the same attitude as Weber’s in the face of that anguish: neither despair, nor resignation, nor individualistic escape, nor enthusiastic optimism, but the attitude of keeping a tenuous and uncertain flame of hope alive and devoting oneself to tireless daily work, even if such an effort seems to have no meaning at all. In short, Weber’s attitude paradoxically combines uncertainty and betting.

He carried out a realistic analysis of his time and identified seemingly iron-like trends that would determine the future. But, at the same time, he recognized the possibility of a turnaround coming from unpredictable factors, as well as the return of ideas, values, and conceptions that were apparently buried forever. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* Weber said:

No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or if neither. (2001, p. 124)

By the way, we can recall here certain changes in the intellectual history of West that have contradicted the expectations and which have been brought about by the return of what had fallen into discredit, but which had been preserved in some way. For instance:

1. The return of the thought of Aristotle to the West thanks to the work of preservation, translation, and commentary of Arab philosophers, like Avicenna and Averroes.
2. The renewed interest in the culture of paganism in the context of the Renaissance.
3. The impact of the reappearance of the texts of the Ancient Skeptics on the crisis of Scholastic Philosophy and the formation of Modern Philosophy.

We cannot rule out the possibility that a new Renaissance will occur at some point in the history of men. Why should we believe that this history has come to its end, its consummation? We may not see any change produced by a possible redemption of the importance of a seemingly outdated knowledge. However, perhaps, a change can happen in one or two hundred years. We must consider that this is an open possibility. And so that it remains an open possibility, we must continue our daily work: the work of keepers and transmitters of the heritage of knowledge that constitutes the field of Humanities, a legacy of great value today and that might even be indispensable in the future.

This article finishes with a clamor to everyone who works in the field of the Humanities not to capitulate, but to exert a noble form of resistance: the intellectual resistance. Apart from all disagreements about the truth, I am convinced that it is helpful to keep a commitment to the search for truth and to the construction of a knowledge that is not the technical one, but which is, as Socrates said, the knowledge of man and, as Aristotle said, the knowledge of the human good.

Paradoxically, even to refuse that proposal, we would have to employ the kind of knowledge that I refer to here, the philosophical or meditating knowledge, for quoting Aristotle (a very old author, but more current than ever):

If one should do philosophy, then one should do philosophy, for this follows from the thing itself; but likewise even if one should not do philosophy, for one does not condemn something without first knowing about it. So one should do philosophy. (Aristotle, 2017, Fragment 2)

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