

## TRUTHINESS VS. POST-TRUTH: THE ETHICS OF RESISTANCE AND COHESION FROM THOREAU TO KROPOTKIN<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** The article highlights the philosophical and moral issues of truth in the writings of two great philosophers, Henry Thoreau and Peter Kropotkin. For all the differences in the times and cultures to which both thinkers belonged, we can trace their similar attitude towards objective scientific truth, which opposes all kinds of forms and systems of false and mythological knowledge. The naturalistic study of nature served for both of them as the starting point in the construction of social theory based on ‘truth’. Both thinkers were very distrustful of the institutions of the state as such and opposed them to the best of their ability.

**Keywords:** truth, truth vs. truthiness, post-truth, truth and nature, American Transcendentalism, Henry David Thoreau on the role of nature, nature as the source of truth, the state against the truth, Peter Kropotkin, mutual aid, struggle for truth against the state, anarchism of Thoreau and Kropotkin

“Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth” (Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, 1854)

[...] Since the brain is at ease among lies, we cheat ourselves with sophistry. Hypocrisy and sophistry became the second nature of the civilized man. But the society cannot live thus; it must return to truth, or cease to exist” (Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, 1902)

### Nature and Truth

In the history of philosophy, we find many attempts to substantiate the social meaning and significance of truth and falsehood. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Francis Bacon, considering the nature of man and society, proposed in his 1620 treatise, *The New Organon*, four metaphorical phenomena (“idols”) of mind that make it difficult to comprehend

and retain true knowledge. These are the idols of Tribe, Cave, Marketplace, and Theater. Taken together, these “idols” demonstrate the direct connection of consciousness with the social environment and the social conditioning of human thinking. On the path of knowledge, even for intelligent and enlightened people, there are many obstacles. Bacon called these obstacles *idols* or *ghosts* – from the Greek word *idolum*, meaning ‘ghost’ or ‘vision.’ This emphasizes that we are talking about illusions, lies, and falsehood – about what is not real, but either imaginary or at times intentionally manipulated. Perhaps this is one of but many more than striking philosophical admissions that true knowledge may be subject to distortion and conscious manipulation.

### Empirical Realism of the Enlightenment: “Truthiness” of Nature

The philosophy of the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century largely inherited the Baconian empirical view of the origin of knowledge with a rationalistic conviction of the power and independence of reason. Hence, for example, the basic requirement of Voltaire is the following: everything that exists must be subjected to the merciless examination of reason, and only that which will be justified by this examination has the right to exist. The royal power, the Catholic Church, the system of estate privileges – all of these must be destroyed as unreasonable. And vice versa, what does not exist in reality, but what meets the requirements of reason, should be created: a republican form of government, a rational cult of man, and most importantly, a system should be established that ensures the freedom and equality of all people. Truth is an important tool of social transformations and, accordingly, all obsolete institutions of society use public deception and lies as a means of retaining their power. Here, the motives of the connection of public lies and deception with the institutions of the state are not based on the principles of reason.

### American Transcendentalism: Correspondence of Nature, Truth, and Moral Values

The tradition of honoring “truthiness”, surprisingly enough, was embraced by the American transcendental-

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ists – Emerson and Thoreau. On the one hand, they recognized the prevalence of high truths of moral ideals that go beyond the limits of the sensual world. On the other hand, the nature that surrounded them, including in Concord on the shores of Walden Pond, seemed to them to be a concentration of the natural (“true”) empirical order. And this truth was also included by them in the construction of the universe. Thus, the sensual, or empirical part of the universe was recognized as equal in relation to the transcendental philosophical worldview.

The transcendentalists saw in the objects perceived by the senses a manifestation of a different – that is, spiritual – substance. They saw a strong connection between material and spiritual realities, a connection they referred to as “correspondence”. Thus, knowledge was reduced by the transcendentalists to the search for “correspondences” and the disclosure of the symbolism of nature.

The individual was endowed with absolute and indisputable autonomy in relation to all external social and natural phenomena. Only the introduction to the “super-soul”, and the knowledge of it, was considered by the transcendentalists to be what enables a person to break the chains of alienation and enter into genuine contact with other people.

The material (physical) world is real, but not essential to the extent that the metaphysical (transcendent) world is. However, according to Thoreau, it is impossible to ignore external empirical experience, because this alone makes possible a connection with genuine transcendental reality and truth. According to Thoreau, one needs to keep feelings sharply honed, and one’s mind in a state of trembling readiness, so that in the end they would be able to understand the principles and ideas – the true reality, to which innumerable facts add. For the human mind, external reality is a construction created by classifying and synthesizing the chaotic experience of the external world. For the human mind, external reality is a construction created by classifying, synthesizing the chaotic experience of the external world. Consciousness organizes the world in its constant unsystematic for-

mation. The insignificant facts of external experience are extremely valuable as manifestations of general ideas and truths.

The nature that surrounded Thoreau and served him as a source of creative inspiration did not yet bear the traces of an active invasion of civilization and was seen as endless, inexhaustible. Thoreau’s worldview is a naturalist one, while also encompassing a romantic perception of nature. The universal principle of the movement of being (the “supreme law”) for Thoreau was the law of the growth of the spiritual principle (“rebirth” and “renewal”). Everything that contributes to this increase is natural, “good” and “truthful”; all that hinders it must be overcome or abolished. Neither physiological needs, nor instincts, nor the unconscious, are inherently “negative.” The question is what they bring to the individual on his/her path to understanding eternal truths.

As a result of combining the three elements of the worldview (striving for the ideal, awareness of human alienation from external being, and the method of dynamic unfolding of the process of self-knowledge), the main theme of the philosophy and literature of European and American Romanticism was formed – a reflective description of the process of isolation and alienation of the subjective Self, combined with an internal, and sometimes distinct and strong, desire to approach the Universal and to identify with it.

Communication of man with nature received in Emerson’s philosophy a special name – “correspondence”. This transcendentalist concept was interpreted by the philosopher quite broadly, as a substantial connection between the state of consciousness and external phenomena, which in their entirety create a vast world of “wordless language.” Acknowledging the “secondary” nature of the natural landscape compared to transcendental reality, the philosopher saw in the natural world an area that could and should enlighten and elevate a person, giving him a charge of ethical and aesthetic spirituality, because man himself, according to Emerson, is a pitiful spectacle; he is a symbol of a degrading divine principle (“man is God in ruins”).

### Social Critique of Moral Reason

In his essay, *Slavery in Massachusetts* (1854), Thoreau also deals with the problem of Nature. After overthrowing the spiritual values of contemporary society, the author somewhat unexpectedly turns to the reader:

I walk toward one of our ponds; but what signifies the beauty of nature when men are base? We walk to lakes to see our serenity reflected in them; when we are not serene, we go not to them. Who can be serene in a country where both the rulers and the ruled are without principle? The remembrance of my country spoils my walk. But it chanced the other day that I scented a white water-lily, and a season I had waited for had arrived. It is the emblem of purity. It bursts up so pure and fair to the eye, and so sweet to the scent, as if to show us what purity and sweetness reside in, and can be extracted from, the slime and muck of earth. I think I have plucked the first one that has opened for a mile. What confirmation of our hopes is in the fragrance of this flower! I shall not so soon despair of the world for it, notwithstanding slavery, and the cowardice and want of principle of Northern men. It suggests what kind of laws have prevailed longest and widest, and still prevail, and that the time may come when man's deeds will smell as sweet. Such is the odor which the plant emits. If Nature can compound this fragrance still annually, I shall believe her still young and full of vigor, her integrity and genius unimpaired, and that there is virtue even in man, too, who is fitted to perceive and love it..." (Thoreau 2008, 258–259).

The text contains two semantic series: the first is a series of natural phenomena, the second is a series of social phenomena. To each of them we apply the aesthetic criterion of harmony, that is, the correspondence of the inner content and the external form of the phenomenon, which Thoreau considered to be the most important and, perhaps, the only essential requirement imposed on reality. Beauty, proportionality, completeness of the semantic principle with the complete incompleteness of the perspective of the process of formation – this is the main thing that was put forward by the philosopher as a standard of harmony. It is not surprising that Thoreau, like other romantics, absolutized the "music of nature", seeing in it the transcendental prototype of any harmony and even to a certain extent the

very substance of this harmony. "Nature makes no noise. The roar of the storm, the rustling leaf, the patter of rain – in all this there is an original and unexplored harmony. Why does the thought flow in such a deep and sparkling stream when the sounds of distant music reach the ear? (Thoreau 1962, 12). Harmony is inherent in man. It consists in an aesthetically proportional ratio of spiritual and material factors – the ratio of thought, intention, on the one hand, and the act – on the other. The harmony of nature is opposite to all forms of falsehood and lying, especially those which are generated by political and economic motivation.

The moral and aesthetic approach of Thoreau to nature comprises a number of important philosophical ideas:

- Nature is not only external objectified reality, but also a source of moral and ethical experiences;
- Engaging with nature requires a careful and even reverent attitude; violation of its harmony adversely affects the morality of people;
- Nature allows only contemplative mastering; man must neither subordinate nor change nature, but only be carefully introduced into its system, becoming a silent, thoughtful observer of its harmonic structure;
- Deception, lying, and falsehood run parallel to the negative phenomena in nature, *i.e.*, the struggle for survival, competition, death and dying.

### The Truth About Lying: Critique of the Society

The main goal of Thoreau's essay "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience", was to answer the question: what should a person do if he has completely lost confidence in the political system in which he must live? As the author of *Walden*, Thoreau could, both in theory and in practice, give his personal example and thus answer the question, "what to do?", as follows: leave the society or remain in it, but, in either case, immerse yourself in spiritual solitude. However, Thoreau himself understood that this

path was more exclusive than typical, more utopian than real. For people who internally disagreed with the social order, but who did not want to turn into forest dwellers and downshifters, it was necessary to indicate a different way to achieve moral purification and rebirth from spiritual hibernation. This dilemma and the consequent answer to the question, “what to do?”, under the unjust and immoral social regime was as timely then as it is today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Thoreau gave his answer to this question and proclaimed the principle of open political protest.

The first chapter of *Walden*, “Household”, and the first pages of the essay, “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience”, are devoted to the same topic – a description of the complete moral and political disillusionment of the individual (“Household”) and the moral and political aspects of urban life (“On the Duty ...”). In either case, the author brings the reader to the realization of the complete crisis of all ties that previously united a person and society. “Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations” (Thoreau 2008, 118). And from “Civil Disobedience”, “I answer, that he [a person] cannot without disgrace be associated with it [the government]. I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as my government which is the slave's government also” (ibid., 230). Today, perhaps, we can give a broader interpretation of the concept of “the state of slaves”. It may be a society of formally free citizens, but internally enslaved within a system of mass propaganda and post-truths. Subordination to mass culture, consumerism, and propaganda turn people into a sort of “slave” when they have neither the power nor the desire to be independent and self-reliant.

The most important aspect of the non-violent revolution, as declared by Thoreau, was that mass political protest was to be preceded by an internal moral revolution in the minds of every person. This is what Sinclair Lewis called the “one-man revolution”. In this sense, a revolution in consciousness is primary in relation to the advancement of non-violent protest, which politically

reinforces what has already been achieved in the sphere of individual consciousness. It is necessary to assimilate the correct moral convictions, a process that almost completely assures the success of the struggle for a progressive social structure. Thus, the mass character of the protest campaign was understood by Thoreau exclusively as a “summary” of individual protests and moral convictions. Everything that could somehow violate the absolute inviolability of the rights of the individual was completely rejected. Therefore, the ultimate goal of a non-violent revolution was not to achieve social justice, but to guarantee the independence of the individual:

There will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly. I please myself with imagining a State at least which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor; which even would not think it inconsistent with its own repose if a few were to live aloof from it, not meddling with it, nor embraced by it, who fulfilled all the duties of neighbors and fellow-men. A State which bore this kind of fruit, and suffered it to drop off as fast as it ripened, would prepare the way for a still more perfect and glorious State, which also I have imagined, but not yet anywhere seen (Thoreau 2008, 246).

#### Peter Kropotkin, Mutual Aid

One of the most prominent Russian thinkers of the 19<sup>th</sup> through the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Peter Kropotkin (1824–1921) was a social philosopher, a noted critic of the state as such, and of state lies in particular. Kropotkin, like Thoreau, felt dislike for and distrust of state institutions and bureaucracies, seeing in them the main source of lies that acquire an institutional character. Although Kropotkin did not use the term “propaganda,” he actually identified the bureaucracy with a system of constantly and purposefully reproducible deception aimed at strengthening the domination of the state. It is noteworthy that, again like Thoreau, Kropotkin linked truth with the study of nature, believing that the violation and distortion of the natural essence of man is connected with his alienation from

the natural world. However, as a prominent scientist, geographer, and biologist, Kropotkin's main emphasis was on a purely naturalistic and positivistic aspect of the world of nature.

Philosophical and sociological views carried the pronounced influence of naturalism, which recognized society as an organic part of the natural principle. On this occasion, in the well-known treatise, "Ethics," Kropotkin wrote:

Reverting to the sound philosophy of Nature which remained in neglect from the time of Ancient Greece until Bacon woke scientific research from its long slumber, modern science has now worked out the elements of a philosophy of the universe, free of supernatural hypotheses and the metaphysical "mythology of ideas," and at the same time so grand, so poetical and inspiring, and so expressive of freedom, that it certainly is capable of calling into existence the new forces. Man no longer needs to clothe his ideals of more beauty, and of a society based on justice, with the garb of superstition: he does not have to wait for the Supreme Wisdom to remodel society. He can derive his ideals from Nature and he can draw the necessary strength from the study of its life" (Kropotkin 1924, 12).

The view of a scientist, and naturalist, surprisingly powerful and sound in nature, covered both natural and social phenomena. It should be borne in mind that all of this contrasted dramatically with the clerical ecology prevailing in Russia and Western Europe at the time. Still, Kropotkin did not take this into account and was not at all afraid to insult the religious feelings of believers. On the contrary, his voice sounded confident and loud. For example, in considering the law of conservation of energy, the Russian scientist saw it as a kind of generalized image of the world, the universe and humanity. According to Kropotkin,

...[Nature] teaches a person to understand the life of the universe as a continuous, infinite chain of energy transformations; mechanical movement can turn into sound, into heat, into light, into electricity; and vice versa, each of these types of energy can be transformed into others. And among all these transformations, the birth of our planet, the gradual development of its life, its ultimate decomposition in the future and the transition back into the great cosmos, its absorption of the universe are only infinitely small phe-

nomena – a simple moment in the life of stellar worlds (Kropotkin 1924, 13)

According to Kropotkin, science penetrates into all areas of the natural world and into all spheres of human activity; in this sense there are no restrictions or forbidden areas for it, there is no taboo. In the vast non-natural sphere of "human institutions, customs and laws, superstitions, beliefs and ideals," the light of science realizes itself, according to Kropotkin, in "anthropological schools of history, jurisprudence and political economy." And this scientific approach to society, in turn, shows that the desire for "the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people" is no longer a dream, not a utopia. It is possible; and it has also been proved that the welfare and happiness of neither a whole people nor a separate class can be based, even temporarily, on the oppression of other classes, nations and races.

At the same time, while discussing the fundamentals of social life, Kropotkin puts forward a kind of principle of ethical solidarity or consolidation of living beings, including man:

If the study of nature has given us the basics of philosophy, embracing the life of the entire universe, the development of living beings on earth, the laws of mental life and the development of societies, then this same study should give us a natural explanation of the sources of moral feeling. And it should tell us where the forces lie, capable of raising the moral sense to greater and greater heights and purity (Kropotkin 1902).

In this sense, Kropotkin sees ethics, or the science of morality, as the main social science discipline organizing all knowledge about society, referring to the theory of "moral sense" proposed by the English philosopher of the Enlightenment Anthony Shaftesbury.

Kropotkin did not propose to draw a direct analogy between the natural world and society, but his constant balancing on the verge of the natural and social spheres not only did not weaken his theory, but gave it even greater persuasiveness. Moreover, Kropotkin urged us to learn from nature not its, so to speak, "immorality" and aggressiveness towards the weak, but rather its "morality" and support for its own kind of individuals.

Moreover, the Russian scientist believed that the highly moral principle (as a human instinct or intuitive motive) played a more significant role in history than the struggle for survival, as proclaimed by Charles Darwin. As Kropotkin put it,

The number and importance of mutual-aid institutions which were developed by the creative genius of the savage and half-savage masses, during the earliest clan-period of mankind and still more during the next village-community period, and the immense influence which these early institutions have exercised upon the subsequent development of mankind, down to the present times, induced me to extend my researches to the later, historical periods as well; especially, to study that most interesting period – the free medieval city republics, of which the universality and influence upon our modern civilization have not yet been duly appreciated. And finally, I have tried to indicate in brief the immense importance which the mutual-support instincts, inherited by mankind from its extremely long evolution, play even now in our modern society, which is supposed to rest upon the principle: “every one for himself, and the State for all,” but which it never has succeeded, nor will succeed in realizing (Kropotkin 1902).

With all the obvious moral idealism and uncritical humanism present in Kropotkin’s allegations, we are finding more and more evidence today that this kind of philosophy does not disappear from history, rather it remains in it and, indeed, is strengthened. Perhaps it strengthens not directly and unequivocally, but gradually and in the historical rhythm of the progressive movement. The fact is that at longer historical distances, “naive” humanism and accentuation of cohesion, strangely enough, reveal in themselves a greater potential of rationality and long-term effectiveness than unequivocal pragmatism of immediate benefit, individualism and optimization of profit in the spirit of the “economic man” philosophy. All of these philosophical positions were implicitly contained in Kropotkin’s social philosophy and confirmed by the practice of his social activities.

Propelled by the rejection of both Rousseau’s idealism and Huxley’s social Darwinism, Kropotkin based his famous thesis that, along with the struggle for survival and domination of the fittest (“survival of the fittest”), there is equal and no less strong mutual assistance,

mutual support and elements of sacrifice not only within the communities of the same species, but in a number of cases in the interspecies field of evolution. Kropotkin shied away from assessing the relationship between the struggle for existence and mutual aid according to the principle of their evolutionary potential and domination. This ratio varies and dynamically changes in the course of evolution, but, nevertheless, mutual assistance is becoming increasingly important.

Specifically, Kropotkin observed and described in nature elements, manifestations of cohesion, solidarity, integration, cooperation, mutual aid, altruism, sacrifice in the name of the weak, self-sacrifice, etc., which, in his opinion, evolutionarily proved their non-randomness and effectiveness. He wrote,

As soon as we study animals – not in laboratories and museums only, but in the forest and the prairie, in the steppe and the mountains – we at once perceive that though there is an immense amount of warfare and extermination going on amidst various species, and especially amidst various classes of animals, there is, at the same time, as much, or perhaps even more, of mutual support, mutual aid, and mutual defense amidst animals belonging to the same species or, at least, to the same society. Sociability is as much a law of nature as mutual struggle (Kropotkin 1902).

The above characteristics of intraspecies communities not only did not degrade in the course of evolution, did not disappear, but, on the contrary, strengthened and, moreover, consolidated at the level of homo sapiens. This opened the way to a completely new theory of society, which Kropotkin undertook to formulate.

A kind of mutual aid instinct, which initially had a natural, biological basis, is transformed into patterns of social behavior, modifying society itself, developing a kind of “chemical” reaction of rallying individuals. On the surface of social life, in culture, it is fixed in such forms as public morality, etiquette, and custom. As more and more profound introduction into the fabric of society, traditions are transformed into social institutions, which is fixed in the regulatory system. At the same time, as a result, the socio-biological instinct of mutual assistance, according to Kropotkin, develops into public perceptions



of justice. All this implies the strengthening of social cohesion, which is not only the background, but also the basis of social justice, which, in turn, forms the idea of equality. Kropotkin asserted that mutual aid, justice, and morality are the consecutive steps of a rising series of sentiments that we learn when studying the animal world and man. They represent an organic necessity, bearing in itself its own justification, confirmed by the whole development of the animal world, starting with the first (in the form of colonies of the simplest animals) and gradually rising to higher human societies.

#### Truthiness vs. Post-Truth or Propaganda

For both Thoreau and Kropotkin, all forms of state violence that distort genuine relations of solidarity and cohesion among people rely on social lies aimed at manipulating society and communities. In this sense, both thinkers saw the first step on the path of liberation from social evil in the purification of social consciousness from the phantoms of lies, or “post-truth” (in the modern interpretation).

Propaganda (lat. *propaganda* is literally – ‘to be distributed (faith)’, from lat. *propago* – ‘spread’) in modern political discourse is understood as an open dissemination of views, facts, arguments and other information in order to form public opinion or other goals pursued by the propagandists for manipulation of a society’s mass consciousness. Propaganda is based on the modern concept of “*postpravda* politics” (English post-truth politics) – a type of political culture in which discourse is mainly formed through appeal to the emotions and personal

convictions of the audience (the details of political reality are ignored), the repetition of the same arguments and persistent ignoring of objective facts that contradict a given concept. Currently, the post-truth policy is becoming prevalent in many social systems, where public discourse is shaped on a combination of the 24-hour news cycle, biased media and pervasive social networks. “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.’”<sup>2</sup> Of course, in the days of Thoreau and Kropotkin it was difficult to foresee the coming of the era of post-truth. But many elements of this system already existed in the embryonic stage and were supported by state institutions.

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<sup>2</sup> Oxford Languages <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/>