

REPLY TO COMMENTS ON TRACK THREE

Is it 'necessary to be able to make an appeal to truth'? Must there be some 'way of making something feel true'? These are Zoe Fiander's two working assumptions and they are mine as well.

Where do you all stand?

Carl Schnackenberg commits himself to 'innate truth'. But surely Adam B is spot on when he notes how fragile our grasp of human rights is even in a culture that appears so strongly to support them. And Paul Bernal's scary stuff on privacy shows us how ideas of fundamentals can change before our eyes. Sally-Anne Way is right that spreading truth is difficult so we need all the allies we can get, but first we need to know what truth is.

One thing for sure is that there is a hankering after fundamentals.

Federico Burlon reminds us that 'no unifying theory has come forth'. I counted no fewer than six approaches in your various responses.

THE DIVERSITY OF TRUTH

Paul Bernal started this theme and it proved unsurprisingly resilient through the week. It takes us to that knotty issue – one I'll be dealing with in a main track a bit later – religion – where does it fit and what can we do about it?

Summing up where I think the discussion takes us, I think you can have different truths for different people, as long as

- Common ground can be found upon which all can focus their action
- The agreement to differ on other matters is one that is rooted in mutual respect and not impatient forbearance
- No truth-holder should force his or her truth on others as a precondition of co-operation but nor should they feel the need to hide it or denigrate it in the company of others
- All truth-holders should be perfectly free to talk about their beliefs and to seek (within the limits of mutual respect) to persuade others of their (exclusive?) rightness. This applies to atheists as much as to Theists: the key is to do all this (if it is to be done) with respect not only for the dignity but also the views of the other. So when Holly Bontoft says 'I find it hard to believe that a devout follower of any religion wouldn't also be able to find a logical/moral reasoning for rights independent of their beliefs' she has the beginnings of exactly the kind of conversation we ought to encourage between activists: so long as her mind is open and that even the hard remains possible.

Anthony Langlois is right that what your truth is can affect how you practice human rights. There may be a very narrow space for co-operation between opposites but we need to find

and work it. So anti-abortionists can work with pro-choice advocates on poverty reduction for example.

The assumption here is that these different sources of truth produce shared commitment to the fundamentals of human rights: equality of esteem and respect for dignity.

I am with Federico on the need to 'negotiate the differences that arise between cultures and ideologies' but what avoids this being a 'cop-out' (Zoe's words) is that the discussion takes place against a background of a shared set of goals.

You can work with people whose truths-in-action produce the same values and goals as your own but not with those whose truths lead in fundamentally different directions.

PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

I liked Zoe's idea that 'what people want to believe in is what feels reassuring', fitting the search for foundations into the needs-calculus is a clever idea and maybe even works well.

I don't think, though, that knowing we have human rights is all that reassuring. It makes us work hard for other people, to find those whose rights are crushed and support them. Practising human rights can make for a difficult and disturbing life.

For example there is Alan Brady's helpful notion of truth as dynamic rather than static, full of movement, struggle, set-backs and accomplishment, with context creating truth rather than finding it: hardly a peaceful image this, and reassuring in the sense that the mayhem of achieving justice is reassuring, a guide making sense of chaos and delivering inner calm but not outward assurance.

BUT DOES REASON WORK?

Alan likes reason a lot: 'Human rights are a way of arguing and their realisation depends on the continuation of that argument.'

Many of you are equally enthusiastic: Paul looks for 'compelling arguments', Anthony talks of the 'cogency of arguments'. Damien Shortt sets off quite a flurry when he insists on immutability – see Paul and Anthony and Damien's rejoinder. (And Damien had some interesting things on hypocrisy to say as well – on which more in a later track.)

Of course we all like reason and deliberation: look how we have come across each other, on a web site devoted to ... reason and deliberation!

But just as perhaps not all of us like football, so not everyone likes argument or cares about reason. Do 'convincing arguments' work on the American Tea Party or the English Defence League? (It's because I answer no to the second of these that I have always believed in banning racist speech.)

Sally-Anne asks 'are we convincing only ourselves?' The answer might be 'yes' – if so, reason, deliberation and debate are not enough.

OVERLAPPING CONSENSUSES

This is another familiar one, and it rightly crops up a lot in your replies. As Holly says, 'If we cannot find a proof for the truth of human rights, then the next best thing is a consensus.'

But as I think Anthony suggests in his first post, it can't be expected to do all the work.

To start with *our* overlapping consensus can be displaced by that of those we oppose, a horrible different vision (eg torture is good; foreigners are sub-human) which we cannot now just reject because, after all, we have 'put all our truth eggs in this consensual basket'.

And then there is the question of what we mean by human rights which informs our search for a consensus. As Anthony says if you see the subject as narrow you'll be looking for very small zones of shared endeavour. If you on the other hand (like me and I think its fair to say Anthony) see it as expansive, as tied up with the flourishing of us all, then you'll be looking for something quite different.

So its tied up with, to quote Anthony, 'a certain vision of what it is to be human'. In order words it begs questions rather than answers them.

QUASI-SCIENTIFIC

I liked the respectful spat between Damien and Paul on this and was glad to see Holly return to it even after Zoe had pronounced it a 'horse thoroughly flogged'.

Serious post-modernists deny that even science is true in any objective way. The late [Richard Rorty](#) was marvelous on this as on so much else: human rights are not 'out there' because there is no 'out there' there. (Or at least, I add, we cannot *know* there is an 'out there' there, and since one thing we do know is that we don't know, it must follow that there *might be* an unknowable *out there* out there.) (I visited Einstein's house near Potsdam with Richard Rorty a few years ago: he has long been a hero of mine and he turned out on that day's experience to be a thoroughly decent almost immodestly modest human being.)

DISCIPLINARY TRUTH

I really enjoyed Louise Thomson on this – 'Each field [has] ... its own relatively partial but still authentic truth.' While 'they are all different but ... all true' at the same time, we can 'search for a more universal truth' by looking 'for themes that might emerge'.

Absolutely.

This is what Track Four – posted this morning – engages with, the threads that lie behind our truths, that make sense of their shared orientations, some more 'head-exploding times' as Zoe puts it!