

True to life: why truth matters

LYNCH, M. P. La importancia de la verdad. Para una cultura pública decente. Barcelona: Ediciones Paidós, 2005

By Pablo Santcovsky, sociologist and Ph.D candidate, Faculty of Communications Studies, Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB)

The best way to define what this eloquent book is about is by using the author's own words:

"This book deals with why truth matters in our personal and political life." (p. 13)

First of all, from a certain rationalist point of view, it may seem daring to place truth on a normative plane and this is one of the main themes running throughout Michael P. Lynch's work, a philosopher by profession. Here, in ten chapters grouped into three differentiated parts, he outlines a long argument with strong instruments from ethics and often from the philosophy of knowledge. Maintaining a tone that aims to distance itself from academism, Lynch gives us examples from everyday life to convince us of the importance of truth and, moreover, he does so without losing the necessary degree of depth that this requires. In this way, his programme also aims to be a kind of useful guide in tackling the everyday problems we might all come up against concerning the use of truth.

In the first chapter, Lynch assumes four *truisms* he defends throughout the argumentation: *a)* that truth is objective; *b)* that truth is good; *c)* that truth is a worthy goal of inquiry, and *d)* that truth is worth caring about for its own sake (pg. 34). For Lynch, truth is a *profoundly normative* truth based on the conception of what our *beliefs* are, those that are true and those that are not. Under this basic perception, he says that truth is worthy of interest but not of veneration. Truth is one value among many others and must matter to *us*, *real* human beings. Calling on the same common sense claimed by other philosophical simulations, such as Rawls' original position or Rousseau's state of nature, the author invites us to enter a machine where, once inside, we will enjoy a virtual reality designed according to our wishes, where we can even forget that we are there, and that the only condition would be that we could never leave. Lynch suggests that, in this situation, most of us would

refuse to enter the machine, as we would not like to spend the rest of our lives in a *virtual* world, we would prefer a life of truth, although sometimes this might be a harsh one. According to the author, the usual criticisms of the four truisms consist of associating them with the following "bad" ideas: that only one truth exists, that only "pure" reason can access truth, that truth is mysterious, that only some people can know the truth and that we should look for truth of all kinds. In the following chapters, he dedicates himself to demolishing these propositions.

In the second chapter, Lynch places the Kantian notion on the table that the experiences we perceive of the world are modelled by our own mental structures, i.e. there is an undeniable filter in the perception we have of what is real: our mind. But, immediately, he reminds us that, as we can be aware of this natural veil between reality as it is and our knowledge, we can both detect and become aware of our own errors in perception and also establish mechanisms of empirical comparison to help us give consistency and credibility to what we want to know, if it is true or not. The author of the book continues by defending that, although we cannot resolve problems with absolute certainty, certainty is a question of degree. The value of searching for truth does not lie in the possibility of achieving absolute certainty. He then reinforces his thesis by welcoming certain scepticism:

"The possibility that we may be wrong means that truth is independent of our beliefs; and that the objectivity of truth entails, in turn, that we may always be wrong. Ultimately, what it shows is that, as long as we think that truth is not our responsibility, we must also contemplate the possibility of not finding it." (p. 46)

One of the most exciting chapters in the book is where the author talks about relativism as a series of systems of thought that lead to doubts as to the possibility of truth being objective. The philosopher starts with a critique of simple relativism, a relativism that resembles solipsism and that, like the latter, is immediately contradictory and not at all convincing. He then decides to pursue post-modern relativism, for which truth would only be given by culture and the power system that governs a community. The author ends up retrieving the importance of context but marvellously rejects the remaining relativist presuppositions. On the other hand, in the next chapter he reminds

us that assuming that objective truth exists does not mean that it must be pursued without taking the consequences into account. From here on he proposes that, if truth is not always good, our objective must be relevant truths, as truth is not the only value we pursue, there are others. And the relevance of a true belief will therefore depend on context. Therefore, when we investigate, we don't only want the truth, we want a relevant truth and, at the same time, we often want to understand the relations, i.e. how different aspects of reality fit together.

In the second part of the book (chapters 5, 6 and 7), perhaps the most academic, the author discounts various theories of truth which he considers to be false. Firstly, he rejects pragmatism, starting with classic pragmatism, by means of basic arguments criticising utilitarianism; the theory of truth as coherence; and, finally, ends up stating that looking for true beliefs is not the same as looking for justified beliefs. He accepts that a well-justified belief is very useful for consolidating truthfulness but rejects that a true belief is the same thing as a justified belief in practical terms, as assumed by pragmatism. He then sets about examining causal realism and the theory of truth as correspondence. Lynch says that something happens here similar to what happens with verificationism that, as a theory of truth, is insufficient, because it does not manage to explain truth or falseness of all kinds of belief, only those resulting causally from some physical phenomenon. But truths of a normative kind are not compatible with verificationism, which means that many verificationists postulate that it is impossible to determine whether normative statements are true or false and that it's only a matter of opinion. Lynch raises doubts as to this conception and gets round it by presenting an ontological status of truth consisting of a plurality of forms, which mean it cannot be reduced to physics but neither can it be converted into metaphysics. It is an ethically desirable value.

The author enters the most ethical aspect of his argument in the third part of his book. First (ch. 8), he shows us the importance of having true beliefs about ourselves. For him, *acting freely* means that our actions are in accord with our desires. That is why it's important to know ourselves and to have good self-esteem, as well as being clear as to what we want and what concerns us. According to the philosopher, we follow an *authentic* life if we are true to ourselves, but

even this is a question of degree, he reveals, and, in short, he means that there are true beliefs worthy of interest not because of what they include but for what they form a part of: a happy and prosperous life. We come across one of the several interesting questions in the book when Lynch states that declaring that something may be *good for its own sake* can lead us to a *conversational block* since, in some way, it seems that there is nothing more to say. Considering self-knowledge as something *good for its own sake* can lead to a similar situation, but Lynch gets around this by saying that, if we consider self-knowledge as an essential part of a happy life, we reach a good destination, as saying that a happy life is *good for its own sake* can be taken on board by everyone. He then supports intellectual integrity, which is not a question of mere coherence but is the typical feature of people who consider truth important for its own sake and who are therefore prepared to change their beliefs if they are not true and even to look for truth and have the courage to defend it. Integrity would come before this authenticity we have already mentioned. When he talks of happiness, the philosopher says that the position is false that claims a good life is to achieve what you want. For him, it's more complex: he includes happiness in the whole series of fluid concepts, which are concepts that can expand and enrich themselves depending on circumstances (pg. 173) and, in summary, he concludes that there is a concept of a happy life with certain essential characteristics, although these are imprecise. This means that, although each person has a different concept of happiness, we would all possess a potential capacity in accordance with some basic principles concerning what happiness is. Consequently:

"Being concerned about truth and believing the truth about what concerns us are necessary ingredients for happiness as they are necessary parts of integrity, authenticity and love itself. Implicitly, therefore, they form part of the concept of happiness." (p. 176)

Chapter 9 is dedicated to the relationship between lies and the importance of truth. First, Lynch concludes that truth is a central aspect of human life, as although we have all lied at some time, the presumption of the truthfulness of the information around us forms part of the background of human life and we could not live with constant doubt as to this truthfulness. Along the same lines, being sincere with others

means respecting them and, for Lynch, respect between people is something approaching a universal value, which means that sincerity can be understood as a constitutive good reinforcing the idea that it is important to be concerned about truth itself.

In chapter 10, the last chapter, Lynch talks of the political importance of truth, of how the fact that truth matters to people makes them more attentive to the excesses of governments, a reason for which liberal democracy exists. Declaring himself to be a liberal (in the North American sense), specifically he defends liberalism (Rawlsian) based on the existence of fundamental rights, which uses the argument that the concept itself of *basic right* presupposes the concept of objective truth (pp. 203 and 204). For Lynch, political morality must be internally coherent and coherent with the empirical truths concerning the actions of humans. In summary, countering the deflationism of Rorty and, at the same time, the most extreme constructivism, he says that:

“A belief is true if things are as this belief says they are and not because, for example, nine out of ten people recommend them. The decisive issue is simply that believing in something does not make something be like that.” (p. 212)

In the same sense, the author concludes with a direct criticism of the current United States administration and its policies to control information, which contradict the principle that a democratic and liberal government must make truth prevail.