Being a Believer

Social Identity in Post-truth Political Discourse

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Abstract: Analyses of so-called 'post-truth' discourse in populist politics have so far largely focussed on sorting it into cases of lying, bullshitting, bubble-like epistemic constraints, or alternative epistemic norms flouting objective truth. We review these proposals and point out problems with each. Some scholars, however, have recently drawn attention to how apparent assertions of facts in these contexts seem to be functionally entangled with expressing or affirming social identities. To get a clearer picture of what such an explanation might amount to, we differentiate four different ways in which social identities might be connected to apparently assertive discourse: signalling, expressive affirmation, dissonance reduction, and identity grounding. Distinguishing and deciding among these will matter not only for providing an accurate analysis of post-truth discourse, but also for determining the exact grounds on which it merits criticism and for what might be done about it.

Keywords: post-truth; alternative facts; social identity; signalling; expressives

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1 Introduction

For most people, whether the sun was shining at a particular time in a particular location isn't a very personal matter. You might have hoped beforehand that it would be or be disappointed that it wasn't – but as far as the fact is concerned, it either was or it wasn't. As much is no personal matter, it's just how the world is. As is well known, though, supporters of President Trump have often been inclined to think otherwise. Throughout the surge of populism across several Western democracies epitomised by the Trump presidency, scholars have been particularly puzzled by the role of apparent assertions of empirical beliefs in what has come to be known as 'post-truth' political discourse. In such discourse, speakers do not only assert empirical claims with a striking

disregard for compelling countervailing evidence. Rather, disagreement about matters of fact seems to have become politicised in a manner reminiscent of the picture Carl Schmitt ([1932] 1963, 27) painted of essential group antagonism:

> [The political enemy] is simply the other, the stranger, and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in a specially intense way, existentially something different and alien, such that in the extreme case there can be conflicts with him that can neither be settled by a previously determined general norm nor by the judgment of an 'uninvolved' and thus 'impartial' third party.[1]

In post-truth discourse, compelling evidence that, for instance, it was cloudy throughout Trump's inauguration likewise seems to fail as an impartial arbiter among believers and disbelievers of a contested empirical claim. Critique on the grounds of such counterevidence seems to be framed by post-truth speakers as an attack along 'us versus them' fault lines; rather than concerning an intersubjective point of view accessible to both speaker and critic, which would seem to be invoked by making an empirical claim.

In this paper, we argue that identity-based accounts are better placed to explain most of post-truth discourse than alternative analyses dominant in the philosophical literature. To get a clearer picture of what such accounts could amount to, we differentiate four potential identity-based accounts (Section 4): signalling, expressive affirmation, cognitive dissonance reduction, and identity grounding. To prepare the ground for this, we will first survey prevalent analyses – in terms of lying, bullshitting, epistemic constraints, and alternative epistemic norms – in Section 2 and then briefly introduce the notion of social identity underlying the alternative avenue we seek to pursue (Section 3).

Evidently, any such endeavour must start from some antecedent conception of what it is that we wish to give an account of. While in most cases of conceptual analysis, we can take some recourse in linguistic intuitions, usage of the label 'post-truth' is arguably too sparse and vague to warrant such treatment. We will therefore make three substantive presumptions about our target cases, echoing the picture just sketched: Firstly, our target cases involve speakers making claims in a manner inappropriately irresponsive to epistemic reasons against the truth of the claim (paradigmatically, *empirical* claims contrary to available *evidence*). In this sense, they are *post-truth* utterances, even though they may state truths flukily or incidentally. Secondly, we assume that target cases will feature noticeably in populist political discourse such as, paradigmatically, that surrounding Donald Trump since his 2016 presidential campaign. This is simply because this discourse drove the emergence of the label 'post-truth' – even though, once properly understood, it may very well be applicable in quite different contexts. Thirdly, we assume that a good account will have a way of accommodating the observation that post-truth speakers showcase a sense of *personal investment* in their claims (including empirical ones) and tend to account for factual contestation of these in terms of political fault lines.

Before we start, let us steer clear of one insidious source of potential confusion. The kind of analysis we are here concerned with is not tied to the *content* of a given claim (e.g., that the sun was

1 Own translation.

shining) but to to the speech act performed by means of it in a certain context. We must therefore resist the temptation to think of instances of one and the same false empirical claim as constituting a single explanandum – what people *do in* professing them is a question that can only be posed relative to a context. In particular, it appears reasonable to expect that the context in which some speaker *originates* a post-truth claim (such as Trump publicly making a new false contention in a speech) will often ask for a different analysis than this claim's subsequent *uptake* (such as Trump loyalists subsequently repeating the claim in private; see also Section 4.5).[2] As long as we keep in mind that such separate questions may arise, the options covered in this paper should, though, still be the relevant contenders for tackling each case.

2 Conventional Analyses of Post-Truth Discourse

First off, let us consider four possible analyses of post-truth utterances that have surfaced in the literature. Bearing in mind that ordinary talk of 'post-truth' discourse is likely to pick out a rather heterogeneous class of phenomena, we are happy to grant that each proposal will successfully account for a certain subset of cases that have at times been referred to under this rubric. Still, we argue that each of the proposals fails to capture what is most distinctive about post-truth discourse. If this is right, then the upshot of this section will be that a sizable portion of cases commonly associated with the label 'post-truth' are not plausibly covered by any of these four concepts.

2.1 Lying

Clearly, one prominent class of empirical beliefs professed against the speaker's evidence is that of lies. Indeed, some have suspected that talk of 'post-truth' politics ends up being little more than a euphemism distracting from the age-old phenomenon of politicians telling strategic lies – much akin, for instance, to alleged Iraqi weapons of mass destruction or Bill Clinton's denial of his affair with Monica Lewinsky (Marschall 2017; Blackburn 2018; Roig 2019).

The following definition – echoing Isenberg (1964, 466) and Primoratz (1984, 54) – has been widely accepted as a starting point for analyses of lying:

> To lie =df to make a believed-false statement to another person with the intention that the other person believe that statement to be true. (Mahon 2016)

The conditions laid out as necessary and sufficient in this definition (statement, untruthfulness, addressee, intent to deceive) face a range of objections (for an overview, see Mahon 2016). For example, liars sometimes do not seek to make their addressee believe the very falsehood they are stating but merely to believe that *the speaker believes* it (Williams 2002, chap. 5; Mahon 2008).

2 We are indebted to an anonymous reviewer for pressing us on this point.

Such refinements notwithstanding, two elements of the above definition have widely been accepted in the contemporary debate. First, lies need to be *untruthful*: whereas the belief the liar intends to elicit in the hearer may or may not turn out to be false in fact, it must be *believed to be false* by the liar (Krishna 1961, 146; Mannison 1969, 138; Kupfer 1982, 104). Second and consequently, lying is *deceitful*: In deciding what to say, the liar chooses the statement he ends up making precisely on account of the fact that he expects it to create some false belief in the hearer (Chisholm and Feehan 1977).

On both counts, though, it seems that paradigm cases of post-truth utterances fail to qualify as lies. In fact, we tend to agree with the position then Senior Counselor to the President Kellyanne Conway (2017) once took in an interview on CNN:

> *Stelter*: The scandals are about the President's lies, about voter fraud, […] about wiretapping, his repeated lies about those issues. That's the scandal.
> *Conway*: He doesn't think he's lying about those issues and you know it.

Certainly, Trump – and populists more broadly – can be found lying and deceiving. For instance, when Trump assured the Department of Justice that no government records remained at his Mar-a-Lago resort and subsequently ordered such records to be moved to a new location (US v. Trump 2023), he had clearly made an untruthful and deceptive statement. By contrast to this case, though, it is precisely the fact that speakers often appear genuinely *committed* to the false empirical claims they are making that makes 'post-truth' politics puzzlingly discontinuous with a political discourse that has long included cases of strategic deception.

In addition, notice two related points about the pragmatics of lying as compared to post-truth utterances. First, post-truth utterances seem unfit for deceptive goals because their utterers refuse to strategically adopt the hearer's perspective. If S wants to instil in H the belief that P, then S must anticipate the conditions under which H would accept that P in order to present things in such a manner as to suggest to H that these conditions are being met. In order to effectively pursue her goal, that is, S must take *the epistemic standards that H applies* to contentions of the type "P" to govern the way she presents the matter. Yet it seems quite clear that this is not what most post-truth speakers do: Instead, post-truth utterances are often startling precisely on account of unabashedly flouting standards of assertibility normally applied in the context. Consider the case of Antonio Sabàto Jr., subsequently Republican candidate for Congress, who in a 2016 interview on ABC News claimed that Barack Obama was a Muslim and responded to the interviewers' bewilderment: "You know what, I have the right to believe that and you have the right to go against that. But I believe it." (2016 05:03)

Second, when a lie uttered at one time t_1 gets exposed as false at a later time t_2, it is manifest to both speaker and hearer that the liar's undertaking has *failed* – either qua lie (for the liar) or qua assertion (for the hearer). As we have just seen, the liar's deceptive ends require her to give the appearance of accepting the epistemic standards that now classify her statement as inassertible. Consequently, at t_2 she has to retract her statement that P and either concede the lie or cover it up with a further lie providing an explanation of how she was subjectively justified in believing P

at t_1, according to the standards on which her claim is inassertible at t_2. Yet again, what is striking about post-truth speakers is precisely that they show no awareness of any fatal problems with their utterances when a compelling case for their falsity is presented – as, perhaps, in the form of Washington Post fact-checkers maintaining a detailed database of Trump's 30,573 false or misleading claims during his 2016–2020 presidency (Kessler 2021).

Both of these problems circle back to the fact that post-truth speakers appear committed to the claims they utter in a way that would be irreconcilable with making the claim untruthfully. Of course, this appearance can be called into question. In particular, consider again the kind of 'meta-deception' raised by Williams (2002): S's *apparent* commitment to P may be exactly what her deceiving consists in if S does not want to make H believe that P, but that *S believes P*. To this end, failing to adopt H's standards for accepting P would do no harm either: All S wants to convey, after all, would be that she herself believes P.

We grant that this is a possibility consistent with the evidence we have above invoked in our objections to the lying analysis. However, we remain sceptical as to whether it makes for a more plausible contender. Such a 'meta-lying' analysis of post-truth discourse would have to posit that a considerable number of people pursue rather intricate, self-reflective plots of deceiving their interlocutors, not least in spontaneous exchanges. They would know that they do not believe P, but present themselves as believing P, often keeping track of a number of actually disbelieved claims over the course of a conversation and across time – considering that post-truth speakers will often not limit themselves to only one particular post-truth utterance. Not only would pulling this off require a notable population of very skilled and diligent liars. We can simply see no reason to posit such elaborate schemes of deception instead of just taking those speakers to believe the claims they appear to believe.

2.2 Bullshit

Famously, Harry Frankfurt (1988) introduced the notion of *bullshit* into philosophical jargon in order to capture a characteristic kind of *indifference* towards the truth of a statement that distinguishes certain insincere speakers from liars:

> Both [the bullshitter] and the liar represent themselves falsely as endeavoring to communicate the truth. […] But the fact about himself that the liar hides is that he is attempting to lead us away from a correct apprehension of reality; we are not to know that he wants us to believe something he supposes to be false. The fact about himself that the bullshitter hides, on the other hand, is that the truth-values of his statements are of no central interest to him; what we are not to understand is that his intention is neither to report the truth nor to conceal it. (Frankfurt 1988, 130)

Bullshit has variously been proposed as key to conceptualising post-truth discourse both within academia (Hürter 2017; Kristiansen and Kaussler 2018; Quinn 2017; Rietdijk 2021; Szanto 2023) and in news commentary (e.g., Cowen 2017; Frankfurt 2016; Yglesias 2017). For sure, as Hürter

(2017) and, not least, Frankfurt (1988) rightly point out, bullshit is a staple in political speeches and press rooms around the globe, and so many a post-truth speaker will also be found bullshitting. Yet as an analysis of post-truth discourse, the same problem affecting the lying analysis likewise haunts any bullshit analysis following Frankfurt's focus on indifference: Post-truth speakers seem to be all but indifferent about the truth of their statements, considering the role these beliefs play in their judgements and actions as well as from the offence taken at their being contested on factual grounds.

Arguably, mimicking the outward signs of commitment to one's claims might also just be what one does in order to conceal one's indifference towards them, as Frankfurt points out bullshitters are keen to do. Proponents of a bullshit analysis see post-truth speakers as attempting to deceive us about whether they are so committed – so surely the *appearance* that they are should not be taken at face value. Analogously to the point we made in the preceding section about complex lies, though, the deliberate faking of commitment to a claim when in fact one is not committed to it requires a considerable talent for acting and efforts to keep track of one's fake attitudes across contexts and claims. Now it may be that a bullshitter feels compelled to follow down such paths of counterfeit once he has bullshitted and cannot revoke his claim. However, in the case of epistemically unwarranted empirical claims it will often be *foreseeable* that one will be challenged on factual grounds. Ordinarily, then, it appears simpler and more plausible to assume that speakers are in fact committed in the way they appear to be.

Of course, there may be good reasons for embarking even on complex undertakings of commitment-faking: Presumably, one will go the extra mile if a particular act of bullshitting is precisely what is required to attain one's ends. Problematically, though, it is precisely the ends pursued in bullshitting on which Frankfurt largely remains silent. So those proposing to construe post-truth utterances as cases of bullshit-like commitment-faking still stand in need of an account of what is at stake for post-truth speakers that rationalises such efforts[3] – which, as we shall see later, identity-based analyses would be well placed to supply.

2.3 Epistemic Constraints

A third family of explanations of post-truth utterances holds them to be, broadly speaking, truthful assertions under unfortunate epistemic circumstances: By contrast to liars, so this story goes, such speakers hold the false beliefs they profess to be true and, by contrast to bullshitters, they are committed to standard norms of assertion. The problem is just that their resources for evaluating the relevant beliefs are compromised, skewing their epistemic judgements (Levy 2023). For instance, the evidential inputs received by the speaker may be systematically biased due to the structure of communication networks they partake in: consider the by-now-familiar invocation of *echo chambers* or *filter bubbles* (e.g. Begby 2022; Anderson 2021). It may be that given implausible prior beliefs, they appraise the relevant evidence rationally – as in the case of conspiracy the-

3 In Section 4.5, we shall return to how these ends pursued *in* bullshitting can sometimes require an identity-based analysis even if the speech in question may appear to be plain bullshit when examined in isolation.

orists (Dentith 2019). More specifically, they may have undue confidence in the epistemic authority of some source, subsequently misappraising testimony obtained from that source (Paulo 2018; Rini 2021).

While again much can be learnt from this strand of research, we have two reservations about its clout in explaining post-truth utterances. First, the more readily that compelling countervailing epistemic reasons are accessible, the more extensive the epistemic constraints an analysis of post-truth utterances must postulate to explain them in terms of plain subjectively justified beliefs. Part of the puzzle presented by post-truth discourse seems to be, though, that it regularly includes cases where counterevidence to a claim is readily available to the speaker – i.e., widely disseminated and easy to appreciate. In such circumstances, we would have to ramp up the implausibility of presumed priors, ultimately casting doubt on whether a significant number of people could in turn rationally arrive at or even merely be attributed these prior beliefs. It may, for instance, very well be justifiable to discount any and all news coverage of the inauguration under the condition of a prior belief in a conspiracy against Trump orchestrated across all major news outlets. Yet the more exotic such rationalising preconditions become, the sparser, presumably, the cases they cover.

Second, when post-truth speakers get confronted with disconfirming evidence or compelling objections that render them subjectively unjustified in holding the belief they previously espoused, they should *revise* their belief on pain of rationality. What's more, doing so would seem to amount to a household case of belief revision. Learning that it was raining during Trump's inauguration speech would then be like learning that tomatoes are fruits rather than vegetables: one always thought otherwise, but now that one faces compelling reasons to the contrary, one revises the belief. Yet if that were how post-truth speakers reacted to fact-checking, post-truth discourse would hardly pose the problem it does.

2.4 Alternative Epistemic Norms

In discussing bullshit-based accounts, we contended that post-truth speakers do not take themselves to be hampering inquiry. One way of accounting for this would be to construe them as simply acting on a *different* understanding of what aiming at truth consists in – even though this disagreement might not be made explicit. A final cluster of accounts, then, takes post-truth speakers to diverge from standard cases in the epistemic norms they take to be applicable within the relevant domain of discourse, rather than in the empirical beliefs they subsume under these norms in assessing or reasoning to a given belief (as bubble-type strategies would have it). This, at any rate, seems to be what some scholars have in mind in embedding post-truth discourse within a larger picture of 'post-truth politics' (Hendricks and Vestergaard 2018) that is supposed to present or follow from some genuine alternative to our previous understanding and practice

of 'truth politics;' typically lending itself to some form or other of relativism or debunking constructivism about truth, objectivity, or rationality.[4]

An analysis along these lines will have to take two hurdles: First, it must specify epistemic standards that would render post-truth utterances assertible. Second, it must argue that these standards can plausibly be attributed to post-truth speakers. Of course, this does not require these alternative norms to be substantively defensible. Still, they should be ones that post-truth speakers could be seen as applying consistently. So what might these be?

First off, note that while commentators sometimes invoke the idea of a rejection of objective truth, post-truth speakers typically treat their utterances in ways that would seem to undermine any broadly sceptical challenge: When, for instance, many Republican candidates in the 2022 US midterm elections held that the 2020 presidential election was stolen, they do not seem to mean that in the end nothing can be said about whether the election was stolen or not.

Instead, we take it that one option that would both render most cases of post-truth utterances assertible and align with the thrust of comments about 'post-truth politics' would consist, roughly, in counting appearances ("It seems to me that P") or positive metacognitive attitudes ("I feel really sure that P") as independent epistemic reasons for P (Heinzelmann and Tran 2022) – that is, reasons that can *outweigh* those observer-independent epistemic reasons which they are standardly taken to be answerable to. So post-truth speakers would believe that the world is just the way it seems *to them* and people to whom it seems otherwise got things *wrong*: The point is not that anyone should follow their gut feelings in deciding what to believe, but that some people's gut feelings are better than others'.

While this does provide a prima facie consistent account of our target cases, it immediately raises the question of why someone should be committed to such highly peculiar norms. Here, a staple from populism theory may seem to get us a foot in the door: As Priester (2012, 4) highlights, it is a core tenet of populism to invoke the "small man's" *common sense* as superior to the intellectual reasoning of the "corrupt elites," who are rendered not only morally, but also epistemically inferior. Considering the substantial overlap of post-truth discourse with populism, we concede that this proposal has some appeal. However, notice that the stand-out feature on this analysis is precisely the distinction made between inherently[5] epistemically superior and inferior groups of people. If an analysis based on epistemic norms must ultimately include and account for this feature, it already requires an identity component at its heart – presumably, a variant of the kind we will return to in Section 4.3.

4 Finlayson (2019, 72–74) provides some discussion of such contentions, yet finds them so puzzling as to prefer to collapse them into echo-chamber accounts.

5 Of course, there are ways of grouping people that trace epistemic authority that obtains on grounds other than mere group membership. Crucially, though, we do not see any such epistemically relevant property in the present juxtaposition and such theories of populism precisely highlight that none is postulated by populists.

3 Post-Truth and Social Identity

In the previous section, we argued that four established ways of explaining post-truth discourse are plausible for at most a specific subset of cases that do not adequately represent what speaking of a turn to post-truth is getting at. However, there is a further line of inquiry that promises to make sense of our intuitive grouping of post-truth cases not captured by these approaches: As some scholars have recently pointed out,[6] such discourse seems to be characteristically entangled with expressing or affirming *social identities*.

By contrast to the metaphysical debate on *personal identity*, talk of *social identity* seeks to capture the fact that some of our features become salient to ourselves or to others in governing our social interactions by way of categorising us in a way that renders us more readily intelligible in a given context; suggesting, enabling, and constraining certain options for behaviour within it. Ásta (2018, 122) seeks to illustrate this phenomenon by means of the metaphor of a 'location on the social map,' which participants in a context assign to themselves and others. As Dembroff and Saint-Croix (2019) have recently sought to highlight by suggesting the notion of *agential identity*, we often deliberately act in ways that aim to control and revise the identity attributed to us by others in light of our subjective identity:

> In April 1997, Ellen DeGeneres officially 'came out' in Time magazine, the cover boldly stating, with characteristic nonchalance, "Yep, I'm Gay". In one sense, DeGeneres's coming out was not informative: it was widely known that DeGeneres was gay. But in another sense, it was hugely informative. It communicated to the world that DeGeneres wanted this knowledge to move outside people's heads and beyond closed doors, and to impact how she was treated in her public life. (Dembroff and Saint-Croix 2019, 571)

Social identities matter to us not merely as a way of categorising individuals, but in virtue of the practical orientation they provide: subjective identities can give us reasons for action, and so can the identity others attribute to us give them reasons to interact with us in certain ways. In this vein, Christine Koorsgard (1996, 101) opted to term our subjectively endorsed identities '*practical* identities' from the get-go and put them at the heart of her constitutivist account of normativity:

> It is the conceptions of ourselves that are most important to us that give rise to unconditional obligations. For to violate them is to lose your integrity and so your identity, and to no longer be who you are. That is, it is to no longer be able to think of yourself under the description under which you value yourself and find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking. (Korsgaard 1996, 102)

It is with a view to such features that social identity has recurrently been brought up in the recent literature on post-truth – to varying degrees of explication and elaboration. Perhaps most expressly so among recent scholarship, Anderson (2021) advocates for understanding populist rhet-

6 For present purposes, we review contributions from the broadly philosophical literature. Tracing developments in social psychology, which provides extant empirical research on identity, not least following Tajfel and Turner's (1986) seminal proposal of *Social Identity Theory*, would provide ample material for a paper of its own. We do not have the space to do so here, nor would it substantially impact the aims of this paper.

oric of the kind including paradigmatic post-truth utterances as "identity-expressive symbolic positioning" that merely appears to be in the business of making empirical claims:

> "Build the wall" is not a practical way to stop illegal immigration, but rather an affirmation of who the (real) people are and recognition of who they must be protected from. "Lock her up!" is not based on a legal argument, but a delegitimizing move. "Voter fraud" is not evidence-based, but a grievance against fellow citizens whom populists think do not deserve to vote. (Anderson 2021, 24)

Arguably, the idea of using apparent assertions of fact as a way of strategically conveying an impression of who the speaker is or where they ought to be 'located on the social map' is already present in Frankfurt's (1988, 121) discussion of one of his paradigm cases of bullshit:

> [The Fourth of July] orator intends these statements to convey a certain impression of himself. He is not trying to deceive anyone concerning American history. What he cares about is what people think of him. He wants them to think of him as a patriot, as someone who has deep thoughts and feelings about the origins and the mission of our country, who appreciates the importance of religion, who is sensitive to the greatness of our history, whose pride in that history is combined with humility before God, and so on.

Subsequently, though, Frankfurt steers away from cases like the above and seems to have in mind acts of 'bluffing' and 'bullshitting one's way through' (1988, 127–29), in which a speaker may have a motive for lying but opts to pursue his aims without even as much as crafting a specific false account of the facts, speaking of the bullshitter chiefly as someone with an "interest in getting away with what he says" (1988, 131).

Again more akin to Anderson, Finlayson (2019, 78) alerts us to how seeming assertions of facts can function to disclose group affiliations or attack adversaries:[7]

> A statement about bananas can be understood as just that – a statement about bananas – but it can also be understood as a more general declaration of allegiance [*with the pro-Brexit Leave campaign*] and an expression of frustration [*about the EU*]. The specific content of the statement is sometimes not all that central to an appreciation of its meaning. This can help explain why the makers of the statements in question often seem impervious to refutation: it doesn't matter how many people were at the rally; the act of repeating and insisting on an inflated figure is, once again, a statement of affiliation and an assertion of defiant confidence. What some people are doing with their words, in the context of phenomena such as Brexit and Trump, is issuing a slap in the face to an Establishment which they believe, with good reason, has failed to serve them.

The idea that such rhetoric implicates an opposition of adversarial groups in particular has been invoked with some regularity. Cassam (2021, 60) mentions in passing that propaganda, which he floats as an alternative to oversimplifying bullshit analyses, often relates to identity:

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7 Incidentally, Finlayson subsequently turns our present proposal on its head in holding that the label 'post-truth' "is first and foremost a slur word: it serves to smear its referents, but without contributing to an understanding of their nature or significance" (2019, 79).

> Identity propaganda appeals to a narrative about who "we" are, who "they" are, and what "they" [are] doing to "us." Identity propaganda seeks to sharpen the division between them and us, and promotes the conception of "them" as "the other" – alien, inferior but a threat to "us."

As much surely sits well with Cas Mudde's (2004, 543) widely endorsed definition of populism as "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people."

It is easy to see why these scholars have found themselves attracted to the idea that post-truth discourse has something to do with identity, recalling the basic tenets of our explanandum we set out in the introduction: If Mudde gets the basic picture of populism right, a rise in populist politics will readily coincide with an increased interest in conveying group affiliations, construed in an essentialist manner and evaluatively loaded – as highlighted by Cassam. If, as Anderson and Finlayson point out, what post-truth speakers do by means of apparent assertions in fact somehow revolves around identity, then that may explain why they espouse empirical claims with utter disregard for their assertibility as empirical claims.

As plausible as establishing such links may seem, though, they have hardly been fleshed out in full as far as an analysis of post-truth discourse of the kind we aim for is concerned. In fact, the quotes we have given above by and large capture what is made of them in the respective papers. Once we drill deeper and ask for a clear picture of what exactly it is that post-truth speakers are supposed to be doing, we may not only find ourselves in want of a more explicit statement of the proposals. We may also find them to be ambiguous between different ways in which identity might be implicated in post-truth utterances or unclearly related to others that go unmentioned. This, at any rate, is what Section 4 aims to show.

4 Identity-Based Analyses: Charting the Terrain

In this section, we will propose an exploratory typology of four different ways in which prima facie assertions of empirical facts might be related to the speaker's identity. We will illustrate each by way of a more familiar example of the respective phenomenon and provide an initial sketch of how post-truth utterances would work if they worked analogously. Our aim in this paper is not to decide among these different options, but to differentiate competing proposals that are amenable to subsequent empirical testing. We will, however, briefly take note of apparent benefits and shortcomings as we go along; in the light of which the proposal in Section 4.3 tentatively appears least vulnerable to objections.

4.1 Signalling

One option that comes to mind would be that post-truth speakers use prima facie empirical assertions to *signal* their identity – to wit, their affiliation with a political group and its goals. On this picture, saying that the sun was shining during Trump's inauguration speech would essentially be like wearing a *MAGA* hat.[8] Note that it is by no means uncommon for people to deliberately convey information about aspects of their identity to others (Green 2007, 1–2; Gal 2015). Consider, for instance, bumper stickers of the ichthys symbol ('Jesus fish') or people appending a rainbow flag to their user name on social media platforms, serving to signal to others one's religious or sexual identity, respectively.

For present purposes, we will presume the following understanding of signals:

> A *cue* is any feature of an entity that conveys information (including misinformation). […] A tiger's pug marks cue other animals to the presence of a predator; my emission of CO_2 cues mosquitoes to the presence of a food source. […] A *signal* is any cue that was designed for its ability to convey the information that it does. (Green 2007, 5)

In terms of identity, then, exposing the X-signal is supposed to provide sufficient evidence for inferring that the signaller is an X, and this evidence is understood by the recipient to be provided intentionally. (For, of course, a person may *give away* their X-ness in all manner of ways without intending to do so.) Likewise, talk of 'signalling' is typically reserved for cases in which the evidence provided does not consist in the plain assertion of the identity fact to be inferred from the signal. As far as we can see, this may come down to any variety of contextual factors: at times, it will simply be considered an unfitting or aesthetically inferior option to present the assertion (consider a bumper sticker drily stating "The driver of this vehicle is a pious Christian"). At other times, a signal not consisting in the relevant assertion will be communicatively efficient, as perhaps might be the case with the social media user who has a rainbow flag appearing right next to their name. Not least, note that signals are sometimes chosen so as to provide sufficient evidence only to a certain subset of recipients, such as those sharing the identity, constituting a coded message targeted at a particular audience that might diverge from that which would understand a plain X-assertion.

In any case, though, the intention of S in presenting a signal x of S's identity X is to elicit in the relevant audience the belief that *S is an X*. In order to fulfil this function, the signal must be reliably intelligible to the target audience as meaning (or warranting the inference) that S is an X. But for this to be the case, x need not be *about* X in the sense that exposing x would warrant an inference to X independently of purely conventional use or a contingently obtaining correlation. In other words, if asserting an empirical belief P effectively warrants the inference that one is an

8 Also, consider a Trump tweet that Harry Frankfurt (2016) deemed a prime example of bullshitting: "The best taco bowls are made in Trump Tower Grill. I love Hispanics!" We agree with Frankfurt that here, Trump was obviously not in the business of making a warranted contribution to a discussion of the global ranking of restaurants serving taco bowls. Yet it seems to us that rather than plainly glossing the tweet as bullshit, it is better accounted for as expressing allegiance with an identity group (Hispanics) by means of expressing personal affiliation with food that he deems intricately tied up with that identity (taco bowls).

X, this is consistent with the logic of signalling without any need for P to assert anything about being an X. If it so happened that only loyal Trumpists would be expected to profess that the sun was shining during Trump's inauguration speech when asked about it, doing so would be an effective way for them to signal their being a loyal Trumpist.

On the surface, then, it would appear that the speaker asserts P in uttering "P." Yet they are not: Contrary to an assertion, the condition of satisfaction of their speech act is not the fact that P, but S's being an X. Likewise, their act is felicitous not if the hearer H comes to believe that S believes that P, but if H comes to believe that S is an X.

As an analysis of post-truth utterances, this could readily explain why post-truth speakers are unresponsive to countervailing evidence: whether P or ¬P is simply of no central concern to them in uttering "P." They would see a response to their utterance that takes the question under discussion to be whether P or ¬P as missing their point – much like a speaker who states "It is getting really cold in here" in order to imply the request "Could you please shut the window?" would feel misunderstood by a person replying: "Oh, that will be because the window is open." Plausibly, a post-truth speaker may, on account of their taking it to be a facially unfitting response, then interpret the push-back challenging P as implicating disapproval of what they take "P" to convey, namely their identity of being an X. In this way, the understanding that stating "P" is strongly tied to someone's being an X may go some way towards explaining the sense of personal investment in what to outside observers may seem to be mere contingent facts about the world.

Note also that false empirical claims may be particularly *effective* signals precisely in virtue of being false: prevalent norms of assertibility sanction the steadfast assertion of false claims and so make this way of signalling their X-ness *costly* for S. Yet the very fact that a signal is costly to produce (sometimes dubbed a *handicap*) makes it less likely to be faked and so more credible as a signal of X-ness (Zahavi and Zahavi 1997). So a post-truth speaker might be seen as leveraging the fact that going to the lengths of looking rather stupid or outlandish by asserting falsehoods is good proof of their commitment to X-ness. In this sense, they would in fact have a stake in the truth value of P, yet neither in virtue of warranting P nor in virtue of lying about it.

Two limitations of this analysis should be immediately evident, though. Firstly, explaining the speaker's indignation in these terms presumes that they would expect the hearer to understand that their utterance "P" functions as an identity signal in this context. Yet it is far from clear that post-truth speakers would regularly be subjectively justified in assuming this – especially when uttering the supposed signal vis-à-vis members of the out-group who follow standard use of P-utterances as assertions, such as a room full of journalists at a press conference.

Secondly, the practice of signalling pursues the aim of conveying information to its audience. Consequently, there seems to be little point in signalling what is already out in the open between speaker and hearer. This analysis, then, could hardly account for any case like that of an attendee of a Trump campaign rally, wrapped in an American flag and wearing a *MAGA* hat, telling a reporter that the sun was shining during Trump's inauguration speech. Likewise, it could

not account for any post-truth utterances among group members where membership is already mutually acknowledged.

4.2 Expressive Affirmation

One way of avoiding the latter two problems facing a signalling account would be to construe the utterance that P not as conveying information about the fact *that S is an X*, but as an *expressive* speech act articulating S's evaluative attitude towards X-ness (or X-constitutive values) (Searle 1975, 356–57). On this picture, saying that the sun was shining during Trump's inauguration speech would essentially be like cheering one's football team at a match.[9] In such cases, there is typically no need at all to signal one's allegiance to observers – assume you find yourself in a designated seating zone and are equipped with fan paraphernalia (scarf, jersey, flag). Yet this clearly does not defy the point of cheering one's team even if others would readily assume that one is an X-fan and has the relevant pro-attitude towards team X winning the match.

This is because, in two ways, expressing an evaluative attitude is not limited to an informational transaction about *one's having* this attitude: Firstly, it involves, as it were, an application of the normative force of the attitude. The question under discussion between fans of team X and team Y in their cheering is not the *descriptive* question of whether fans of either team would prefer their team to win, but the normative question of whether team X *should* win. Secondly, acts expressive of evaluative attitudes are often experienced as intrinsically worthwhile on account of holding the evaluative attitude itself,[10] especially so when these concern central aspects of our identity. If taking an evaluative pro-attitude to X involves deeming it "to be promoted," then one component of acting on this simply is rooting for X.

Yet while it is easy to see how an empirical belief typically held by X-people could come to be used for *signalling* X-ness, it is less evident how post-truth speakers should come to consider stating empirical beliefs an adequate means of *cheering* for a group.

Three options come to mind. Firstly, note that identity commitments sometimes co-opt features that are merely contingently associated with the identity into being used as expressive affirmations. Think of a teen fangirl or -boy who picks up their passionately adored musician's manner-

9 Pollsters and social scientists have long faced the problem of determining whether survey responses accurately measure a participant's beliefs or are provided on some ulterior basis. A prominent version of the latter has been labelled *expressive responding*, "whereby individuals intentionally provide misinformation to survey researchers as a way of showing support for their political viewpoint" (Schaffner and Luks 2018, 136; see also Prior, Sood, and Khanna 2015; Bullock et al. 2013). This has led some political scientists to assume that surveys which study post-truth discourse by measuring the prevalence of particular false beliefs do not, in fact, show that respondents hold false beliefs, but instead that they engage in "partisan cheerleading" vis-à-vis the pollsters (Schaffner and Luks 2018, 135). The prevalence of this form of expressive survey response is, however, subject to some debate (for contrary evidence, see Berinsky 2018). Two factors further limit the purchase this strand of research has for our present aims: first, the focus of the aforementioned studies is specifically on the issue of what is being measured in survey responses, not on post-truth discourse in general. Second, there is little in the way of systematic conceptual elaboration as to what expressive responding amounts to or how respondents come to pick the beliefs in question as a means of cheering, and for what exactly.

10 In a similar vein, note how people often curse to vent their anger without anybody present to acknowledge it (Green 2007, 31).

isms beyond any reasonable need for signalling their fandom; or the way in which we often subtly tune into the 'style' of a new peer group – be it after switching careers or when said teen heads off to university and redefines themself as 'an X-student.' Perhaps, then, being 'the way we do things' can be sufficient for something to become an option for affirmatively expressing one's identity, without any obvious basis in its ulterior meaning.

Yet the ties between an empirical belief and an identity could also be less arbitrary. Secondly, it could be that the content of such a belief would be evaluated as a good state of affairs in the light of relevant identity-constitutive values.[11] Perhaps there is a sense in which being a Trumpist entails that one would think the world a better place if the sun were shining during Trump's inauguration speech than if it were not. If so, insisting that it was shining might constitute a way of expressing approval of such a possible world, and so of one's Trumpist identity.

Thirdly, such an axiological connection may also hold on a higher-order level: It may be that in the light of values the speaker seeks to express, the world would be a better place if the stated belief were true – yet not because of the content of the belief itself, but in virtue of further facts its truth is relevant to. Most obviously, this may concern the question of whether some other person who holds and professed this belief got things right. Plausibly, for instance, a world in which Trump does not succumb to proclaiming falsehoods is better for a committed Trumpist. Therefore, a strong pro-attitude towards Trump may entail a pro-attitude towards deeming his assertions assertible, which may in turn be affirmatively expressed in repeating these same assertions, irrespective of countervailing evidence.

4.3 Cognitive Dissonance Reduction

In order to make sense of how assertions of empirical facts might express a pro-attitude, we have just been looking for ways in which they might indirectly be tied up with values that form part of a speaker's identity. Yet that might involve an unnecessary complication: If being an X means that one strongly prefers one state of affairs over another, then one may – albeit irrationally so – fall prey to holding onto believing that this state of affairs obtains even in the face of countervailing evidence, simply in virtue of one's strong evaluative commitment. Consider, by analogy, a romantically committed person who encounters evidence that would in isolation compel her to revise her belief that her spouse is faithful to her. Yet her strong commitment to seeing herself as living in a perfect monogamous marriage with a spouse to whom she means everything leads her to conjure alternative ways of accounting for the evidence without revising said belief.

Indeed, psychologists usually take it for granted that resolving what Festinger (1957) influentially termed cases of *cognitive dissonance* can motivate us to modify any belief involved in the dissonance (commonly discussed as the 'attitude change' strategy of dissonance reduction in that liter-

11 This mechanism seems to be presupposed by some empirical researchers studying expressive survey responses: because a world in which the economy is thriving under the incumbent government would be better from the perspective of its supporters, they see reporting a rosier perception of objective economic conditions in survey settings as a way of cheering for the government (Prior, Sood, and Khanna 2015).

ature, cf. McGrath 2017).[12] It should, at any rate, be clear that people often face a choice between different options for restoring coherence within a belief system, particularly if we allow for rationally unjustified moves. On this picture, then, post-truth utterances would basically be standard assertions of the speaker's beliefs. What would be peculiar about such utterances is instead that these beliefs are ones the speaker talked themselves into in the course of maintaining coherence within a belief system in which certain beliefs are 'immunised' against revision by identity commitments.

This, of course, raises the question of how an empirical belief should become thus immunised. Remember that in Section 2.3, we criticised epistemic constraint analyses of post-truth discourse for relying on implausibly irrational prior beliefs. Does the present proposal not amount to a largely similar explanation facing the same problem? We think it does not, for two reasons.

First, note that belief revision is not presumed to be conducted rationally in the present analysis. The types of analyses we discussed in Section 2.3 would hold that post-truth speakers are subjectively justified in believing P given their epistemic situation, such as given their prior belief Q. This, however, stipulates a previously formed belief Q and then asks how the agent should react to new evidence against P, where Q would speak for discounting this evidence. Evaluating evidence conditionally on further beliefs that bear on its evidentiary value is, however, not the same thing as holding a belief *fixed*. In order to assimilate the effect of holding Q fixed, such accounts would have to ramp up the individual's credence in Q and it is this extremely high credence in Q that seems implausible to obtain antecedently. The present proposal, by contrast, does not entail that agents evaluate the evidence correctly in light of Q, and thus need not presume such an *epistemic* commitment to Q.

Instead, and secondly, the added value of integrating identity into the picture precisely consists in pointing out that Q may be held fixed for non-epistemic reasons, highlighting S's identity as a plausible source of the 'immunising' commitment to Q.[13] We assume that a typical way for this to obtain is through a non-epistemically grounded commitment to epistemic authorities:[14] A loyal Trumpist, for instance, may find herself in the peril of choosing whether to discount the TV coverage and photographs documenting rain falling from clouded skies during Trump's inauguration speech or to believe that Trump asserts plain falsehoods and is, at best, an unreliable source regarding questions as basic as distinguishing between rain and sunshine. She may opt for the former.[15]

12 Philosophers may well be inclined to see echoes of Quinean coherentism in such contentions: "Any statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system." (Quine 1951, 40)

13 In this case, cognitive dissonance reduction comes very close to what social psychologists have in turn dubbed *directionally motivated reasoning* (Kunda 1990). In an article advancing the link between motivated reasoning and misinformation, Flynn et al. (2017, 133) note that "[p]olitical facts often implicate long-standing, personally important identities such as partisanship" and thus suggest political identities as one driving factor of motivated reasoning. Unfortunately, though, they provide little clarification as to how identities "implicate" particular empirical beliefs.

14 See, for instance, Swire et al. (2017) for empirical evidence supporting this hypothesis.

15 In fact, so may Donald Trump himself.

4.4 Identity Grounding

Lastly, one particular way in which a belief may be immunised against revision in virtue of the speaker's identity is for the belief to be *constitutive* of the identity – that is, for the fact that S believes P to partially ground the fact that S is an X, such that S would cease to be an X upon thwarting the belief that P. While positing such a role for empirical beliefs may appear ad hoc, note that there seem to be identities that constitutively involve empirical beliefs. As per the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1997, para. 1333), for instance, it is arguably part of being a Catholic to believe that the bread and wine consumed in the Eucharist really are the flesh and blood of Christ – or, more plainly, to believe that an omniscient and omnipotent being exists. By contrast to the preceding proposal, then, the empirical belief P would be held onto not in order to salvage a further identity-relevant belief Q but merely in virtue of one's commitment to being an X, and one's understanding that being an X depends on believing that P.

While this would constitute another way in which a speaker's social identity could be tied to their post-truth utterances, we doubt it provides an attractive account thereof – at least assuming the proper extension of the label 'post-truth' to be anywhere near that of its ordinary use. It simply seems implausible to assume that each and every empirical belief asserted in a post-truth utterance is constitutive of the relevant identity. Arguably, the doctrines of the Catholic Church are quite extensive, too. To pull this off, though, Catholicism relies on clear institutional rules of recognition for identity-grounding beliefs – that, for instance, is precisely what issuing the Catechism was all about. Is there any contender for an analogue in post-truth discourse?

Clearly, there seems to be no formal canon of, say, Trumpist creeds. Still, a more flexible option might fit the bill: Where identities involve acknowledging the authority of some leader figure, it might just be that believing anything the X-leader asserts partially grounds being a loyal X. Yet again, such strict conditions on X-membership would probably overstate the sect-like nature of post-truth discourses at the cost of explanatory scope: It does not seem to be the case that people who on some occasions knowingly disagree with a leader affiliated with their political identity thereby lose all subjective justification for making post-truth utterances. While it is important to see that identity grounding might implicate empirical beliefs in a manner distinct from cognitive dissonance reduction (Section 4.3), we therefore conjecture that the latter will better align with target cases.

4.5 Who or What Grounds Fact-Identity Linkage?

The four options we have laid out above provide different accounts of what post-truth speakers actually do in uttering some empirical claim "P", with each account offering a central role for their identity as an X. Accordingly, they all stand in need of explaining how this empirical claim comes to fulfil the function they assign to it. As we saw, our options for establishing this link vary across the four proposals: With signalling, for instance, what matters is that utterances of "P" are understood to warrant the inference that the speaker is an X. There is a wide range of circum-

stances that might facilitate such an inference. We already noted that false assertions may be particularly suitable in this regard in virtue of being a 'handicap.' Even so, X-members would face a coordination problem in settling *which* false beliefs to use in signalling X-ness – for, surely, just claiming that strawberries are blue does not show one is a Trumpist. How would they resolve it? Plausibly, Trump has a role to play in this: Claims their leader prominently repeats on relevant public occasions (rallies, speeches) and defends against contentastion by opponents are, at the very least, a salient point to meet.

And so might his word matter on other accounts, too: With *expressive affirmation*, we conjectured that affirming P might count as affirming one's X-ness because it would be better in the light of X-values if prominent proponents of P were right. Similarly, if being an X entails accepting Trump as an epistemic authority, this could explain why P, when uttered by Trump, is immunised against revision in *cognitive dissonance reduction*. Lastly, if beliefs are among the things that *ground* one's being an X, there must be some way of knowing which beliefs play this role. Open-ended reference to determinations by some authority is a classic way of attaining just this (as with the Vatican or, indeed, Supreme Court Justices).[16] In these ways, we can see a functional differentiation singling out those who, within an identity group, have the authority to settle or change certain facts about this identity.

This reveals the interesting possibility that agents vested with the relevant kind of status can leverage the uptake their utterances will receive in post-truth discourse among their group even when their original utterance is not best analysed as an identity-based speech act itself. Consider, for instance, the possibility that Trump is aware that whichever contentious claim he repeats at his rallies will subsequently be promulgated (as per 4.1, 4.2) or immunised and defended (as per 4.3, 4.4) by loyal Trumpists. He may then choose to endow specific claims with this function based on extraneous considerations. It may, for instance, be in his interest to make the claim that 'Biden weaponises the Department of Justice to sabotage a political opponent' a telltale sign of being a Republican in the US in 2024. While, on this reading, his initial introduction of the claim may be construed as a form of Frankfurtian bullshit, it is only with a view to its identity-related uptake that we properly understand the *point* of this act of bullshitting (cf. 2.2). Accordingly, the explanatory relevance of understanding identity-based post-truth discourse extends even beyond those cases directly amenable to this type of analysis.[17]

16 Epstein (2015, chaps 6–7) provides insightful discussions of these kinds of dynamic anchor principles for social facts.

17 We are very grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing us towards this distinct uptake dynamic.

5 Conclusion

'Post-truth' has made a career as a label stuck on a puzzling brand of assertions of empirical claims contrary to compelling evidence readily accessible to the speaker. In this paper, we have reviewed major ways in which scholars and commentators have sought to explain what such speakers are doing: they might be lying (2.1), bullshitting (2.2), forming subjectively justified beliefs under epistemically detrimental circumstances (2.3), or hold their beliefs up against peculiar epistemic norms (2.4). While we acknowledge that each analysis may do well at covering some cases or others, together they still leave large swaths of what users of the label 'post-truth' apparently seek to get a grip on unaccounted for.

Against the backdrop of the shortcomings of these four options, identity-based analyses stand to provide a promising alternative (Section 3). Yet while invoking social identity in giving an account of post-truth utterances may be explanatorily beneficial, it hardly makes for one specific proposal. Instead, as we have aimed to show over the course of Section 4, it turns out to open up an all but straightforward logical space of possible and not obviously implausible analyses, which we have proposed to chart in terms of four different ways in which identity might get implicated in post-truth utterances: such claims may signal an identity (4.1), expressively affirm it (4.2), restore coherence in a belief network in a way that safeguards an identity commitment (4.3), or maintain one's identity in the first place (4.4).

What they have in common is that giving a prominent role to social identity puts them in a good position to explain how certain beliefs that facially are about some feature of the world or other appear to be a matter of deep personal commitment and thus become immunised against countervailing epistemic reasons: Such reasons no longer threaten a representation of facts that are 'out there' and not 'up to you.' Rather, a threat – and be it an indirect one – to your subjective identity amounts to a threat to your "[ability] to think of yourself under the description under which you value yourself and find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking" (Korsgaard 1996, 102). Seeing how such a threat figures in post-truth speakers' motivation to withstand countervailing evidence allows us to see how the stakes in their utterances crucially differ from those in the standard assertions they appear to be making at first glance. It also underscores the extent to which entangling utterances or beliefs that ought to be governed by epistemic norms with overriding identity commitments undermines the effective regulation of epistemic practices.[18]

Yet notice likewise that there are important differences between the four options. Most importantly, on the first two proposals a speaker's apparent assertion that P turns out not to be an as-

18 Importantly, this is not limited to cases in which identity commitments in fact make epistemic outcomes worse. If, for instance, being a Democrat would require believing whatever the Center for Disease Control says about COVID-19, this may in ordinary circumstances be perfectly conducive to forming true (and even justified) beliefs. Yet it would still be a case of an epistemically overreaching political identity: One should defer to the CDC if and because such deference is epistemically justified – not because one's identity compels it, whether it is epistemically justified or not.

sertion of P in the first place, whereas on the latter two, the contrast with standard assertions consists not in the type of speech act performed, but in the reasons for which the speaker asserts P. *Expressive affirmation* stands out in that P is used to address a normative question, and *cognitive dissonance reduction* stands out in building in the speaker's irrationality. The four options also differ in the extent to which they presuppose the speaker's awareness of what they are actually doing in apparently asserting an empirical claim: while *signalling* will usually require some communicative intent and *identity grounding* should be based on an understanding of the role of the professed belief for one's identity, *expressive affirmation* and *cognitive dissonance reduction* may plausibly play out without much further reflection.

Lastly, note that each analysis presents us with options for explaining the sense of a shift in political discourse that has prompted observers to come up with the label 'post-truth' for it in the first place, albeit different ones: Is it that the means we use for signalling or affirmatively expressing our identities have changed? Is it that their political identity has become more integral to people's self-concepts, moving them to make larger sacrifices within their belief systems to safeguard them? Or is it that certain emerging political identities make increasingly improper demands on what their adherents hold to be true?

In virtue of their differences, distinguishing different potential connections between identity and post-truth discourse matters for giving an accurate account of the latter. Perhaps more importantly, though, it likewise matters normatively: Post-truth discourse has received widespread attention not primarily on account of the intellectual puzzles it poses but in virtue of how it threatens the functioning of political discourse requisite for liberal democracy. Refining our picture of post-truth will not only allow us to spell out more precisely what this threat consists in. It will also allow us to pinpoint what exactly (if anything) it is that post-truth speakers get wrong and should be criticised for: On the picture of *cognitive dissonance reduction*, for instance, the problem seems to be that identity commitments play a role in the speaker's deliberations that, as a matter of epistemic rationality, they shouldn't play. On the *signalling* picture, by contrast, the speaker's intent may be unproblematic in and of itself – instead, we may want to criticise their choice of using empirical beliefs as a means to these ends, in light of how signals that appear to make empirical assertions hinder us in governing properly assertive discourse by the norms applicable to it.

Last but not least, correctly appreciating what it is that speakers do in making post-truth utterances should also matter for effectively countering such discourse. For instance, if post-truth speakers were not in the business of properly asserting their uttered claims in the first place (as in *signalling* or *expressive affirmation*), then any efforts to rebut these would amount simply to talking past one another: Fact-checking aimed at showing a claim to be false poses no immediate problem for a speaker who does not take herself to have warranted its truth. Instead, we might want to explore ways of channelling identity signalling or expression into alternative mechanisms that do not likewise undermine assertive discourse: Our task might not consist in keeping post-truth speakers from doing what they are ultimately doing, but from doing it in this particular way. On the contrary, if post-truth discourse flows more directly from the identities in question (as in *cognitive dissonance reduction* or *identity grounding*), it will likewise be helpful to

have a clear picture of the task we are faced with: changing how someone identifies or what they take that identity to comprise is a very different matter than changing their garden-variety empirical beliefs.

It can safely be assumed that political developments in 2024 make such questions of countering post-truth discourse no less relevant than they were in 2016. We hope to have shown, though, that understanding more clearly what post-truth speech consists is precisely what should help us in thinking about how we might manage to return to arguing about policies instead of rain and sunshine.

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