Truthfulness (Wahrhaftigkeit) in the deliberative model of democracy

Jürg Steiner

Abstract

In the Habermasian version of deliberative theory, truthfulness (Wahrhaftigkeit) is a key element. Habermas goes back to Kant for whom to be wahrhaftig means to be true to one’s inner self, to find one’s human dignity. Without human dignity, we become mere speech machines (Sprachmaschinen). Not to be wahrhaftig is a crime for Kant. Can we empirically measure in a reliable and valid way to what extent actors in a political discussion are truthful? After many unsuccessful attempts, I have come to the conclusion that Wahrhaftigkeit in the Kantian and Habermasian sense eludes empirical measurement. I assume that our most inner self is not something fixed that we can discover if only we dig deep enough. I rather assume that the inner self is something malleable and elusive that despite all our inner searching we can never quite know. Such a view is compatible with deliberative theory, which expects that political actors are open to change their preferences based on the force of the better argument. Such openness would not exist if we would be sure what our inner self is; in order to be wahrhaftig we would simply do whatever our self tells us and not listen to arguments of others. Although we cannot measure truthfulness, we can measure the perception of truthfulness by the participating actors. We have done so in experiments in deeply divided societies such as Colombia, where we brought together ex-combatants of the leftist guerrillas and the rightist para-military to discuss how Colombia can get a future of peace. During the experiments, nobody complained that the other side was not truthful, but in the questionnaires after the experiments there were many such complaints. These latter complaints are an important social reality worthwhile to be investigated. From a normative perspective, I postulate that Wahrhaftigkeit should be kept as a regulative idea of the deliberative model.

The deliberative model of democracy expects that actors, both politicians and ordinary citizens, justify their positions with reasons, refer to the public interest, respect the position of other actors, and are willing to yield to the force of the better argument. It could be, however, that such seemingly deliberative speech acts are not sincere at all and are only used for strategic considerations. Actors justify positions with reasons that are not sincere but look good in a strategic game. References to the public interest hide crude self-interest. Respect is expressed to flatter the other side in order to improve one’s own bargaining position. Actors change strategically exaggerated position to their real position as a clever move and not because of the force of the better argument. Does this scenario cause great problems for the validity of the deliberative model? Many theorists think so

Jürgen Habermas is the foremost theorist who gives key importance to truthfulness (Wahrhaftigkeit). In an early work, he postulates that “each person may only assert what he believes himself.”¹ He sticks with this assertion when in a more recent work he writes that in deliberation participants must abstain from deceptive behavior (ohne Täuschung).² Habermas

¹ Jürgen Habermas, Moralbewusstsein und kommunikatives Handeln (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1983), S. 98. „Jeder Sprecher darf nur behaupten, was er selber glaubt“.

claims that in most social situations it is routine praxis to assume that others are truthful; otherwise one would not engage in any conversation at all. If this assumption is violated, deliberation breaks down. For Habermas, without truthfulness no real deliberation can take place. For him truthfulness is a necessary condition of deliberation in a constitutive sense. Habermas explicitly bases his theory on the writing of Immanuel Kant, so that it is relevant to see what Kant means by truthfulness. Like Habermas, Kant already uses the concept of Wahrhaftigkeit, which for him has a much deeper connotation than the English translation of truthfulness. The concept Wahrhaftigkeit for Kant certainly includes not telling lies, but it is much broader in its meaning. To be wahrhaftig means to be true to one’s inner self, to find one’s innermost identity. For Kant to be wahrhaftig is to find one’s human dignity. He goes as far as to write that not to be wahrhaftig is a crime because one destroys one’s human dignity. Without human dignity, we become mere speech machines (Sprachmaschinen). For Kant it is a duty (Pflicht) to oneself and to others to be wahrhaftig. If we are not wahrhaftig with others, we do not respect their human dignity, and we do not act according to our own dignity.

The argument against the Habermasian position with regard to truthfulness runs about as follows: Motives for deliberative behavior do not count for much. What really counts is behavior itself. If a participant in a discussion expresses a high level of respect towards another participant, only this utterance matters, whether it is meant truthfully or not. Dennis F. Thompson presents this argument in a forceful way. In his view, the key is that deliberators present all possible arguments in terms that are accessible to the relevant audience, respond to reasonable arguments presented by opponents, and manifest an inclination to change their views or cooperate with opponents when appropriate. This requires no special window into the motives or inner life of actors. According to Thompson, “empirical researchers therefore should not worry, as some evidently do, about formulating an independent test for sincerity or truthfulness.” In the same vein, Mark E. Warren argues that “deliberative institutions should not depend upon, or be defined by, the deliberative intentions of participants.” Let me illustrate this argument against the Habermasian position with a speech act in the British House of Commons. In a December 5, 1997 debate, Conservative MP Richard Ottaway addressed MP Estelle Morris, Labour Undersecretary of State for Education and Employment, in the following way: “I am pleased to hear that the Minister’s commitment to special education needs is being developed through the Green Paper. I am also pleased at the tone of her speech.” The argument against Habermas would be that this utterance of respect may or may not have been truthful, but that this would be irrelevant. The only relevant issue would be whether the utterance of Ottaway did contribute to a good outcome with regard to special education.

---


4 Sincerity is another possible but also not quite satisfactory translation.

5 Immanuel Kant, Metaphysik der Sitten (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 1986).


Warren does even go further in arguing that under certain conditions “white lies” are justified. He stresses, however, that he is “not, of course, advocating insincerity” as a general rule, but only under very specific circumstances, namely when there are “histories of distrust, mutual ignorance, suspicion, and status inequality.” Under these conditions, absolute sincerity would be detrimental to deliberation, since it “will cause injury, will be a conversation stopper, and so amounts to a choice against deliberation.”

In such situations, Warren calls for manners, and manners not in a conventional snobbish way, but as deliberative diplomacy, “which may require expressive insincerity to be preferred when issues are at their most sensitive, and conditions of discourse are less than ideal.”

“Deliberative diplomats hold that in order to sustain a politics based on deliberation, some things should not be said ….Within societies divided by race, ethnicity, or religion, unbounded deliberation may reveal and strengthen latent prejudices in ways that cause more damage than if they had gone unspoken.”

For Warren, “well-mannered people self-censor and tell little white lies”, if absolute sincerity and honesty would have unfavorable consequences. He believes that sometimes “the civilizing hypocrisies of good manners” may help deliberation. Robert Goodin is another prominent theorist who argues “that, politically, some things are better left unsaid.”

He agrees with Warren, that sometimes “sensitivities are good grounds for taking certain topics off the agenda… Merely raising the topic can sometimes profoundly offend certain segments of the community.”

The position of theorists like Thompson, Warren and Goodin is controversial in the current philosophical literature. Thus, Patti Tamara Lenard wrote a critical reply to Warren, where she insists that Habermas has the right “intuition” when he postulates as a criterion for good deliberation “mutual trust in subjective sincerity.” Lenard postulates that “we must believe that others do not intend to deceive us in some way and that they are sincerely advocating the position they put forward, and that they are genuinely committed to the reasons with which they support their position. To a considerable extent, the capacity for effective communication relies on our being able to take for granted that people are telling the truth.” Lenard addresses specifically sensitive situations that Warren worries about and takes a counter-position:

In situations of intense vulnerability, such as the kind Warren describes, deliberators will need to have confidence precisely in the sincerity of the views expressed by others. There is considerable debate in the confidence-building literature about the mechanisms

14 Robert E. Goodin, Innovating Democracy (Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 64.
15 Goodin, Innovating Democracy, pp. 75-6.
by which deliberators should be protected from the insincerities of others; this debate is
predicated on the view that conflict resolution or transformation can emerge only under
conditions in which sincerity is the norm. 

Lenard concludes that in situations of intense hostility, the advice of Warren “may be a
dangerous rather than a productive strategy for those involved in negotiations.” There are
many other theorists, besides Lenard, who stick with the Habermasian position that
truthfulness must be considered as a key element in the deliberative model. Ian O’Flynn, for
example, states: “Truthfulness is important to the ethos of democracy. We would never
deliberate with others unless we thought that they were, in the main, truthful. We respect
people if and because we think that they are truthful.” In the same vein, James Bohman and
Henry S. Richardson make the point that deliberation requires “a level of sincerity and mutual
recognition.” Michael Neblo goes in the same direction when he writes: “It is difficult to see
how being coerced on the basis of polite lies shows any deep kind of respect to those who
come out in the minority. Thus, without a sincerity constraint, deliberation may lose much of
both its epistemic values, and its respect expressing function.” For Simon Niemeyer
“truthfulness should be aspired to, even if it is ugly and even though we know that it can’t be
guaranteed,” and he defends this position with the argument “that as soon as you admit
untruthfulness you open the door back to strategic manipulation.” Jane Mansbridge wants
participants in deliberation to “speak truthfully.” For her “lying is a form of coercive
power.”

We see that theorists differ widely on the role of truthfulness in the deliberative model.
Whatever weight is given to truthfulness, the focus is on truthfulness of motives. Rudy
Andeweg brings to my attention that there is another important aspect of truthfulness that is
neglected in the theoretical literature, namely whether facts are presented in a truthful way. As
an example he mentions “political leaders who knowingly overstated the intelligence on
weapons of mass destruction in Iraq in order to convince others that military intervention
against Saddam was justified. These leaders were truthful about their own motives and goals,
but they deceived others by presenting ‘untruthful’ factual information.” This example
shows, indeed, that truthfulness may refer both to motives and facts, and that the two aspects
may not necessarily go hand in hand. André Bächtiger also puts emphasis on the factual
aspect of truthfulness. According to him, “it may be futile to get hold of the inner motives of

20 Personal communication, January 15, 2009.
21 James Bohman and Henry S. Richardson, “Liberalism, Deliberative Democracy, and Reasons that All Can
   Accept,” Journal of Political Philosophy 17 (2009), 270.
22 Michael A. Neblo, ‘Family Disputes: Diversity in Defining and Measuring Deliberation’, Swiss Political
23 Personal communication, September 8, 2009.
   of Political Philosophy 18 (2010), 66 and 81.
26 André Bächtiger, ‘On Perfecting the Deliberative Process: Questioning, Disputing, and Insisting as Core
   Deliberative Values’, Paper Presented at Annual Meeting of The American Political Science Association,
participants during a decision process.” He wants to “reverse an intention-based approach to truthfulness by viewing truthfulness as an element that can emerge out of a critical and thorough process of agonistic inquiry.” Bächtiger considers critical questioning, disputing and insisting as core deliberative values. On this basis, deliberation should help to come closer to the factual truth in using methods “similar to cross-examination in court” and “investigative news media.” In this way, it may be possible to “unravel relevant information that otherwise would be withheld.” With this argument, Bächtiger is in agreement with Gary Mucciaroni and Paul J. Quirk who argue that a decision process must be rational also in the sense that actors check the accuracy of information in consulting the best available research evidence.

The normative-philosophical controversies on truthfulness reveal hypotheses that cry out for empirical testing. The big question is whether absolute and unconditional truthfulness helps or hurts deliberation. This raises the challenge for empirical scholars to measure in a reliable and valid way to what extent participants in a political discussion are truthful. How can we investigate whether politicians, or, for that matter, ordinary citizens, mean what they say when they discuss political issues? Some rational choice theorists have developed models where truthfulness and lying play a great role. These models, however, remain at a theoretical level and are never empirically tested. Let me give two examples of papers that have both the concept of deliberation in the title and are therefore relevant in the present context. David Austin-Smith and Timothy J. Feddersen ask in a mathematical model whether in a jury lying or truthfulness are more likely under majority or unanimity rule. But they undertake no effort to empirically test their hypotheses, nor do they show how such tests could look like. In a similar vein, Dimitri Landa and Adam Meirowitz present game-theoretical ideas about institutional settings making lying least likely, but again without any hints of how their ideas could empirically be tested.

I, for my part, have come to the conclusion that Wahrhaftigkeit in the Habermasian sense eludes direct empirical measurement. Michael Neblo points out well the problematic of measuring truthfulness in the deliberative context: “Sincerity is a notoriously difficult concept to get a handle on empirically. The fear is that there is simply no scientifically serviceable way to operationalize the concept for most purposes of deliberative research.” Let me justify why in my view a direct measurement of Wahrhaftigkeit is impossible or at least highly problematic. As stated earlier in the paper, to be wahrhaftig in the Kantian and Habermasian sense means to be true to one’s inner self, which raises the question of how we can know what our most inner self is. How do we know whether we are true to this self? I assume that our most inner self is not something fixed that we can discover if only we dig deep enough. I rather assume that the inner self is something malleable and elusive that despite all our inner searching we can never quite know. Such a view of the inner self is compatible with deliberative theory, which - as we have seen above - expects that political

---


---

actors are open to change their preferences based on the force of better arguments. Such openness would not exist if we would be sure what exactly our inner self is, so that we would have no reason to listen to others in order to be wahrhaftig. We would simply do whatever our inner self tells us. According to deliberative theory, talking with others will help us in the search of our inner self. Thus, good deliberation can be instrumental to better understand our own deeper identity, but we will never be quite sure what this identity really is.

This elusive and changing nature of our inner self means that we never quite know whether we are wahrhaftig in a particular situation. If a politician or an ordinary citizen supports a specific position, he or she can never be quite sure whether this position is fully compatible with his or her inner self. Outside observers will be all the more uncertain about the Wahrhaftigkeit of the taken position. All this means that it seems impossible to measure the level of Wahrhaftigkeit with a sufficient level of reliability and validity. This does not mean, of course, that we are not able to detect crude lies in a political discussion, especially when not motives but facts are involved. But it is a much more subtle issue whether someone is truthful, for example, in referring to the common good or showing respect to other actors. Not being truthful in such situations is much more difficult to detect than to discover crude lies about factual matters. The elusive character of one’s most inner motives is also forcefully stressed by Goodin:

The point is not just one about veracity in reporting one’s own motives. The fear is not so much that the agent will lie, but that without any reality check neither he nor we will have any way of telling what the truth of the matter really is. Nor is the worry that he will necessarily cook the books in his own favour, attributing to himself nobler motives than he in fact harbours. He may do just the opposite, engaging in moral self-debasement and attributing to himself less noble motives than are really at work.  

Although in my view, truthfulness in a political debate can not be measured in a systematic way, we know that participants in a discussion usually are interested whether other participants are truthful or not. As Goodin puts it: “Coming to understand a person’s motives for acting as he did enables us to explain his past behavior, and to do so in such a way that allows us to predict his future behavior.” Of course, perceived truthfulness may not correspond to the actual reality of truthfulness. But if most participants feel that people expressed what was truly on their mind, this perception is also an important social reality. Perhaps, there are some participants who are untruthful, but if they hide their untruthfulness in such a way that nobody notices, such untruthfulness has no significance for the group. On the other hand, if most participants do not trust the other participants on their words, this perception is also an important social reality. Perhaps they are not truthful themselves, so that they project their behavior to other participants. If most everyone expresses the view that much untruthfulness occurs both with regard to motives and factual information, this reveals a very different group atmosphere than if the perception is one of mutual truthfulness. Thus, the perception of truthfulness is an important social reality that can empirically be measured.

We have tried to do so with experiments in several deeply divided societies. Let me illustrate our approach with the experiments that we did in Colombia with ex-combatants of the leftist guerrillas and the rightist para-military. We did 28 experiments with a total of 342

participants. The topic for the discussion was how Colombia could arrive at a future of peace. Immediately after the experiments participants had to take position to several items intended to measure the perception of truthfulness in what was said during the experiment. Here are the results for two of these items:

Overall, I feel that people expressed what was truly on their mind.

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral or do not know</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I cannot escape the feeling that many participants were hiding their true beliefs from the discussion.

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral or do not know</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The answers depend on the formulation of the items, revealing the well known phenomenon that people have the tendency to answer in the positive. This tendency was probably even stronger among ex-combatants because they were particularly cagey not to choose wrong words. 77 percent agreed that the other participants were truthful when they spoke up, which is an impressive figure for traumatized ex-combatants, although there was most likely social pressure to answer in the positive. When in the second item, the question of truthfulness was formulated in a negative way, there were still 30 percent who explicitly said that they disagreed that the other participants were hiding their true beliefs. And with 42 percent it was not even a majority who expressed suspicion that the others were not truthful. All in all, it seems that the perception of truthfulness was relatively high given the background of participants. This would augur well for future progress in the discourse quality. If one is not constantly worried that others are not telling the truth, one is more likely to search for common solutions in the interest of all.

Although empirical data on perceptions of truthfulness are useful, they are no substitute for a measurement of truthfulness itself. The problematic of doing empirical research about this particular element of deliberation does not mean, however, that we should eliminate truthfulness as a normative part of deliberative theory. As Ian O’Flynn puts it well, “just because something is not objectively visible does not mean that that thing is morally or politically irrelevant.” What is the relevance of truthfulness in the deliberative model of democracy? It is my position that truthfulness has a value per se. From a moral or deontological perspective, truthfulness is an important value, although I would not go as far as Kant disallowing any untruthfulness. I acknowledge that there are occasions, for example a committee on national security, where it may sometimes be justified not to be altogether truthful in reporting the results to the outside world. I also agree with Warren that rules of good manners may sometimes require telling “white lies,” for example not to say that a meeting was boring when indeed this is what one felt. I also agree with Christian F. Rostbøll that for reasons of privacy the deliberative model does not require that participants reveal all

38 Personal communication, January 15, 2009.
their innermost desires and interests in order to justify arguments.\textsuperscript{40} As a general norm, however, participants in a political discussion should strive for truthfulness when they use a deliberative vocabulary. With the argument that motives are relevant, I get help from David Hume who writes: “We must look within to find the moral quality... A virtuous motive is requisite to render an action virtuous.”\textsuperscript{41} Following Hume, I would like to keep truthfulness as a normative regulative element of deliberation.

To keep truthfulness as a normative element in the deliberative model is particularly important if we think of how we should teach our students about deliberation. Without the element of truthfulness, it is easy to see deliberation as a shrewd tactic to further one’s personal interests. Even in good deliberation, strategic actions will never be completely absent. It is only in the unreachable ideal type of deliberation where political actors would consider only the common good and express respect without any ulterior motives. Real life discussions are always characterized by mixed motives. Some actors will always be to some extent untruthful in a political debate. But it seems to me desirable that we postulate as a general regulative rule that truthfulness be a normative goal. In this way, deliberation has a moral value in itself and is not only valuable because it may have good consequences. This is what we should teach students. Although much lying, cheating and corruption may go on in the political arena, students should internalize the norm that this is not inevitable and that the goal should be politics with more truthfulness and sincerity.

Although I have no data for the level of truthfulness of political discussions, I could present data on the perception of truthfulness. In Colombia, ex-combatants did never call each other liars during the experiments, but in the questionnaire filled out after the experiments there were quite a few complaints that other participants were not truthful when they spoke up. According to Kant and Habermas, in order to be truthful, ex-combatants should have articulated these complaints during the discussion itself. But this is a situation where I side with Mark Warren that telling other participants face-to-face that they are liars would have endangered any signs of emerging deliberation. After all, it was already an accomplishment that a high number of ex-combatants were willing to meet with representatives from the other side. So it was a sign of appropriate prudence that complaints about untruthfulness were expressed only in the questionnaire after the experiments.
