

ERIC BAIN-SELBO  
Lebanon Valley College

## WHY TRUTH MATTERS

A review of *True to Life: Why Truth Matters*, by Michael P. Lynch. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2004. xii + 204 pp. \$27.95 (cloth).

**I**T IS TIRESOME (to say the least) to be a participant in an intellectual environment too often filled with postmodern gibberish, frivolous and often self-contradictory defenses of nihilism, and philosophers and theologians who treat truth as a four-letter word. Indeed, if I listen to or read one more spirited argument that truth does not matter, one more effort to establish the truth that truth is irrelevant or even dangerous, I just might vomit. Truth certainly can be dangerous. Wielded in the hands of some people, the idea of truth can be used for great evil (e.g., many or most Nazis believed that Hitler had cornered the market on truth). But to adapt a popular saying from the National Rifle Association, truth does not kill people, people kill people. The fact of the matter is that truth *does* matter to both its defenders and its opponents. So the sooner we can dismiss with the juvenile rejection of truth, the sooner we (philosophers, theologians, scholars of religion ... just about everybody) can get back to the work of thinking seriously and arguing genuinely about what truth is and what is true.

In *True to Life: Why Truth Matters*, Michael P. Lynch makes a valuable contribution to setting us back on the right track, and that is why his relatively slim volume is so refreshing. Refuting opponents of the idea that truth does not matter in ways that are insightful, clever, and often quite original, Lynch *defends* truth on the one hand and then makes a compelling, constructive argument *for* the role of truth in the good life and the good society.

Lynch begins in Part I by drawing our attention to a far too frequently employed dichotomy: "Absolute Certain truth with a capital 'T,' or no truth at all" (3-4). He adds that with "options like these, no wonder we are prone to throw up our hands" (4). Lynch, of course, rejects both options. He rejects the notion that "the value of pursuing the truth rests on the possibility of certainty" and describes

this as a “myth” (27). Indeed, this is a very dangerous myth, because when a person or group believes it has attained such certainty then that person or group potentially can exert great pressure or commit great harm against those who disagree with that person or group (29-30).

While the myth of absolute certainty can be dangerous in the hands of those who believe in it, it conversely fosters various forms of relativism. Because (so the relativists might say) absolute certainty is impossible, we effectively cannot say anything about truth. At its extreme, relativism even supports the idea that truth does not matter. But here relativists fall prey to the myth of absolute certainty, believing that “truth matters only if it is absolute” (32). Lynch agrees with relativists that absolute certainty is an unattainable state, but he rejects the notion that this means that truth does not matter or that we cannot talk effectively about truth. In chapter three, he makes convincing cases against a variety of relativisms, including simple relativism and postmodern relativism. He supports some aspects of relativism but wants to avoid falling into nihilism. He concludes that “pluralism is appealing. Sometimes at least, there can be more than one true description of reality. And yet we don’t want to say that every story of the world is equally true. We want to say that in the game of truth, there are ties for first place, but there are also losers” (41).

In Part II (chapters five through seven), Lynch takes on a number of inadequate theories of truth that either fail to adequately describe it or reject it outright. These include coherentism, scientific critiques and reductions, Nietzschean positions, and minimalism. Perhaps his most sustained treatment (not only in Part II, but in other parts of his work as well) is reserved for both classical and neo-pragmatism. For classical pragmatism (as expounded, for example, by William James), truth is worthwhile only to the extent that it has “cash value” or works in some way. Thus, “truth is valuable *only* as a means, not as an end” (63). Lynch finds a number of problems with such a position. First of all, there are no clear criteria about what distinguishes a belief (held to be true) as pragmatically justified and another belief as not. What beliefs work for me might not work for you. In this case, there is the danger of falling into the worst kind of individual relativism. Another problem is that classical pragmatism cannot account adequately for certain kinds of truth. Lynch uses the example of Caesar crossing the Rubicon (67). It simply is the case that Caesar crossed the Rubicon or he did not. It might be that what is most pragmatically justified for me or my group may change (e.g., sometimes it might be better or worse to believe that Caesar made such a crossing), but this does not change the fact that Caesar did or did not cross the Rubicon. In short, classical pragmatism cannot account for the truth of such historical claims.

More recently, pragmatism has been revived by philosophers like of Richard Rorty. Rorty argues that there is no practical difference between a belief being justified in a particular context and a belief being true. This is because a belief is only deemed to be true when designated as such in a particular context. Justification and truth are equally contextual. Since there is no practical difference, “there is no difference that matters between taking truth as a goal and taking justification as a goal” (71). Here again there is the difficulty of truth understood historically. While we might imagine that a slave owner in the 19<sup>th</sup> century could be justified in believing that slavery is good (given the context in which he lived), we nevertheless want to refuse that such a belief *really* was true then or now. Lynch also argues: “Even if there is no direct practical difference between aiming at truth and aiming at justification, it doesn’t follow from this fact alone that there is no difference at all. Having truth as a goal of inquiry is what explains why we bother to justify our beliefs in the first place” (73). In other words, truth is not the product or the corollary of justification, it is the very aim for which we begin any process of justification.

Again, Lynch rejects the myth of absoluteness or certainty when thinking about truth. He advocates a healthy skepticism about claims to truth. But this very skepticism presupposes an effective concept of truth. One is skeptical only to the extent that one believes that truth claims may not reveal the whole truth or may even be false. Skepticism presupposes the value of truth and its pursuit (28-29). Having grappled with what he takes to be inadequate descriptions of truth and even direct attacks against the value of truth, Lynch turns in Part III to his constructive argument for truth and its role in the life of the individual, community, and nation.

Chapter Eight contains the argument that truth is important to the individual and his or her good. First, it is important that an individual know the truth about him/herself. This is the classic dictum to “know thyself.” Why is this good? Without a “sense of self” we are incapable of knowing what our commitments are, what projects we wish to accomplish, and what kind of person we are or want to be. In other words, we are ignorant of those things that give our life meaning and we have little idea about who we are. On the other hand, knowing oneself allows one to achieve “authenticity.” For Lynch, “one is authentic in this sense when one is true to oneself” (124). When one is authentic, one can have self-respect (a product of our determination that we are being true to our commitments and our projects). This, in turn, is the first step to having respect for others.

Having established the relationship between truth and a “sense of self,” Lynch argues that self-knowledge is a part of happiness. Happiness (as Aristotle

famously argued) is an end-in-itself. Nobody pursues or tries to achieve happiness for any other reason than to be happy. It is not a means to some other end. While self-knowledge is not sufficient for happiness, it is necessary. Thus, self-knowledge or truth is a constitutive good. For Lynch, “being constitutively good, like being an intrinsic good, makes something worth caring about for its own sake, as opposed to caring about it for what it leads to” (128).

Truth then is important because it is a constitutive good, because it is a part of happiness, which is an end-in-itself. Thus, we simply cannot dispense with truth. We *necessarily* care about truth (in this case, the truth of certain beliefs about ourselves) and we *should* care deeply. Certain implications follow. “To care about the truth,” Lynch argues, “entails that one is *disposed to act* in certain ways” (129). Just as caring about the good entails the exercise of the moral virtues, caring about the truth entails the exercise of intellectual virtues. Chief among the intellectual virtues is what Lynch calls integrity. Integrity requires that 1) one care for the truth for its own sake; 2) one is willing to pursue the truth; 3) one stands up for what they believe is true; and 4) one is open to the truth because it is the truth, and thus one is capable of recognizing when he or she is wrong (131-3). In concluding Chapter Eight, Lynch writes: “Caring about truth and believing the truth about what you care about are necessary parts of happiness by being necessary parts of integrity, authenticity, and self-respect. Implicitly, therefore, they are part of the minimal concept of happiness” (143).

In Chapter Nine, Lynch turns to the role of truth in the personal interactions that occur within any community. In particular, he focuses on the issues of lying and sincerity. While there certainly are practical reasons for why lying is problematic (How can we have a community if we cannot trust that people are telling the truth?), Lynch wants to make the point that “lying is bad partly because believing the truth is good” (152). In other words, believing the truth is good for its own sake not simply because it is a means to some other end; conversely, lying is bad not simply because it prevents the attainment of some end but because the truth is good for its own sake. Lynch drives home the point in his discussion of the related virtue of sincerity. He argues:

Sincerity is good because true beliefs are good, but sincerity requires caring about the truth as such for its own sake. As with intellectual integrity, caring about truth is a necessary part of being sincere. Someone who couldn't care less about the truth may end up telling the truth about this or that when it suits him, but he won't be a sincere person. He'll just be honest when it pays. (155)

So how does this tie back in with the rest of the argument? Both lying and insincerity show a lack of respect for others. Lynch then claims that respect for others and self-respect are two sides of the same coin. Thus, if I cannot show

respect for others then this is an indication of a lack of self-respect. But we already have seen that self-respect (along with authenticity and intellectual integrity) are constitutive (in part) of happiness—they are necessary elements of happiness. Thus, sincerity and telling the truth (as indicative of one's respect for others and thus self-respect) likewise are constitutive of happiness. Once again we see that truth is important and that there are good reasons for why we care about truth and why we *should* care about truth.

In Chapter Ten, Lynch turns his attention to the issue of truth and political life. He argues that “[c]oncern for truth is a constitutive part of liberal democracy” (160). He rejects what he calls “relativistic liberalism”:

the liberal must herself acknowledge that, in advocating liberalism, she is advocating one view among others of the good life. But if it is part of the liberal's view that every view of the good life must be seen as equally true as her own (or potentially so, should it end up passing for truth in the national conversation), then it is unclear why she is advocating liberalism at all. If her opponent's views—those say of the fundamentalist Right—are equally true as the liberal's own, then what motivation does she have for opposing them? (165)

The contradiction is clear, and it is one that Lynch wants to work around.

Let us look at his treatment of the concept of rights. It seems unreasonable that we could affirm and defend so strongly some fundamental human and civil rights if we did not believe that they were true. If we thought that they were simply social and political tools that should be used as long as they are effective, it is hard to imagine why we would believe in them so strongly and why we would be willing to die for them. Our reactions about rights are a result *not* of their utility (though they are useful) but because we believe that they are *objectively true*. Rights, in turn, are necessary to a liberal democracy. For example, we could not define a society as a democracy without some right to free speech or the right to vote. Rights also return us to the idea of respect for others and (politically speaking) equality. Rights cannot be applied to some people but not to others. Part of the definition of a human right is that everyone has it and thus it should be respected by everyone and in everyone. Thus, Lynch concludes that “you can't be a liberal without believing in rights, and you can't believe in rights without believing in objective truth. So far, so good, I'd say, but it is crucial to see that an additional inference is also warranted: namely, that *concern* for equal respect and other liberal values among the citizens of a democratic government requires a *concern* for truth” (167).

Again, Lynch uses Rorty as a sparring partner. For Rorty, rights can be justified, but they cannot be objectively true. A right is justified when compelling reasons

can be provided to an audience and the audience then accepts those reasons as convincing justification for that right. Clearly then rights are relative to particular audiences, and the truth of universal (i.e., not contextually bound) human rights is thrown out the door. But even within a particular audience or community we run into a problem. Why should any audience accept and be regulated by rights that are not true? Rorty seems to want us to believe in rights while at the same time realizing that they are not true. But as Lynch notes, this is like trying to follow Pascal's advice about believing in God. Pascal argued that even if one does not believe in God, one should try to "brainwash" him/herself because, in the end, it is better to wager that there is a God than that there is not (170). But we easily can see the problem with this. It is hard to imagine that we could muster such belief without believing in the truth of its content, and even if we could, such belief in God clearly would be in bad faith. And how likely will such belief or faith stand up under trying circumstances? So it is with rights as well. We believe in rights because we believe in their objective truth. This does not mean that rights correspond to some natural property in the universe or are grounded in God or some transcendent entity. Lynch, like most clear thinking philosophers, steers clear of such correspondence theories and metaphysical arguments. He prefers the idea of coherence instead. He argues that the coherence of a political morality has three elements:

First, a coherent political morality must be internally coherent. (172)

Second, a coherent political morality must itself be coherent with the empirical and nonempirical truths about human actions and personhood. (172)

[Third, what makes a political morality true is that it] actually *is* coherent – it hangs together internally and with the empirical facts. (173)

Our use of rights and rights language has developed into an internally convincing and coherent body of law. This body of law seems consistent with our understanding of what it means to be a human being and to form human communities. Thus, we legitimately can argue that rights *are true*.

In the end, Lynch concludes: "No one, and no government, is infallible. We can make mistakes, but this should not stop us from aiming at the truth; it simply reminds us that the very act of aiming at the truth requires admitting the possibility that you may never hit the target" (174). In short, though we never can achieve absolute or certain knowledge, truth *does* matter, whether we are talking about individual happiness, interpersonal relationships, or political life.

While Lynch has made an important and critical contribution to the discussion of

truth, his work is not without its shortcoming. Two questions in particular still plague the reader.

First, Lynch argues that we often care about the truth deeply and that we *should* care about the truth deeply. He also argues that we often care about the truth for its own sake and that we *should* care about the truth for its own sake. Lynch makes an effort to connect these two arguments, but he may not be successful. I can care about something or even someone deeply but not for its or his/her own sake. I care deeply that The University of Tennessee (my alma mater) defeats Alabama (our archrival) in football each year, but I cannot say that I want the Volunteers to win for their own sake. I want them to win because it brings me pleasure and fills me with pride (however wrong that may be). Thus, my caring is pragmatic. I care because it makes me happy when we win. If we always lost, I perhaps would stop caring at some point because my caring might become pragmatically deficient.

Of course, Lynch's argument involves connecting truth to happiness. It runs something like this: 1) The good life (happiness) is good as such. Again, one does not seek the good life or happiness for any other purpose than itself. The good life or happiness is an end-in-itself; 2) Caring about truth is constitutive (in part) of the good life. This has been summarized above; 3) Thus, caring about truth is good as such, is an end-in-itself, is worth caring about deeply, and should be cared about for its own sake. The move here is to bring truth in as close proximity as possible to the good life or to happiness. Since the latter are ends-in-themselves then it could be argued that the former is as well. But I am not sure that the argument from constitutive good works. This is my second question: If something is a constitutive good, does that mean that we only can or should care about it for its own sake? Lynch tries to parse out constitutive good from a means to an end (127-8). A constitutive good is something that is an intrinsic part of a good as such, of an end-in-itself. The constitutive good is not the means to that end, but something that helps to make the good an end-in-itself. He argues that a "means to an end is *ipso facto* different from the end itself. A necessary part of something [a constitutive good], on the other hand, helps make the whole of which it is a part the thing that it is" (128). If truth then is a constitutive good in this sense, then it shares with the good life or happiness the quality of being an end-in-itself and thus should be cared about for its own sake. I like this move, but I cannot say that I am wholly convinced. In other words, I think that a pragmatist could grant to Lynch much of what he says about authenticity, respect, sincerity, etc. Yet the pragmatist still could argue that what Lynch has done is to detail why truth is useful or has "cash value." For the pragmatist, Lynch has not established truth as an end-in-itself but simply has elaborated upon why truth is so useful to us.

I still prefer Lynch over the pragmatist position, but my point here is that he certainly has not had the last word on this issue. He has made a valuable contribution, but for those of us who agree with Lynch that truth really does matter, we still have much work to do.

*ERIC BAIN-SELBO* is associate professor and chair of religion and philosophy at Lebanon Valley College (Pennsylvania). His research includes work in comparative religious ethics, methods and theory in the study of religion, comparative philosophy, social criticism, and the study of popular culture. His most recent work is *Mediating the Culture Wars: Dialogical Virtues in Multicultural Education* (Hampton Press, 2003). His book *Judge and Be Judged: Moral Reflection in an Age of Relativism and Fundamentalism* is forthcoming with Lexington Books. He is currently at work researching for his next book called *Gameday and God*, which will be a study of the religious dimensions to college football in the American South.

©2005 Eric Bain-Selbo. All rights reserved.

Bain-Selbo, Eric. "Why Truth Matters" *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 6 no. 3 (Fall 2005): 70-77. PURL: <http://www.jcrt.org/archives/06.3/bain-selbo.pdf>