

FELIPE  
FERNÁNDEZ-ARMESTO

*Author of* MILLENNIUM

# TRUTH

A HISTORY  
*and a Guide  
for the Perplexed*

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**FELIPE FERNÁNDEZ-ARMESTO** has been a member of the Modern History Faculty of Oxford University since 1983. His many previous books include *Columbus*, *Millennium*, and *Reformattons*.

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# A GLOBAL HISTORY OF TRUTH

*presented by*

*Oxford historian*

FERNÁNDEZ-ARMESTO

**W**e need a history of truth—though until now no one has tried to write one. We need it to test the claim that truth is just a name for opinions—produced and reproduced—that suit the demands of society or the convenience of elites. We need to be able to tell whether truth is changeable or eternal, embedded in time or outside it, universal or varying from place to place.

We need to know how we have got to where we are in the history of truth—how our society has come to lose faith in the reality of it and lose interest in the search for it. We need a history of truth to illuminate the unique predicament of our times and, Felipe Fernández-Armesto argues, to help us escape from it.

Fernández-Armesto shows how—at different times, in different societies—people have tried to distinguish truth from falsehood; he also exposes the basic human assumptions about truth that have informed and determined

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these truth-telling strategies. All truth-finding can be reduced, he argues, to a few basic types, which have always been available, but which have been combined in varying proportions. These types are still useful. They can help us survive contemporary uncertainty and rebuild life after doubt.

This little book takes on an enormous subject and makes it understandable to anyone. It's a work of unusual audacity and tremendous scope; it is short, clear, readable, opinionated—but uncompromising in raising big issues, using rich language, and embracing a vast range. It leaps from truth-telling technologies of earlier societies to the private mental worlds of great philosophers, from the building of the pyramids to cubist art, from spiritualism to science, and from New York to New Guinea.

#### FELIPE FERNÁNDEZ-ARMESTO

has been a member of the Modern History Faculty of Oxford University since 1983. His many previous books include *Columbus*, *Millennium*, and *Reformations*. Translations of his work have appeared or are pending in twenty languages.

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TRUTH

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# TRUTH

*A History and a Guide for the Perplexed*

Felipe Fernández-Armesto



St. Martin's Press  
New York



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*If God held all truth concealed in his right hand, and in his left hand the persistent striving for the truth . . . and should say, 'Choose!' I should humbly bow before his left hand and say, 'Father, give me striving. For pure truth is for thee alone.'*

Gotthold Lessing

*Truth is the same thing to the understanding as music to the ear or beauty to the eye.*

G.N. Clark



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## PREFACE

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Most western parents feel guilty about Santa Claus. When the time comes to face the question about whether Santa 'really' exists, they feel like slayers of children's innocence or exploiters of their credulity, or both. In cultures without Santa, other mythical gift-bearers generate similar family crises.

One mother I know cheerfully admitted that the whole story was hokum and forfeited her children's trust for the rest of her life. A father of my acquaintance tried to stress the poetic truth of the tale and faced an embarrassing interrogation about his hocus-pocus with Santa suits, Christmas stockings and half-eaten mince pies. Another said, 'It's true about Santa the way it's true in the book that Long John Silver was a pirate.' 'So it's not true,' his little boy replied. An academic couple, after discussing it thoroughly between themselves, decided to tell their children, 'It's true that Santa brings you your presents in the same way that we speak of the wind hurrying or the sun smiling.' The little boy and girl,

who concluded that the sun and wind exist and that Santa does not, never forgave them for this evasion.

A schoolmaster who taught my own children and had a very pious little girl tried saying that the Santa story was a parable: 'You don't suppose,' he said, 'that the things Jesus told in the parables actually happened, do you?' The child ceased to be pious. Fellow-Catholics gave me rival advice. 'Tell your boys,' one said, 'that the Santa story is an attempt to express the divine love that is reflected in parents' love for their children.' I felt this was good doctrine but that there was no place for Santa in it. 'Of course Santa exists,' the other asserted. 'He's Saint Nicholas, mediating for children.' I was prepared to admit this but felt that it tended to make the image of the gift-bearer pagan and abominable – which, I suppose, it is. I still feel the Santa tale is more than just another of the falsehoods we invent to manipulate our victims but I have not yet found the sense in which it is true or a way of expressing it which exactly fits the facts.

This book is about the quest for language that can match reality. The story is not over yet, and we do not know whether it will end in triumph or tragedy. The pursuit of truth has been a long-standing, widely shared project of mankind. Now a lot of us seem to have abandoned it. Suspicions that reality is intractable and inexpressible have always been around. As far as we know, they have never been as widespread or as influential or as corrosive of the very concept of truth as they are today.

Against the background of the history of the truth-quest, the scale of current indifference looks like a sudden, uncharacteristic and dangerous novelty. Embraced with conviction, the quest has always been a source of inspiration and drive. It has made progress happen and civilization work. We cannot be sure of getting any further ahead or even of surviving much longer without it. A review of the history

- of the concept of truth may help to explain how we got into this predicament and suggest clues about what might happen next. At present, common sense is caught in the cross-fire of a culture-war between religious extremists, who think they know the truth, and secular nihilists, who think it can never be known. My hope is to put our crisis in context; to reassure readers that the search for truth is still on and leave relativists and fundamentalists where they belong – on the margins of history.

In tackling an unprecedented challenge without previous work to guide me – without even having many monographs on which to draw – I have to take an experimental approach and can only provide a framework-essay, not exhaustive coverage. Some practical compromises are made for the sake of brevity and clarity. Cultures I know well or which are close to home for me are inevitably treated more fully and less uncertainly than those which are more remote; but this seems better than leaving the latter out altogether. The obvious overlaps with the history of concepts related to truth, like knowledge and reality, are not laboured. Nor do I make more than selective use of the surprisingly copious literature about the history of mendacity, equivocation and deception.

This is a book about truth in society; it is not a history of what individuals, however gifted, have thought about truth. Though individual ‘great thinkers’ play a big part, they are called in for the sake of theories which have inspired assent, commanded consensus or seeped into received wisdom. For the purposes of the book, part of the interest in truth-finding techniques lies not in their efficacy but in how they become institutionalized. In Chapters One and Two much of the evidence is anthropological, as I argue (no doubt to many demurs) that this is a valid method for reconstructing early thought. At moments throughout the book, I return the reader to ethnographers’ worlds, but Chapters Three and Four

are increasingly dominated by great texts, because these were the sources of influential ideas in the places and periods covered.

The result has, for a writer, all the temptations and traps of interdisciplinary work. This book combines readings in history, philosophy and anthropology and even, to a small extent, in psychology. It touches peoples whose languages I do not know and of which my knowledge is necessarily only very general. I say this not to excuse the book's shortcomings, or to trail for praise for music like the lover's and the bard's, but to invite corrections where I have made mistakes and suggestions where I have left important things out.

Instead of attempting total coverage or arraying comprehensive examples, or trying to impose a chronological treatment on a subject to which it is unsuited, I trace changes and continuities in the history of concepts of truth through vignettes: instances of individuals, groups or episodes, depicted in their real circumstances, at intervals throughout history. The result is intended to show how the way people conceived truth interacted with the worlds they inhabited, without – as I argue – departing from a universal tradition. Chapter Two, for instance, is narrated between sketches of Zande oracular practices, nineteenth-century American and European spiritualism, Chinese Buddhist monks' quests for scriptures, the discovery of the Magdalen papyrus and the intuitive experiences of St Augustine and Descartes.

I try to make the language resolutely non-technical. Because I draw on disciplines in which rival jargons jostle for a place, I look for a lexicon of my own based on traditional usage. This is not immodest, but necessary; the technical languages are confusing because the same things are called by different names by rival schools and the same terms are assigned conflicting meanings.

I feel obliged to Alistair Crombie, who assured me that a



- book on this subject would be useful, then died – *in paradisum deducant te angeli* – and to the Athenaeum, where I wrote most of it, looking over a grove:

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*adiocere bonae plus artis Athenae,  
scilicet ut vellem curvo dinoscere rectum  
atque inter silvas Academi quarere verum.\**

Oxford

28 February 1997

\* Goodly Athens added to my art the desire, of course, to tell the curved from the straight and to seek the truth in the groves of the Academy. Or:

Good Athens gave my art another theme:  
To sort what is from what might merely seem  
And search for truth in groves of Academe.

Horace, *Epistles*, II, 2, vv. 43–5

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## INTRODUCTION

### Under the Owl – Truth, Time and History

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*Anything must be true before it can significantly claim other merits. Without Truth, all else is worthless.*

E. Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*

Truth, time and history are usually found together in paintings, not books. An obscure and hurried sketch of Goya's haunts me while I write. Out of the blackness in a corner of the background swirl creatures of the night: bats with membranes spread, owls with outstretched claws, glinting talons, malevolently gleaming eyes. Time, fear-struck below them, has none of the mature gravity with which he is usually painted. He is ill-formed, rigid and stumbling. His wings stream behind him but he seems incapable of taking flight. His shaven face is contorted with horror as he stares at the monsters that loom from the dark.

In the middle ground, from off the canvas, eerily diffused light falls on a nude girl. Utterly, innocently exposed, with pert breasts, tumbling hair and an unselfconscious pose, she balances herself delicately with a slightly out-thrust arm. She is faint, pubescent, just emerging from shadows into womanhood. Time grips her, tensely but ineffectually, by one wrist.

In the foreground, on a broken plinth, a naked redhead squats at the apex of the inverted triangle formed by the figures. With a slight smile just visible on the indistinct smudge that Goya gives her for a face, she turns from Time and Truth to look at us, while she writes her record in her book. Time is dragging Truth into the presence of History, but History seems not to care. Enigmatic, complacent, she is more interested in her audience.

Historians have continued to turn truth down as a subject. Some readers of this book – or potential readers who have already turned away from it – may think that there is no such subject to write about. Yet we need a history of truth. We need it to test the claim that truth is just a name for opinions which suit the demands of society or the convenience of élites. We need to be able to tell whether truth is changeful or eternal, embedded in time or outside it, universal or varying from place to place. We need to know how we have got to where we are in the history of truth – how our society has come to lose faith in the reality of it and lose interest in the search for it.

We live in a Mickey Mouse world in which images flicker with the speed of animation and confusion is treated as a good. The result is a crisis of values undermined, certainties discarded and fears excited. Trapped in 'future shock' by the fear of unprecedented, uncontrollable change, refugees scurry into muddle. Pluralism gets stuck in pastiche. The representative monument of our times – which will summon us to the minds of future generations the way the pyramids stand for

ancient Egypt or the Parthenon for classical Greece – is Michael Graves' Disney Building in Burbank, California. Here an evocation of Hadrian's Mausoleum is kitted with Mickey's ears. The atlantes who support the pediment depict Snow White's Seven Dwarfs. Pride of place is given to Dopey.

Confusion is there to be revelled in and shocks – including future shock – can be stimulating. A modified version of Father Brown's curse, however, seems to be coming true: when people stop believing in something, they do not believe in nothing; they believe in anything. Crackpot cults prosper, manipulative sects thrive, discredited superstitions revive. Trapped between fundamentalists, who believe they have found truth, and relativists, who refuse to pin it down, the bewildered majority in between continues to hope there is a truth worth looking for, without knowing how to go about it or how to answer the voices from either extreme. We need a new *Guide for the Perplexed* – a way of understanding and identifying truth which can survive in the post-modern era.

We need a history of truth to illuminate the unique predicament of our times and – if possible – help us escape from it. We also need it because truth is fundamental to everything else. Everyone's attempt to be good – every attempt to construct happy relationships and thriving societies – starts with two questions: How do I tell right from wrong? And how do I tell truth from falsehood? The first question has more practical applications but it depends on its apparently more theoretical twin. There is no social order without trust and no trust without truth or, at least, without agreed truth-finding procedures. The options on which society depends – such as mutual respect, adhesion to contracts, obedience to laws, devolution of individual strength to the community – have to be commended on convincing grounds. Some philosophers think practical utility is sufficient, but the value of practical utility is itself a matter of opinion. It can be commended on

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the grounds that 'practical utility is good'. It can hardly be commended on the grounds that 'It is not true that practical utility is good.' Every act of assent implies a truth-test. Every use of language represents an attempt to reflect the real.

The history of truth is as old as the history of our species. When we signal a state of affairs – the approach of a herd of mastodons, perhaps, or the imminence of fire or ice – we apply a truth-test and represent the reality we detect in language (or something like language: gestures, say, or grimaces or grunts). In most species, at some stages of evolution, the recognition of danger or opportunity seems to be instinctive and unconscious and it can be communicated instinctively. As soon as it becomes conscious, it reflects a concept of truth. It is as pertinent to ask of the first people, 'How did they decide whether their utterances were true?' as of the most sophisticated philosophers. Indeed, it is, I think, impossible to be human without having a concept of truth and a technique for matching the signs you use to the facts you want to represent as true.

The antiquity of truth-telling techniques is also suggested by a well-known fact about magic. Naming is the simplest form of matching language to reality. In many systems of thought – perhaps most until recently – knowing a name gives one power over things named. This suggests an interpenetration of language and reality, of words and the things they refer to. A similar relationship exists in many – again, has probably existed in most – human minds between image and reality: the artist or photographer, for example, said to 'capture' a soul in a likeness and to exercise power thereby; or the 'voodoo' practitioner who exerts influence on a body through operations on a moulded image. The power acquired by him who knows a name or possesses an image could have been misattributed: it may simply be that the power-wielder has a genuine source of influence in his intimate knowledge

of the subject, in which case the name and likeness should merely be taken as signs of this intimacy or figures of speech denoting it. The common occurrence, however, of the notion that shadows and reflections are visible manifestations of the soul should suggest a similar context for the understanding of names and images. Indeed, in the Orthodox tradition of Christianity, icons are seen as bearing part of the essence of the holy reality they represent.

I therefore make an attempt, in the pages which follow, to begin the story of truth with the earliest human thoughts we can try to reconstruct. Since, however, concepts of truth do not seem to me to have changed in a straightforward linear way over time – they cannot be said to have ‘evolved’ or ‘developed’ – I have not attempted a simple chronological arrangement.

Nor, for practical reasons which emerged while I was at work, do I try to enumerate all the concepts of truth which have been proposed in human history. Instead, I try to approach those concepts by analysing the truth-finding techniques espoused in different cultures at different times. (Some readers will need to be assured at once that this should not be mistaken for a relativist or post-modern project; on the contrary, the history of truth reconstructed here is remarkable for its continuities and its universal resonance.) Although I try to elude the hieratic temptation which often induces professional academics to make difficult subjects harder, it has to be admitted that this is not an easy subject. Readers are entitled to have it laid before them without condescension, but a brief guide to what follows may be helpful at this stage.

I propose that all the ways in which people have understood truth can be classified under four headings, each of which represents very broadly the dominant trend of a phase or period. The periods overlap and one of the surprising disclosures of the book is that all four categories have always been

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around, competing or co-operating with one another as ways of discovering truth, in varying degrees. The first four chapters are devoted to these categories:

*The Hairy Ball – Teeth Optional* (the title of which is taken from Zande lore examined in the text) is about what I call ‘the truth you feel’, which is detected affectively or by a kind of apprehension not covered in other chapters. I argue that, at the earliest times we can know about, it was usual for truth to be understood as registered emotionally or by non-sensory and non-rational kinds of perception. Pre-literate societies – I suggest, on the basis of anthropological evidence – understood truth in this way, as did some early literate ones.

*The God in the Saddle* (the title is an allusion to Virgil’s description of the Cumaean Sibyl possessed) argues that the preponderance of ‘the truth you feel’ is succeeded or supplemented by that of ‘the truth you are told’. In this phase of the history of truth people receive what they acknowledge as truths from what I call a ‘truth world’, inaccessible by means available to all: truth must be mediated by various human, oracular, divinatory or scriptural sources of authority. I include the notions of poetic truth, revelation and truth-detected-by-consensus and the concept of innate truth. This raises the possibility of unmediated truths, discussed in the following two chapters.

*The Cage of Wild Birds* (the title is an allusion to Plato’s famous characterization of thoughts) is about ‘the truth of reason’ or ‘the truth you think for yourself’, and covers phases when truth is understood as what reason determines; the chapter is essentially a history of rationalism, which, it is argued, originates as a reaction against earlier-prevailing concepts of truth, and of techniques of reasoning which are commonly called logical.

*The Dream of the Butterfly* (the title alludes to Chu Tse’s image of the unreliability of the sensations we have when

awake) is subtitled 'the truth you perceive through your senses' and covers the history of belief in the reliability of sense-perception. I suggest that though this seems basic common sense to some of us, its preponderance over other means of truth-detection is actually a relatively late development. The concept is handled through a dual history of science and empiricism; the coverage begins in 'primitive' societies described by anthropology and gives a lot of attention to ancient Egypt and China.

In each of these chapters I track the disillusionment to which these ways of understanding truth led people who believed in them. I try to relate them to the glutinous social and cultural environments in which they flourished.

In the last two chapters I trace the ancestry and sketch the social and cultural contexts of modern disenchantment with truth, which – in the academic disciplines traditionally most reverent of it – is now generally seen as relative, vacuous or not worth pursuing. There is an intense and minatory feeling to these chapters, as I insist that we have to bequeath to our children ways of distinguishing truth from falsehood in which they can have confidence, or else abandon them to be the victims of delusions or doubt.

As far as I am aware, no one has ever attempted this subject before. The nearest approach was made by Michel Foucault in a lecture in 1971, when he proposed a division of the history of what he variously called the search for 'true discourse' and the 'will to truth' or 'will to knowledge' into four phases. He identified the first with Greek poets of the sixth century BC, for whom, he claimed, true discourse was prophecy, uttered in poetry and enshrined in rites. It was defined by the legal and ritual stature of the prophet or judge; it announced what would happen, and commanded the assent of its victims. In the classical period, a century later, by a transfer of emphasis from 'the ritual act of utterance to the utterance itself', truth



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