Last Night in Sweden

At a Florida rally on February 18, 2017, Donald Trump spoke about threats of terror:

> We've got to keep our country safe. You look at what's happening in Germany, you look at what's happening last night in Sweden. Sweden, who would believe this? Sweden. They took in large numbers. They're having problems like they never thought possible. You look at what's happening in Brussels. You look at what's happening all over the world. Take a look at Nice. Take a look at Paris. We've allowed thousands and thousands of people into our country and there was no way to vet those people. There was no documentation. There was no nothing. So we're going to keep our country safe. (NY Times)

Trump's words suggested that something terrible had happened the night before in Sweden. Something like the terrorist attacks in Brussels and Paris. Something caused by undocumented refugees. But there had been no terrorist activity in Sweden the night before (Independent). The only recent Swedish terror attack had been over a month ago: Neo-Nazi members of the Nordic Resistance Movement attacked an

immigrant asylum in Gothenburg and injured one person.

Trump later said that he was referring to a report on an increase in crime in Sweden since the Syrian refugees had been accepted into the country (Independent). Swedish sources, however, however, have denied any significant recent change in crime rates.

The world is changing rapidly. It is becoming harder to know what is true and what is false. What do we know of the world? What should we believe?

Truth, Knowledge and Belief

Some comments on the philosophy of knowledge might help us determine where we stand in this new world. Epistemology considers what a subject, denoted by **S**, knows in terms of propositions, denoted by **p,** e.g. "Snow is white." The most commonly accepted understanding is that knowledge is "justified true belief:"

S knows **p** if **S** believes **p** on the basis of evidence supporting **p**, and if **p** is true.

The truth condition is necessary because we may have false beliefs. This occurs when we conclude on the basis of some evidence that something is true when it is actually false. We may believe that a terror attack occurred in Sweden on January 17, 2017, because the President of the United States said so (or seemed to say so), but this is a false belief.

What is ultimately important then is not what we believe but whether what we believe is actually true. Truth is even more difficult to understand than knowledge. Most commonly we consider something as true if it corresponds to something (a "fact") in or about the real (or "actual") world. This approach works fairly well for propositions about the physical world, e.g. "Snow is white." However, it does not work as well for propositions requiring judgment rather than perception,

e.g. “Killing is wrong.” In this case, there may be different kinds of truth. The truth of a proposition depends on its context. “Killing is wrong” may be false in the context of self-defense.

Yet everything is true or not depending on the context. Even “Snow is white” is false in the context of colored illumination. So we have to come together and decide what we mean by things, and what we consider their appropriate contexts. Philosophy considers this state of affairs in terms of pluralist theories of truth.

These ideas become very complex when we consider predictions about what will happen. We have created laws and theories about what will happen on the basis of what has occurred before. These laws and theories are true inasmuch as the predictions they entail have not proved false when we have tested them. Laws about the physical world are more easily considered true or false than laws about human behavior. It is easier to know that the sun will rise tomorrow than that refugees will initiate terror attacks.

Most importantly, we usually have to accept the evidence of other people when we decide about what we know. We cannot personally experience everything, nor can we personally test all possible theories about the world. We depend on others to support what we believe. People in Sweden quickly pointed out that there was no terrorist attack in their country on February 18, 2017.

In evaluating the evidence of others, we have to consider several factors. Most crucial is whether those providing the evidence are trustworthy, and whether they have previously been correct in their assessment of the world. A second factor is that our beliefs must be coherent. We cannot believe that there was a terrorist attack in Sweden on February 17, 2017, and at the same time believe that no one in Sweden noticed this. Finally, we often agree with what most people believe to

be true. It is difficult to insist that something happened when most people say it did not. Conforming to majority opinion is clearly not as good as finding out for ourselves, but in most cases we have neither the time nor the ability to do so.

The Clear and Present Danger

Given our understanding of knowledge and truth, we must realize that the present state of truth is precarious.

First is the problem of majority opinion. The vicious circle whereby innuendo becomes fact is terrifying. When Trump proposes his belief about something, many people may accept this, both because they trust their President and because it is coherent with their world-view. Then the opinion of the these many people can be used to justify the belief. David Bromwich describes this phenomenon in the London Review of Books:

> Trump's most disturbing habit is also his most ridiculous trait: he credits and is apt to repeat his professed beliefs when – and in exact proportion as – he sees other people credit them. We normally think of beliefs as something you cannot choose (unlike opinions or estimations), but Trump does choose and he correlates the numbers of his followers with truth in the physical world. So when, in an interview on 25 January, the ABC reporter David Muir inquired into his unsubstantiated belief that between three and five million people voted illegally, accounting for Hillary Clinton's popular majority, Trump replied: 'You know what's important? Millions of people agree with me when I say that.' The when-I-say-that is essential to Trump's belief and essential to the relationship to his beliefs enjoyed by millions. His belief, triggered by impulsive attraction to something dressed as a fact, is fortified against refutation by the echo of the belief from his followers.

Second is the problem of reliable sources. The world has long depended on the Free Press to describe what is happening in the world. Sometimes reporting has been biased, but for the most part the professional media have tried their best to be objective. The internet has made available multiple other sources of information, some extremely biased and some completely fallacious. Capitalism has contributed to the problem. Monetized websites pay by the number of times they are accessed. Outrage is far more effective than truth in attracting "hits."

Fake news has become recognized as a powerful force in molding public opinion. Yet Trump and his colleagues have now begun to call all sources that treat them critically as fake news. Thus they attenuate any criticism of either themselves or the fraudulent news-sources that support them. As Charles Sykes in the New York Times, one of the media sources that Trump considers "dishonest," remarks

> In a stunning demonstration of the power and resiliency of our new post-factual political culture, Mr. Trump and his allies in the right media have already turned the term "fake news" against its critics, essentially draining it of any meaning.

In this world of alternative facts and fake news, we are approaching the "doublethink" of George Orwell's *1984* (Part 2, Chapter 9):

> To tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing in them, to forget any fact that has become inconvenient, and then, when it becomes necessary again, to draw it back from oblivion for just as long as it is needed, to deny the existence of objective reality and all the while to take account of the reality which one denies.

Even the description is impossible to pin down. We cannot even define doublethink without getting lost in contradictions.

Where to now?

How can we now “know” what is going on? On what do we base our beliefs? Somehow we must find a way of assessing the truthfulness of sources. Fact checkers are essential. Probably the most important is the non-partisan FactCheck.Org. The Washington Post runs a good fact-checking blog. Another source is Snopes.com, which was originally set up to evaluate urban myths but now also deals with fake news. We must support the Free Press – this may be our last bastion of reality. The internet has wreaked havoc with the financing of the press. Most people take their news from the internet for free. This may be dangerous. We must subscribe to proper journalism.

The photograph in the header showing the Stockholm City Hall is from Wikipedia.

Note Added in 2021:

The increasing role of fake FaceBook accounts in spreading disinformation is described on the Comparitech website.