ARTICLE 3

Existence and Truth

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There is a question our time has forgotten to ask.

Not: **is it true?** That one is asked everywhere: in newspapers, on platforms, in debates, in ordinary conversation. Fact-checkers, detection algorithms, disinformation labels: an entire infrastructure is devoted to it.

The forgotten question comes before it, and its absence explains why all that infrastructure solves nothing. It is: **did it really take place?**

It is not the same question. As long as the two are confused, as long as we believe that by settling the problem of truth we settle the problem of existence, we miss the point. This article is devoted to that distinction: truth, a property of statements; existence, a property of acts. Two registers, two questions, two different answers.

I. What truth is, and what it presupposes

Since Aristotle, truth has been a correspondence. A statement is true if it matches the reality it describes. “It is raining” is true if it is raining. Truth is a relation between language and the world.

This definition presupposes something that is almost never questioned: that the world is there, stable, accessible, and that we can consult it to check whether our statements reach it.

It is this presupposition that the flow throws into crisis. Not by making the world inaccessible. But by making it hard to tell what really took place from what is merely stated.

WORDS THAT DO THINGS

In the 1950s, the philosopher John L. Austin observed that some statements do not describe reality: they change it by being uttered.

“I now pronounce you married.” This is neither true nor false. It is an act, which creates something that did not exist before. Austin called these statements performatives.

A promise is a performative. So is an oath. They do not describe the world: they create obligations, bonds, new realities.

What makes a performative succeed? Austin answers with conditions: a registrar can pronounce you married because he is empowered to do so. The words must be uttered in the right context, by the right person, in the right form.

That is necessary. I do not believe it is sufficient. What makes an act really take place is that it cost an effort, passed through a friction, left a matter. Without that, even an act in due form remains fragile. It has been uttered. It has not taken place.

II. What existence is, and how it differs

Existence, in the sense I mean, is a property of acts. Not of statements. Not of persons. Not of emotions.

An act exists if it has cost an effort, passed through a resistance, and left in the world a trace that can no longer be undone. That is the formula:

> Real = Matter × Friction × Effort

Truth concerns the relation between words and things. Existence concerns the relation between acts and matter.

The question of truth belongs to language. It is settled with sources, testimony, cross-checking.

The question of existence belongs to acts. It is not settled with words. It is settled with what remains.

Truth Existence Property of statements of acts Register language matter Settled by sources and testimony what remains of the act Can be true in a vacuum real without being true Question is it accurate? did it take place?

EXISTENCE COMES FIRST

There is an order between these two questions.

One cannot ask whether a thing is true before knowing whether it took place. An event that did not occur is neither true nor false: it is absent. The question of truth presupposes the existence of what it bears on.

The question of existence therefore comes first. It is the one our time has forgotten to ask, in the belief that the question of truth was enough.

III. The paradox: two cases that tip the balance

Here are two cases that make the distinction visible. They are unsettling. That is their purpose.

FIRST CASE: BEING RIGHT IN A VACUUM

Someone tells you he went through great pain last year. It may be true. It may be false.

What is in question here is not his pain. It is the account he gives of it. The question of truth arises: is he sincere? That can be debated. But the account itself is not an act. It costs nothing, resists nothing, leaves nothing.

One can be perfectly right, describe exactly what happened, and produce a statement without weight.

Being right is not enough. Truth without weight remains a declaration.

SECOND CASE: LYING WITH WEIGHT

Now the opposite case, the most disconcerting.

Someone refers a matter to the Bureau des Protocoles. He chooses the Colère (Anger) protocol, perhaps without feeling the slightest anger. His motive is a lie, a game or a secret. It does not matter: the motive belongs to him, and the Bureau never judges it.

I execute the protocol. The effort is real, the friction is real. The lead is cast, the date is engraved.

The act took place. Fully, irreversibly. What the mandator felt, or claimed to feel, changes nothing.

One can lie, and produce a real act.

WHAT THE PARADOX REVEALS

These two cases look like flaws. They are the very coherence of the distinction.

A notary registers a gift without checking that it is made out of love. The deed is valid even if the feeling was feigned. No one sees this as a flaw in the notarial system: it is its definition. The notary records the act, never the motive.

The Bureau des Protocoles works the same way. It does not produce truth. It certifies that an act took place. It does not certify that this act tells the truth about anything. The motive stays with the mandator: their secret, their lie or their reason. It is no concern of the administration.

Judges, historians and journalists deal with truth. The Bureau deals with what took place.

This is not a retreat. It is a demarcation. An institution must know what it does, and what it does not do.

IV. Why fact-checking is not enough

Back to the infrastructure of verification. Why is it not enough?

Because it works in the register of language. It asks the question of truth. And that question, however important, does not settle the question of existence.

WHAT THE FACT-CHECKER DOES

A fact-checker examines whether a statement matches reality. He consults sources, cross-checks, assesses. It is useful work, necessary, often courageous.

Suppose he succeeds perfectly: he separates the true from the false exactly, and his conclusion is widely circulated and understood.

THE PROBLEM OF EXISTENCE REMAINS WHOLE

A statement that has been checked, declared true and circulated everywhere remains a statement without weight if no one has passed through it, if no body has committed itself to it.

One can know with certainty that a thing is true, and that knowledge can change nothing. We have known for decades that tobacco kills. That knowledge has not been enough to change behaviour, because knowing is a statement, and changing is an act.

Verification restores truth. It does not give a promise back its weight. It does not create friction where there is none.

THE REAL PROBLEM OF OUR TIME

Our time suffers from two distinct problems, and confuses them.

A problem of truth: false statements circulate, spread, are believed. That is serious.

A problem of existence: acts no longer carry weight, commitments no longer hold, promises evaporate at the moment they are made. That runs deeper. And it is what verification cannot touch.

A society that can no longer tell what took place from what was declared is not merely misinformed. It has lost the sense of what took place. No algorithm will give it back, because this is not about words. It is about acts.

V. What this distinction demands

If truth and existence are two distinct registers, and if existence comes first, our time does not only need fact-checkers. It needs places where acts can still take place: practices, procedures that put effort, friction and matter back where there are none.

The question to ask before all others is not: is it true? It is: did it really take place?

It seems simple. It is demanding, because it is not satisfied with an answer in words. It asks for an answer in acts: a friction passed through, an effort made, a matter that remains.

The Bureau des Protocoles is one of these places, a modest one. It does not repair the age. It shows that an act can still resist, weigh, last.

In the next article, this distinction takes on a political dimension. For democracy, as is often forgotten, does not rest on truth alone. It rests on the promise. And a promise is an act, not a statement.

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