

“Truth will be Truth tho’ it sometimes prove[s]... distasteful.” *A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain* (1725).

“And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles, to betray [us] In deepest consequence.”

~ *Macbeth* (Act 1, Scene 3), William Shakespeare.

We are said to be living in a “post-truth” era; a cultural climate in which emotion and ulterior motivations take precedence over facts. Yet, Benjamin Franklin's prescient observations admit to a world before our own in which post-truth politics were as alive and well as they are today. The subjugation of truth to emotion is not a peculiarity of our contemporary world, but rather a constant of human affairs. However, the peculiarity of our own time is that the market for truth has never been so expansive. Although “Truth will be Truth,” the proliferation of social media platforms for discussion, the shift from mainstream news networks to YouTube-based political commentators, and the growing prevalence of AI-generated “deep-fakes” make locating the truth of a situation far more challenging. The old-school assumptive reliance on leaders, subject-matter experts, folk wisdom and religious texts has been traded for a universal distrust of any authoritative source; in some cases, for the better, in others, for the worse. While philosophers may argue over the existence of a positivist notion of objective truth versus a Nietzschean Perspectivist stance, we can come to a common sense agreement that there are sets of facts about our world, though they may indeed “prove... distasteful.” By revisiting the observations of Franklin, we can remind ourselves of the dangers post-truth politics pose to any generation, and how our own human fallibility makes us perfectly susceptible to the manipulation of truth.

Franklin's philosophical pamphlet *A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain* (1725) argues that the Judeo-Christian God's traditional trio of virtues—omnipotence, omnibenevolence and omniscience—are incompatible with the concepts of morality and free will. He thus put forward an argument against the existence of these concepts, while addressing the problem of evil. While we can leave the relative philosophical merit of Franklin's position to one side—he himself later refuted his own Calvinistic arguments—his reflections on human motivation for action are eminently relevant to our present times. As global interstate relations continue to break down, conflicts spark, and existential threats to humanity forever loom, revisiting the wisdom of Franklin is essential to carving out a peaceful path for our future. Only by recognising and actively addressing the often “distasteful” nature of the “Truth” behind our motivations, can we hope for resolution.

In the summation of his argument, Franklin establishes the premise that “every Action is the Effect of Self-Uneasiness;” and it is this “Truth,” I argue, that

often “prove[s] mortifying and distasteful.”¹ An uneasiness within us—be it pain, boredom, restlessness or fear—motivates us to every action we take: it is the “Spring and Cause of all Action.”² Like Schopenhauer’s pendulum that swings back and forth between pain and boredom, Franklin argues that “self-uneasiness” informs the core of our existence, being the cause for every effect. Without this uneasiness, life and motion would cease to exist: “we are dead, we think and act no more.”³ Yet, as most of us would agree, the uneasiness we feel is often incommensurate with the facts of our environment; our boredom seldom corresponds to a lack of opportunity, our fears are often irrational, and we can feel restless even in the most comfortable of settings. As Franklin aptly put it, self-uneasiness is “without and distinct from the Mind itself.”⁴ That is to say, our sense of continual uneasiness is pre-rational. While the brain’s fear circuits can be explained biologically, the uneasiness we experience is seldom the effect of reasoning and reflection, but a cause *for* such. And it is this universal sense of a pre-rational uneasiness, one that screams for an explanation and a cure, that can be exploited so efficiently. As best put by 45th, and now 47th, President-elect Donald Trump: “Real power [...] is fear.”⁵

The exploitation of fear is as old as politics itself: yet, every successive generation continues to fall victim to its political manipulation. Franklin knew the power of fear in his own time, with the British exploiting fears of slave revolts against the Patriots in the American Revolution. Franklin himself later succumbed to xenophobic fears pertaining to the influx of German immigrants into the United States, fearing that “they will soon so outnumber us.”⁶ The annals of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries supply an ample volume of examples as to how fear and uneasiness can be mobilised by politicians. In each case, the mechanisms of *diagnosis* and *prescription* are at play: politicians diagnose the threat and prescribe an often violent solution. The uneasiness and fear felt by Germans in the post-World War One Weimar Republic, fuelled by economic crises and hardship caused largely by the Treaty of Versailles, gave Hitler the necessary pretext to diagnose the problem as a Jewish one, and prescribe genocide as the solution. In 1972, Idi Amin diagnosed economic hardship to be the result of the South East Asian community sabotaging Uganda, and prescribed the expulsion of its 60,000 Asian citizens as the solution. In 2003, with the wounds of 9/11 still fresh, George W. Bush was able to leverage the uneasiness felt by the American public, blowing unfounded claims of Saddam Hussein’s harbouring of WMDs out of proportion, giving a justification to invade

¹ Benjamin Franklin, “A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain 1725” in *Founders Online National Archives*. Accessed November 15, 2024. URL:

<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-01-02-0028>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Patrick Boucheron, “‘Real Power is fear’: what Machiavelli tells us about Trump in 2020” in *The Guardian*, February 8, 2020. URL:

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/feb/08/real-power-is-fear-donald-trump-machiavellia-boucheron>

⁶ Benjamin Franklin, “From Benjamin Franklin to Peter Collinson, 9 May 1753” in *Founders Online National Archives*. Accessed November 20, 2024. URL:

<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-04-02-0173>

Iraq. Bush, with broad brush strokes, diagnosed manifold problems, from Islamic extremism to potential world annihilation, and prescribed the Global War on Terror (GWOT) as the solution. The consequences of Bush's campaign of manipulation are still being felt today across the Middle East, and has made the world unequivocally less stable than before. It is this potential for catastrophic outcomes that our own "self-uneasiness" possesses, which makes Franklin's words so relevant to our present moment.

That is not to say that fear is merely an effective ploy manufactured by politicians *alone*. Fear is indeed an adequate and rational response for many groups facing existential threats across the globe, be it Palestinians, Ukrainians, Kashmiris, Uyghur Muslims, Yazidis, Kurds and the many other groups currently subject to potential annihilation and the removal of their basic human rights. Likewise, in the West, many of us have legitimate reasons to feel a sense of unease and fear. In the UK, the NHS is suffering after decades of austerity, while more than a third of children are in poverty.⁷ Across the pond, "medical bankruptcy" continues to be the leading cause of bankruptcy for Americans.⁸ These are real causes for rational concern. However, it is easy for such fears relating to domestic issues—be it inflation, the cost of living, job insecurity—to be projected on to foreign scapegoats, minority groups, or simply for the very energies of our uneasiness to be channelled into conflict, hatred and war. Unaddressed political concerns, an ever-increasing polarity between right and left, and an increasingly unsustainable economic situation in the West have helped nurture a culture of fear in which extremism breeds. As Thomas Hobbes observed, insecurity engenders fear, and fear opens the floodgates. The pre-rational self-uneasiness common to human experience of which Franklin talks is easily exacerbated by external uncertainties—be it economic hardship or instability, health problems or even losses in our social standing and status—which stimulates fear within us: in turn, we long for an end to this fear, for someone to explain its cause and show us the pathway to its end. It is this prospect—a comforting solution to end our uneasiness—that fuels populism, and even makes politically-moderate politicians popular when it comes to declaring war. And it is exactly this that is the "distasteful and mortifying Truth" that motivates much of our action.

We stand at the crossroads of a multitude of incendiary conflicts. We are told to fear and distrust an economically strong China; to hate Russia and its supposed lust for imperialism; to unequivocally support Israel as the apparent bulwark against Islamic extremism; to celebrate violent regime changes in foreign countries sponsored by our own government. In every case, politicians make little effort to distinguish between the state and its citizens. Meanwhile, a growing East/West arms race in Artificial Intelligence, a renewed nuclear arms race on the horizon, a climate crisis and further developments in biochemical and cyber weapons, make the world an evermore insecure place to be, in which we are one button, misunderstanding or hiccup away from annihilation. So before being spurred into the next campaign of

⁷ Samuel McIlhagga, "Britain is Dead" in *Palladium*, April 27, 2023. URL: <https://www.palladiummag.com/2023/04/27/britain-is-dead/>

⁸ Ibid.

hatred and fear toward the next inevitable scapegoat, we should heed Franklin's observations, remembering that much motivation for action comes not from necessity but from our own uneasiness, and that the justifications we give for these actions often belie a "mortifying and distasteful" truth. Franklin's "truth" may not be the "beauty" of Keats's truth, yet it remains essential to acknowledge as we navigate the path to peace.