

On Factoids  
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Increasingly these last few years, I've been interested in how people come to know what they know, or better, what they think they know. The philosophical term for that process is epistemology. An example, see a 2014 writing for this site, "Epistemology Matters: Reflections Prompted by a Death in Missouri." The way we decide what is true, real, shapes our lives: our actions, which are at the core of our being, which define us, are given direction by what we consider to be factually true about people and circumstances. What makes epistemology matter so much to me is that wisdom, freedom, and self-determination matter so much to me. If we aren't good at discerning truth from fiction, or fantasy, we will buy into false notions about reality and take wrong--inappropriate, immoral--paths in life. And, so important, if other people have the power to control what we deem to be true, and thus how we behave, we aren't in charge of our lives, these other people are. I want everyone to determine his or her own destiny for him- or herself.

It is in this light that I took note of a letter written on March 21st, 1985 by the late author Norman Mailer to David Irving Shapiro, who was putting together a seminar on clear thinking (see, J. Michael Lennon, editor, *Selected Letters of Norman Mailer*, Random House, 2014, pp. 594-595). Mailer wrote:

I coined the word "factoid" while writing a biography of Marilyn Monroe titled, no surprise, *Marilyn*. Since the book is not handy, I cannot give you the page where the concept is introduced, although as I remember, it was in the first two chapters. In any event, my definition of a factoid was a fact which had no existence prior to its appearance in print. The notion behind it was that a vast variety of facts were essential in all kinds of ways, signally, in the case of Marilyn Monroe, through publicity. A movie star's flack might, for example, say, "So and so sleeps only in the nude," when in fact she in reality wore wool nightgowns every evening of her life and the flack indeed had never met her; he was merely an assistant flack putting out copy. The word factoid was used to dramatize the fact, and this is a fact, not a factoid, that a vast percentage of what we take for real, codified, observed,

verified, and factually true is, in fact, built upon nothing other than an existence in print. Needless to say, once a factoid is printed, it is reprinted in many another newspaper, wire service, etc., and takes on a psychological reality often more powerful than the other psychological reality attached to the true fact.

I find the concept of factoid useful: a fact that exists only in print. A factoid doesn't have to be an outright lie or fabrication; while it could be that, it could also be a sincere speculation or assertion—the writer believes it is so—it's just not grounded in reality. In any case, it only exists as those words on the page; that's the only reality it has. Since many people—I'd guess the great majority of them, it's a human characteristic—tend to believe whatever they read, that's their epistemology, the factoid becomes, in their eyes, actual reality and not just print reality, especially, as Mailer points out, if they read it repeatedly. And, I'd add, especially if it rings of credibility given what else they know (and “know”)—yes, Marilyn is the sort that would sleep in the nude. And especially if it comes from an authoritative source—it was in *Harpers* magazine, or my professor authored it. And especially if it makes them feel good about themselves and doesn't shake up their lives or cause trouble for them. No threat to them that Marilyn sleeps in the nude; unlike, say, if they were Christians, and read that Jesus was a political revolutionary who never claimed to be divine. (All this also applies to what people hear verbally from their reference group or sources they find credible, but I'll keep the discussion limited to print expressions here.) What should be obvious but all too often isn't, is that believing something is so doesn't make it so. Subjective truth, what exists inside someone—I truly believe it—doesn't necessarily align with outer, objective truth. Assumptions, beliefs and opinions, aren't always grounded in true facts. Subjective, internal, truth can, and very often is, the reiteration of a factoid (or series of them), a print declaration that has no correspondence, or very little, with external reality.

This consideration of factoids ties into the above mentioned “Epistemology Matters” article and other writings on this site because factoids can be incorporated into and support false explanations and theories and narratives that are bad maps for charting our courses in life. Bottom line in this writing, we need be

very cautious about believing something just because it somehow got into print--in the press, in a reading assigned for class, on a web site, in a tweet, a blog, or a text message, wherever it might be—and it feels right to us, and the people we identify with believe it, and we get praised, included, and rewarded, for affirming it--say, with a nod of approval, an invitation to lunch, or a good grade in the course.

Each of us individually, autonomously, needs to break from the herd (those who believe whatever happens to be on the page) and the herders (those who write things on the page that aren't so). We need to bring a healthy skepticism to whatever is in print; think about who put it there and what it's in it for them if we buy it; take a variety of perspectives into account and not just go by what the people who have our eyes (and ears) say; come to truth on our own; and get it right. We need to ground our lives in facts, not factoids.

I'll end by underscoring that in this last sentence I said we need "ground our lives in facts." I didn't say we needed to express those facts publicly in print, or verbally. We have to be savvy about doing that, particularly if our facts contradict the current party line, conventional wisdom, orthodox thinking, whatever term to use. Characteristically, people, and particularly those currently in power, don't take well to anybody doing that. If you in effect pronounce the emperor naked, you run the risk of eating pizza alone on Saturday nights, or even being trashed as a person and harassed and fired from your job. So be careful. Truth is a dangerous thing to possess; it can blow up in your face if you don't handle it right. But if you handle it well, it can pave the way to a life that you can be proud of.