Our Country is in an Epistemological Crisis

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The impeachment issue provides one more illustration of our country’s extreme political polarization. The underlying culprit, however, may be epistemological rather than political.

I have watched media interviews of and statements by House and Senate members. Aside from believing Republican leaders seem incapable of defending Trump’s threatening Ukraine, I am amazed about how they conflate “fact” and “opinion.” Recently, for example, Louisiana Republican Sen. John Kennedy could not answer a simple and nonpolitical question raised by NBC’s Chuck Todd: When does an opinion become a fact? Kennedy was literally dumbfounded by the question. We should not be surprised.

Our country is confronted with a serious epistemological crisis — a subject I have spent my academic career studying and about which I have written a book and numerous of journal articles. Drawing on my research, I contend that, like the ancient Sophists, many contemporary relativists and postmodern thinkers, Republicans in 2019 treat everything that is said as of equal worth — that there is no categorical epistemological difference between “belief” and "knowledge.” In short, if belief and knowledge are not segregated, politicians can indiscriminately claim that their opposition’s “facts” are merely “opinions” — and be successful rhetorically, getting away with such an assertion.
Until people are willing to refrain from knee-jerk political reactions, engaging instead in a thoughtful philosophical discussion about what counts as “truth,” the nation’s current partisan and polarized state will remain — something preventing productive debate, progress in solving problems and restoration of deliberative democracy. To be clear, this philosophical issue must not be a purely academic conversation restricted to those in the ivory tower. It must take place in the public square. Issues about what is true and what isn’t, after all, have always guided the decision making of ordinary citizens and impacted our nonpolitical lives.

Richard Cherwitz  
Austin, Texas