

**JAMES'S CHILDREN?
POST FACTUALISM AS A DESCENDANT OF THE PRAGMATIST
CONCEPTION OF TRUTH**

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ABSTRACT: William James's critics argued early on that James's pragmatist conception of truth, according to which truth is what "works", leads to subjectivism and irrationalism. This paper engages in a critical self-reflection of pragmatism and asks whether there is a "slippery slope" from James's views on truth via Richard Rorty's radical neopragmatism to truth-denialism and post-factualism exemplified by both real-life populist politics and the fictional character of O'Brien in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a novel insightfully yet problematically interpreted by Rorty in an essay on the relation between truth and freedom. The paper argues for a pragmatically pluralist conception of truth capable of accommodating realism and objectivity within pragmatism.

Keywords: truth, pragmatist conception of truth, realism, objectivity, pluralism, James, W., Rorty, R., Orwell, G.

"What happened to the truth is not recorded"
(Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot*. London: Vintage, 2009 [1984], 65)

Introduction: Vulgar Pragmatism?

Together with a group of Finnish colleagues, I have since 1999 been involved in writing and revising a series of philosophy textbooks for high-school students, published by the Finnish publishing house Edita, which specializes in textbooks and non-fiction books (though not in scholarly publishing). In an introductory book published in 2005, we included a brief discussion of "the pragmatist theory of truth" in the context of a more general exploration of the concept of truth. As textbooks usually do, our books also include a lot of pictures, hopefully keeping their young readers alert. For the truth-theoretical section, we decided to use a photograph of Donald Trump, picturing him with his bestseller, *How to Become Rich*. In those years, Trump was not at all well known in Finland, although he was already at that point a famous celebrity in the United States. I can't remember who decided to use the picture in the book; I certainly had no idea whatsoever who this guy was, and I had never

heard of him before. The point of the photograph was obvious: we asked whether the sentences of Trump's books are true if they make their author (or, possibly, their reader) rich and if they in that sense pragmatically "work". Getting rich would then be their concrete "cash value".

Little, of course, did we know: I could never have imagined that I would write a paper seriously asking whether there is a slippery slope leading from William James all the way down to Donald Trump, and even beyond, but this is precisely what I am now doing. If Trump is a pragmatist, he is certainly the most vulgar pragmatist there can be.¹ Susan Haack (1995) once called Richard Rorty's pragmatism "vulgar", contrasting it with Peircean pragmatism, in particular, but it should be obvious that there can be no serious comparison between pragmatist intellectuals like Rorty (no matter how controversial their views might be) and truly vulgar "pragmatists" like Trump, many of whose pronouncements are not only false but degrading, insulting, full of hate, and a continuous threat not just to world economy but to world peace. Fortunately, the disgraceful Trump presidency is over, but the political divisions yielding post-truth populism will unfortunately continue to trouble us, as we are witnessing the fragility of democracy not only in the United States but in other countries as well. I do believe we must seriously consider how exactly pragmatism is related to the kind of attitude to truth and reality that we find Trump, and his supporters, exemplifying. The worry that there might indeed be something like a slippery slope from James – via Rorty – to Trump is to be taken seriously: are post-factualists "James's children", and if so, in what sense exactly?²

¹ During Obama's presidency, there was serious scholarly discussion (including a special session at the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy and a thematic issue of the journal *Contemporary Pragmatism*) on "Obama's pragmatism", i.e., on how Obama's background at the University of Chicago might have exposed him to pragmatist influences that could have played a role in his thinking about law and politics, among other things. In Trump's era, an analogous talk about his "pragmatism" would be a dark joke, comparable perhaps to Mussolini's well-known interest in William James.

² The allusion here, as any historian of pragmatism easily recognizes, is to Murphey's (1968) characterization of the classical Cambridge pragmatists as "Kant's children" – a view that I largely share. Note that the reason I am focusing on James and Rorty in

There is no need to describe even in general terms the ways in which Trump and his supporters, like many other populists in many other countries, on the one hand deliberately lie in order to advance their own pursuits and on the other hand just do not seem to care about the distinction between truth and falsehood at all – or care about it only in the crudest possible “pragmatic” sense of having their own interests served. We all know very well how Trump’s disrespect for truth is consistently manifested³ in his actions and public statements, including his incredible tweets. In an extremely crude sense of pragmatism, those speech acts openly loathsome of truth and the commitment to pursue the truth may have been pragmatically “true”, as they did bring Trump to his powerful position.⁴ They indeed pragmatically “worked” for him – but they certainly do not seem to work from the point of view of those suffering from the political and economic catastrophes of his presidency.⁵ In this situation, many people disillusioned

this paper is purely practical: it is in the work of these two pragmatists that the threat of a “slippery slope” is the most striking. Other pragmatist contributions to debates on the concept of truth, including, say, Charles S. Peirce’s or (in contemporary pragmatism) Robert Brandom’s, would not as obviously lead to such problems. On the other hand, I am definitely not committed to the picture of there being two clearly distinguishable pragmatisms, the Peircean realistic one and the more relativist or subjectivist one starting from James’s alleged misreading of Peirce; I find the pragmatist tradition much more complicated – and also more unified (cf., e.g., Pihlström 2008, 2015, 2020).

³ Even this is incoherent or a bad joke: one needs the concept of truth to be consistent at anything, including one’s disrespect for truth.

⁴ Moreover, Trump of course perversely uses the notion of truth, as well as related notions like “fake news”, always suggesting that what he says is true and what his opponents say is false. For some illustrative picks from among thousands of possible examples, see, e.g., <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jul/14/the-death-of-truth-how-we-gave-up-on-facts-and-ended-up-with-trump> and <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/07/25/politics/donald-trump-vfw-unreality/index.html>.

On the latter occasion Trump is reported to have urged his supporters: “Stick with us. Don’t believe the crap you see from these people, the fake news. ... What you’re seeing and what you’re reading is not what’s happening.” It is of course a traditional populist strategy to claim that only the populist leader has some privileged access to what is “really” happening. Even at the final stages of his delusional campaign denying the facts of the 2020 Election, he continued to claim that “the facts” were on his side.

⁵ It could be argued that even Trump himself in the end collapsed due to his truth-denialism, including his inability to take seriously the facts of the covid-19 pandemic. This can be left for political historians to examine.

by political developments talk about “post-factualism” and the “post-truth era”, and if there is any individual who can act as a face for this cultural situation, it is presumably Trump (surrounded, of course, by an alarming number of leaders of major countries all over the world who share the willingness to sacrifice truth in the interest of greed and power).

Ironically, on the page next to the one with Trump’s picture in our 2005 textbook, we placed a picture of a Soviet citizen reading the newspaper *Pravda* (meaning “truth”). Every statement contained in the pages of that official newspaper of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had gone through strict censorship by the Soviet authorities. There was just one official truth available, the view the Party held, and though our situation is different – in Trump’s era, there seem to be no shared truth (or shared falsity) available at all but just a confusing rhapsody of self-serving tweets – we might be in an equally serious danger of losing contact with truth and reality.

I will now ask whether the pragmatists are in some ways guilty of this development. The two main figures I will focus on are, unsurprisingly, James and Rorty. There is no point in offering any close reading of their well-known views here,⁶ but I will explore them in the context of the worries many of us share regarding Trump and other truth-degrading populists in our confusing political world today.

William James on Truth

It needs to be emphasized that, far from leading to radical relativism or political opportunism, James’s (as well as Dewey’s) pragmatism functions as a link between the crucial relevance of the concept of truth and the emphasis on individual plurality and spontaneity.⁷ I would like to suggest that it is through Jamesian pragma-

⁶ One of the best recent examinations of the pragmatic conception of truth is Capps 2019.

⁷ The main sources for James’s views here are, of course, *Pragmatism* and *The Meaning of Truth* (James 1975 [1907] and 1978 [1909], respectively).

tism that we can bring the notion of truth itself bear on the analysis of human experiential plurality and unique individuality (see also, e.g., Cormier 2001, Capps 2019). This requires, however, that we not only maintain that there is a plurality of truths, or that truths may be relativized to a plurality of practice-laden human perspectives of inquiry, but seriously try to understand and reconceptualize the concept of truth itself from a Jamesian pragmatist perspective. *Pragmatic pluralism* in a Jamesian style insists that individual perspectives and commitments to truth-seeking matter to what truth is or means for us. This is clear in James: truth is always truth-for-someone-in-particular, an individual person pursuing truth both generally and in, e.g., their existential, ethical, or religious lives, not abstract truth-in-general.

The pragmatist theory of truth is far from uncontroversial, as anyone who ever read undergraduate textbooks on truth knows. We might, however, approach it in terms of the distinction between *truth* and *truthfulness* (very interestingly analyzed in Williams 2002). These are clearly different notions, but they are also connected. One may pursue truthfulness without thereby having true beliefs; one can be truthful also when one is mistaken, insofar as one sincerely seeks to believe truths and avoid falsehoods and also honestly seeks to tell the truth whenever possible (and whenever the truth to be told is relevant). Clearly, whatever one's theory of truth is, one should in some way distinguish between truth and truthfulness.

On the other hand, certain accounts of truth, such as the pragmatist one, may be more promising than some others in articulating the intimate relation between those two concepts. We might say that this distinction is "softened" in James's pragmatist conception of truth, which rather explicitly turns truth into a *value* to be pursued in one's (individual and social) life rather than mind- and value-independent objective propositional truth corresponding to facts that are just "there" no matter how we as truth-seekers (or truth-tellers) engage with or relate ourselves to them. Truth in the Jamesian sense is richer and broader than mere propositional

truth precisely because it incorporates truthfulness – a normative *commitment* to truth – as a dimension of the notion of truth itself. Truth, then, is a *normative* property of our practices of thought and inquiry in a wide sense and in this way something that our practice-embedded life with the concepts we have involves, not simply a semantic property of statements or a metaphysical property of propositions that could be taken out of that context of life-practices. Its normativity is, we might say, both epistemic and ethical. James's pragmatic conception of truth hence crucially accommodates truthfulness, as truth belongs to the ethical field of inter-human relations of mutual dependence and acknowledgment. Truth is an element of this "being with others" (to borrow a Heideggerian term out of context). It also incorporates an acknowledgment of the inner truth (and truthfulness) of others' experiences.⁸

Jamesian pragmatic truth is also inextricably entangled with our individual existential concerns; therefore, it is indistinguishable from James's general *individualism* (see, e.g., Pawelski 2007). Individuals' responses to their existential life-challenges vary considerably, and any ethically, politically, existentially, or religiously relevant conception of truth must in some sense appreciate this temperamental⁹ variation – without succumbing to the temptations of uncritical subjectivism or relativism, though. Now, if we for ethical reasons do wish to take seriously the Jamesian approach to individual diversity, as I think we should, then we must pay attention to what he says about the "plasticity" of truth and about truth being a "species of good":

⁸ This particularly concerns others' experiences of suffering (cf. Kivistö and Pihlström 2016, chapter 5; Pihlström 2008, 2019, 2020). Only irresponsible metaphysical speculation about, say, "theodicies" leads us to postulate a false transcendent meaningfulness for such experiences. My "antitheodistic" reading of James is very closely connected with my understanding of his conception of truth and truthfulness, but this is a large topic that must be set aside here.

⁹ James's (1975 [1907], Lecture I) account of individual philosophical temperaments should, I think, be understood in close entanglement with his notion of truth. There is no way of completely disentangling the temperamental aspects from our practices of pursuing the truth.

Truth independent; truth that we *find* merely; truth no longer malleable to human need; truth incorrigible, in a word; such truth exists indeed superabundantly – or is supposed to exist by rationally minded thinkers; but then it means only the dead heart of the living tree, and its being there means only that truth also has its paleontology and its ‘prescription,’ and may grow stiff with years of veteran service and petrified in men’s regard by sheer antiquity. But how plastic even the oldest truths nevertheless really are has been vividly shown in our day by the transformation of logical and mathematical ideas, a transformation which seems even to be invading physics. (James 1975 [1907], Lecture II)

... truth is *one species of good*, and not, as is usually supposed, a category distinct from good, and co-ordinate with it. *The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons.* (Ibid.)

Another famous Jamesian formulation relevant here is this:

Pragmatism, on the other hand [in contrast to other accounts of truth], asks its usual question. “Grant an idea or belief to be true,” it says, “what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone’s actual life? How will the truth be realized? What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth’s cash-value in experiential terms?” The moment pragmatism asks this question, it sees the answer: *true ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify; false ideas are those that we cannot.* That is the practical difference it makes to us to have true ideas; that, therefore, is the meaning of truth, for it is all that truth is known-as. This thesis is what I have to defend. The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its *verification*. Its validity is the process of its *valid-ation*. (Ibid., Lecture VI)

Note how easy it is to interpret such ideas in the “vulgar” way. Truth “happens” to an idea when that idea leads to useful results in one’s life – such as one’s becoming rich and powerful, for instance. However, it should be obvious that, no matter how careless James’s formulations were, such crude pragmatism was never James’s own view. He is unclear and controversial, but he is certainly not recommending that we just replace truth with our

wishful thinking or political and economic pursuit of power.¹⁰

Several outstanding James scholars have already shown how nuanced James’s view on truth is – also in the political sphere – so I only need to cite a few readings to emphasize this point. In his discussion of James’s theory of truth, which I find highly pertinent to these concerns (cf. also Pihlström 2013, chapter 4), Jose Medina (2010) defends Jamesian pluralism in a politically relevant manner: in ethics and politics, we can never reach an “absolute” conception of what is universally best for human beings and societies, but different suggestions, opinions, experiential perspectives, and interests must have their say – that is, must be acknowledged (though this is not Medina’s exact terminology). A conception of political solidarity can, then, be grounded in Jamesian ideas about truth. James maintains not only pluralism and individualism but also (on Medina’s reading) a *relational* conception of individual identities: nothing exists in a self-sustained manner but only as parts of networks of mutual interdependence. Such a metaphysics of diversity and relationality needs, furthermore, the concept of acknowledgment: we must sincerely (which is not to say uncritically) respond to even those perspectives on life that we find alien or even repulsive, though this is much more easily said than it is done. While James’s pluralism and relationalism are, according to Medina, elements of a metaphysical view according to which everything must be understood in relation to other things, in terms of ubiquitous relationality, they are irreducibly ethical and political ideas, applying even to the reality of the (epistemic, ethical, political) self.

¹⁰ Note also that James is here speaking about the potential consequences of our ideas or beliefs (actually) “being true”, not about the consequences of their being believed to be true. The passage just quoted is therefore one of the more realistic formulations of the pragmatic conception of truth by James, even presupposing his commitment to something like (a minimalist version of) the correspondence theory truth. Generally, however, James is much less clear than Peirce in formulating his pragmatism as a principle concerning not just the consequences of the truth of our ideas but of those ideas being believed or entertained by us (cf. Pihlström 2015).

It is precisely in this context that we should, according to Medina, appreciate James's theory of truth. True beliefs are, as James says, "good to live by"; when maintaining a belief, any belief, we are responsible for its consequences in our lives, and in those of others. The pragmatic "theory" of truth – which should not be called a "theory", in order to avoid seeing it as a rival to, say, the "correspondence theory" – invokes not only, say, the satisfactory or agreeable consequences of true beliefs but also ethical ideas such as solidarity and justice in terms of which the functionality of our beliefs ought to be measured. Therefore, we may say that truth (in the pragmatic sense), truthfulness, and the acknowledgment of otherness are conceptually tied to each other in James's pragmatism. One cannot genuinely pursue truth in the Jamesian sense unless one also acknowledges, or at least truthfully seeks to acknowledge, others' perspectives on reality – indeed, the uniqueness of such individual perspectives, and their potentiality of opening up genuine novelties. If we take this articulation of Jamesian pragmatic truth seriously, then we can immediately see how vulgar a "Trumpist" version of pragmatism is. Trump's views may in some sense be "satisfactory" or "agreeable" for him and his opportunistic (or cynical and disillusioned) supporters, but they can hardly be said to truly acknowledge other perspectives on the world, let alone to honor any commitment to pursuing the truth independently of personal or political benefit.

The pragmatist account of truth is also connected with James's moral philosophy by Sarin Marchetti (2015, 33), one of the most perceptive recent commentators of James. It is easy for us to agree with his general claim that pragmatism as a philosophical method also incorporates a fundamentally ethical intention based on a conception of ethics as self-transformation and –cultivation.¹¹ He maintains that James is not primarily advance-

ing a theory of truth but "using pragmatism to unstuff our views on truth and put them to work" (ibid., 169). We are invited to rethink the meaning of truth "in our lives", and James is therefore offering us a "genealogical phenomenology" of this concept (ibid., 177).¹² Truth is something that dynamically functions in our ethical world-engagement, not a static relation between our beliefs (which are not static, either, but dynamically developing habits of action) and an allegedly independent external world. The concept of truth is also interestingly entangled with James's important but often neglected metaphor of blindness: "We are morally blind when we fail to see how the sources of truth are nested in the very meaning those experiences have for those who have them [...]" – and the most serious blindness is our losing touch "with the meaning of our own truths and experiences" (ibid., 202, 205).¹³

The commentators I have briefly cited (Medina and Marchetti) are of course only individual voices among many. They nevertheless help us note a certain approach to Jamesian truth that is inherently ethical. I have tried to capture this basic idea by using the concept of truthfulness, but that is obviously only one possible concept that can be used here. Regarding the active union of truth and ethics, I find myself mostly in agreement with Medina's and Marchetti's readings (without going into any great detail here).¹⁴ I will now have to move on to the worry that James's pragmatist account of truth

– are pragmatically "true" or "false" in so far forth as they put us in touch with ethically significant experiences. The truth of a metaphysical view can be assessed by means of the pragmatic criterion of its ability to open us to what James (1897) called "the cries of the wounded" (see also Kivistö and Pihlström 2016, chapter 5; Pihlström 2020). It is right here, in a pragmatist ethically structured metaphysics, that truth, in James's memorable phrase, "happens to an idea".

¹² Pragmatism, James maintains (according to Marchetti), "transforms the absolutely empty notion of correspondence in a rich and active relationship between our truths and the way in which we can entertain them and thus engage the world" (Marchetti 2015, 184). For a non-empty correspondence theory, see, however, e.g., Niiniluoto 1999.

¹³ As Marchetti notes, James sees the "possibility of overcoming" such blindness as a "transformation of the self" (Marchetti 2015, 206). The relevant reference here is James 1983 [1899]; see also Pihlström 2019.

¹⁴ See Pihlström 2008, 2013, 2020 for my more comprehensive discussions of James's pragmatism.

¹¹ In addition to being an application of the "pragmatic method", we might say that in a sense the Jamesian approach to *metaphysics* is an application of the pragmatist conception of truth. On James (1975 [1907]) as engaging in a pragmatically shaped metaphysical inquiry (rather than rejecting metaphysics altogether), see, e.g., Pihlström 2009, 2013. Our ideas expressed or expressible by means of concepts like substance, God, freedom, etc. – our metaphysical views and commitments

might be easily developed into a direction that turns problematic, especially in our “post-truth” era.

Rorty (on Orwell) on Truth

Rorty is famous for a version of pragmatism advocating what he calls *ethnocentrism* (“we have to start from where we are”, acknowledging our historical contingency) and *antirepresentationalism* (which rejects any representational relations between language and reality, claiming that the traditional problems of realism and skepticism, among others, only arise in the context of representationalism). Here we cannot deal with the development of Rorty’s pragmatism, or its relation to truth, since his early work in the 1960s and 1970s to his late proposals to replace systematic philosophy by “cultural politics”.¹⁵ I will focus on a specific strand of Rorty’s pragmatism, relevant (I suppose) to the worries about post-factualism raised in this paper.

As was suggested earlier (and as other James commentators like Marchetti have emphasized), the concept of truth, far from being restricted to the oft-ridiculed “pragmatist theory of truth”, is fundamentally important in James’s moral thought in general. It is in this context that we will now expand our horizon from James’s pragmatism to Rorty’s neopragmatism and especially to Rorty’s treatment of George Orwell. While discussions of Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) have often primarily dealt with Winston, the main protagonist of the novel, Rorty’s treatment of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* finds O’Brien, the Party torturer, the most important character of the novel.¹⁶

In his essay on Orwell, “The Last Intellectual in Europe” (in Rorty 1989), Rorty rejects the standard realistic reading of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, according to which the

book defends an objective notion of truth in the context of a penetrating moral critique of the horrible and humiliating way in which Winston is made to believe that two plus two equals five. Consistently with his well-known position (if it can be regarded as a philosophical “position” at all), Rorty (*ibid.*, 173) denies that “there are any plain moral facts out there in the world, [...] any truths independent of language, [or] any neutral ground on which to stand and argue that either torture or kindness are preferable to the other”. Orwell’s significance lies in a novel redescription of what is possible: he convinced us that “nothing in the nature of truth, or man, or history” will block the conceivable scenario that “the same developments which had made human equality technically possible might make endless slavery possible” (*ibid.*, 175). Hence, O’Brien, the “Party intellectual”, is Orwell’s key invention, and Orwell, crucially, offers no answer to O’Brien’s position: “He does not view O’Brien as crazy, misguided, seduced by a mistaken theory, or blind to the moral facts. He simply views him as *dangerous* and as *possible*.” (*Ibid.*, 176.)

The key idea here, according to Rorty, is that truth as such does not matter: “[...] what matters is your ability to talk to other people about what seems to you true, not what is in fact true” (*ibid.*).¹⁷ In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston’s self is destroyed as he is made to believe that two plus two equals five – and to utter “Do it to Julia!” when faced with his worst fear, the rats. Rorty points out that this is something he “could not utter sincerely and still be able to put himself back together” (*ibid.*, 179). The notion of sincerity is highly central here, especially as it obviously establishes a link to the key idea of truthfulness that I above claimed to find at the heart of James’s account of truth.

A basic distinction between truth and falsity is, however, necessary for the concepts of sincerity and truthfulness. Insofar as Rorty’s pragmatism carries Jamesian pragmatism into a certain extreme, one is left wondering

¹⁵ Again, I cannot review the development of the complex views of a major philosopher like Rorty here (any more than in the case of James). For Rorty’s pragmatism as an account of truth as what our “cultural peers” let us say, see Rorty 1979; for his anti-representationalist understanding of pragmatism, see Rorty 1991; and for philosophy as cultural politics, see Rorty 2007.

¹⁶ The discussion here is partly based on the chapter on James, Rorty, and Orwell in Kivistö and Pihlström 2016.

¹⁷ This is followed by the well-known Rortyan one-liner, “If we take care of freedom, truth can take care of itself.” (Rorty 1989, 176.)

whether there is any way to stop on the slippery slope arguably leading from James to Rorty (and eventually bringing in, with horror, first post-factualists like Trump and then Orwell's O'Brien). Reality must still be contrasted with something like unreality, while truth and truthfulness must be opposed not only to falsity but also to lying and self-deception, and possibly other kinds of loss of sincerity and truthfulness that may follow from the collapse of the truth vs. falsity distinction itself. What we find here is, as we may say, the problem of realism in its existential dimensions. This is, arguably, the core pragmatic meaning of the problem of realism and truth, and therefore the very possibility of ethical truthfulness is a key pragmatist issue to be dealt with, not just marginal to the Jamesian-Rortyan engagement with truth.

By destroying Winston's capacity for sincerely uttering something and still being able to "put himself back together", O'Brien leads us to imagine the possibility of evil that renders truthfulness itself impossible. This will then collapse the Jamesian pragmatist conception of truth as well, given that it starts from a kind of pragmatic softening of the notion of objective truth culminating in the "truth happens to an idea" view that we may find characteristic of James's ethically grounded metaphysics, and his pragmatism generally.

While James only resisted certain metaphysically realistic forms of metaphysics, especially Hegelian monistic absolute idealism (and corresponding metaphysical realisms), without thereby abandoning metaphysics altogether (see Pihlström 2008, 2009, 2015), Rorty's reading of Orwell is deeply based on his rejection of *all* forms of metaphysics. According to Rorty, Orwell is urging us that "whether our future rulers are more like O'Brien or more like J. S. Mill does not depend [...] on deep facts about human nature" or on any "large necessary truths about human nature and its relation to truth and justice" but on "a lot of small contingent facts" (Rorty 1989, 187–188). Now, this is hard to deny; various minor contingent facts have enormous influence on how our world and societies develop. This is also a very important message of Rortyan *ironism* in general: our firmest moral com-

mitments, our "final vocabularies", are historically contingent. But the worry is that if we give up (even pragmatically rearticulated) objective truth entirely, we will end up giving up the very possibility of sincerity, too, and that is something we need for resisting the future of all possible O'Briens' Newspeak seeking to justify evil, suffering, and torture.

It is, indeed, one thing to accept, reasonably, historical contingency and to reject overblown metaphysics of "deep facts about human nature"; it is quite another matter to give up even a minimal pragmatic sense of objective truth required not only for truthfulness and sincerity but for their very possibility (and, hence, for the possibility of insincerity as well, because insincerity is possible only insofar as sincerity is possible, and vice versa), that is, the very possibility of keeping in touch with "the meaning of our own truths and experiences" (quoting Marchetti's apt phrase again).

I am not claiming that Rorty (or James) is wrong, or has a mistaken conception of truth (or facts, or history), but that *if* Rorty is right (whatever it means to say this, given the threatening disappearance, in his neopragmatism, of the distinction between being right and being regarded as being right by one's cultural peers), then we may be in a bigger trouble regarding the place of truth in our lives than we may have naively believed. We may, then, lack sufficient philosophical resources for dealing with people like Trump. Jamesian pragmatism seems to take the correct, indeed vital, step toward integrating the ethically and existentially normative notion of truthfulness into the pragmatist account of truth itself, as we briefly saw. However, insofar as this kind of pragmatism develops into something like Rorty's neopragmatism, which lets the notion of truth drop out as unimportant, the end result is not only an insightful emphasis on historical contingency¹⁸ but also the possible fragmentation of truthfulness itself, which seems to depend on a relatively robust distinction between truth and falsity.

¹⁸ As well as the role of literature in showing us fascinating, and dangerous, contingent possibilities (see also the other relevant essays in Rorty 1989; cf. Conant 2000).

What this shows is a quasi-Rortyan point: Orwell is more important, and O'Brien more dangerous, than we might have thought; and so is Trump (and therefore, furthermore, Rorty's version of pragmatism as an intermediary stage between James and full-blow post-factualism is also more important than many pragmatism scholars might want to admit). But this also shows that Rorty in effect deprives us of the linguistic, literary, and philosophical resources that we might have seen Orwell as equipping us with.

This criticism of Rorty (which is, implicitly, a qualified criticism of Jamesian pragmatism, though *not* a proposal to give it up but to carefully rethink its lasting value, being aware of its potential problems) comes close to James Conant's (2000) devastating attack on Rorty's reading of Orwell.¹⁹ According to Conant, Rorty is committed to (indeed, obsessed by) the same philosophical prejudices as his metaphysically realist opponents in claiming that notions such as objectivity, facts, or historical truth are not in the focus of Orwell's worries. Conant argues that Rorty fails to see that there is an "ordinary" way of using these and related concepts that need not be construed either metaphysically realistically or antirealistically (or in a Rortyan deflated manner); hence, "when our intellectual options are confined to a forced choice between Realist and Rortian theses [...] we are unable to recover the thoughts Orwell sought to express [...]" (ibid., 279–280). Conant obviously does not dispute Rorty's (or Orwell's) emphasis on historical contingency, but he argues that in a perfectly ordinary sense, "the demise of 'the possibility of truth'" could still be an extremely scary scenario (ibid., 285–286). In Conant's view, Orwell's novel is primarily "about the possibility of a state of affairs in which the concept of objective truth has faded as far out of someone's world as it conceivably can" (ibid.,

297),²⁰ and therefore it is directly relevant to our concerns here.

Conant contests in a thoroughgoing manner Rorty's deflated reading of O'Brien's character as someone who *simply* enjoys torturing Winston and seeks to "break him" for no particular reason (see *ibid.*, especially 290). Truth and truthfulness do, he maintains, occupy a central place in Orwell's analysis of what is really frightening in totalitarianism; in this way, the debate between Rorty and Conant on these notions in the context of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* directly continues the general pragmatist struggle with truth and truthfulness.²¹ O'Brien's "unqualified denial of the idea that (what Orwell calls) 'the concept of objective truth' has application to the past" (ibid., 308) can be directly applied to Jamesian sincerity and truthfulness. It must be possible for the Jamesian pragmatist to argue that O'Brien has given up any ethical commitment to truthfulness through his arbitrary reduction of truth to the opinion of the Party. But then, *pace* Rorty, freedom and the availability of the concept of objective truth are inseparable:

What [Orwell's] novel aims to make manifest is that if reality control and doublethink were ever to be practiced on a systematic scale, the possibility of an individual speaking the truth and the possibility of an individual controlling her own mind would begin simultaneously to fade out of the world. The preservation of freedom and the preservation of truth represent a single indivisible task for Orwell – a task common to literature and politics. (Ibid., 310)

²⁰ He also says the novel "is perhaps as close as we can come to contemplating in imagination the implications of the adoption of a resolutely Rortian conception of objectivity (that is, a conception in which the concept of objectivity is exhausted by that of solidarity)" (Conant 2000, 307). This formulation is better than the one quoted in the main text above because it avoids involving the notion of a state of affairs which might itself be regarded as a remnant of old "Realist" metaphysics.

²¹ Note how different Orwell's views on totalitarianism, at least on Conant's reading, are from Hannah Arendt's well-known ideas, in which the concentration camp is the epitomization of totalitarianism. (See Arendt 1958.) For Orwell, such atrocities are peripheral; hostility to truthfulness is the "really frightening" thing. (Conant 2000, 295.) Note, however, also that Rorty charges Conant of confusing truth with truthfulness (Rorty 2000, 347). Conant says that the "capacity of individuals to assess the truth of claims on their own" threatens "the absolute hegemony of the Party over their minds" (Conant 2000, 299). This is presumably also why populist political movements are willing to cut down education, higher education in particular.

¹⁹ See also Rorty 2000. Conant's essay is, in my view, one of the best critical discussions of Rorty's project in general, by no means restricted to the interpretation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – yet, as it focuses on that book and Rorty's reading of it, it does show us something about the fundamental philosophical relevance of Orwell's novel.

No matter how exactly we should read Orwell and Rorty, this is a fundamental link between freedom and truth, a link also needed to make sense of the very idea of truthfulness in its pragmatist meaning. In particular, the preservation of freedom and truth – the task Conant argues is shared by literature and politics – is inseparably intertwined with the need to fight against “the corruption of language”, which corrupts our concepts and, thus, thought itself (ibid., 313).

In the interest of being fair to Rorty, we can still try to understand the matter, and sketch our response to it, in Rortyan terms. Rorty, famously, rejects the very idea of our being responsible or answerable to any non-human objective reality – traditionally presupposed, he believes, in realist accounts of truth – and emphasizes that we can only be answerable to human audiences.²² This could be analyzed as a relation of acknowledgment: we acknowledge human audiences as our potential rational critics in a way we cannot acknowledge any non-human reality. Thus formulated, Rorty is not very far from Jamesian truthfulness, which involves the continuous challenge of acknowledging others' perspectives on the world (cf. above). However, part of our response to a (relevant) audience is a response to an audience using the concept of objective reality. We have to recognize the relevance of that concept by recognizing the relevant audience. This is a case of what has been called “mediated recognition” (cf. Koskinen 2017, 2019): we recognize objective reality and truth by recognizing the appropriate audience(s) and our responsibility or answerability toward it/them. We acknowledge objective reality itself by being answerable, and recognizing ourselves as being answerable, to an audience (e.g., potential rational critics) that might challenge our views on reality.

Now, the problem here – to recapitulate our worries once more – is that the relevant audience could change in an Orwellian manner. The *use* and (thus) meaning (recalling the Wittgensteinian view that “meaning is

use”) of the concept of objective truth could even be destroyed. Then the kind of mediated recognition alluded to here would no longer work. In some sense there would no longer *be* an audience we would be responsible to anymore. And there would then be no views to have on anything anymore. Rational thought would collapse. In other words, we can recognize each other as using the concept of an objective reality (and a related concept of truth), and thereby acknowledge each other and ourselves as being normatively – truthfully – committed to pursuing objective truth about reality – but only until O'Brien gets us. Then that commitment collapses, and so does our acknowledgment of each other as users of the notion of truth – and, hence, of communicating agents. So does, then, our commitment to sincerity and truthfulness, which are needed for moral and political seriousness.

Rorty then seems to be wrong about the idea that defending freedom would be sufficient for defending truth. It is certainly necessary but hardly sufficient. In particular, negative freedom from external constraints is not enough: what is needed is positive freedom and responsibility, hence commitment to truth-seeking, something that the Jamesian integration of truth with truthfulness succeeds in articulating. There certainly is a kind of unrestricted freedom in American politics, but truth apparently has not been able to take care of itself. Moreover, Rorty (1989, 188) himself needs to use the concept of truth – and related concepts such as the ones of fact and reality – when he reminds us that “[w]hat our future rulers will be like will not be determined by any large necessary truths about human nature and its relation to truth and justice, but by a lot of small contingent facts”.

Interestingly, Rorty also maintains the following: “If we are ironic enough about our final vocabularies, and curious enough about everyone else's, we do not have to worry about whether we are in direct contact with moral reality, or whether we are blinded by ideology, or whether we are being weakly 'relativistic'” (Ibid., 176–177) This is, indeed, a very big “if”. We need to worry

²² This theme runs through Rorty's entire thought, but *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, the book containing the Orwell essay, is one of its best articulations.

about these matters precisely because we can never be sure we are able to be “ironic enough” and “curious enough”. These attitudes themselves require a commitment to truthfulness. Our need to maintain a pragmatic conception of truth more realistic than Rorty’s can thus be seen to be based on Jamesian pragmatic reasons. Moreover, this need also emerges as a result of our taking seriously a crucial Rortyan lesson about the fundamental contingency of even our most basic conceptual commitments. It is precisely due to the fragility of truth – the possibility that O’Brien might arrive, as Orwell warns us, destroying our ability of distinguishing between truth and falsity – that we must cherish our Jamesian ability of responding, with ethical sincerity and truthfulness, to others’ perspectives along with our own continuous commitment to pursuing the truth.

Conclusion: Truth, Pluralism, and Critical Philosophy

In conclusion, and in order to further emphasize the political significance of the issue, let me very briefly compare these pragmatist elaborations on our need to be committed to the pursuit of truth – and the related integration of truth and truthfulness – to Hannah Arendt’s views on truth (and Richard Bernstein’s useful reading of Arendt), especially as they are articulated in Arendt’s “Truth and Politics”, an essay originally published in 1967 (see Arendt 2003).

Arendt not only offered us an analysis of totalitarianism of lasting relevance and an equally lasting defense of human spontaneity in its ethical and political dimensions but also an ever-timelier account of the significance of the concept of truth. In “Truth and Politics”, she carefully examines the often-antagonistic relation between truthfulness and political action, drawing attention to deliberate lying as a political force – and one may argue that her views are, for well-known reasons, even more relevant today than they were half a century ago (see also Bernstein 2018, 67–83). She reminds us that while truth itself is “powerless”, it is also *irreplaceable*; political force, persuasion, or violence cannot substitute it, and

“[t]o look upon politics from the perspective of truth [...] means to take one’s stand outside the political realm”, from “the standpoint of the truth-teller” (Arendt 2003, 570). This kind of *critical distance* necessary for an adequate understanding of the relation between truth and politics requires the age-old project of “disinterested pursuit of truth” (ibid., 573). It is, of course, this very project that the populist culture that brings into power people like Trump seeks to suppress.

Is such disinterestedness available in pragmatism? Isn’t pragmatism, especially the Jamesian version of pragmatism we are preoccupied with here (let alone the Rortyan one), inevitably “interest-driven”, and doesn’t its individualism therefore open the doors for political manipulation and disrespect for truth? Why, more generally, is the concept of truth important for a sound appreciation of pragmatic pluralism and human diversity, after all, and why exactly should we aim at a pragmatist articulation of this concept in the first place?

A key to this issue is *reflexivity*: pragmatism – better than other approaches, I believe – is able to acknowledge the meta-level “interests” guiding our pursuit of disinterestedness itself. We pragmatically *need* a concept of truth not serving any particular need or interest. Thus, we also pragmatically need a deep pluralism (but not relativism) about truth. The reflection we are engaging in here, with the help of Arendt as well as James and Rorty, is in a crucial sense internal to pragmatism. We are asking what kind of purposes our different philosophical conceptualizations of truth, including the traditional realist (correspondence) one and the more comprehensive pragmatist one, are able to serve. In this sense, Jamesian pragmatism, I would like to suggest, “wins” at the meta-level. Its potential collapse to Trumpist populism or O’Brien’s destruction of truth is definitely a threat to be taken very seriously – especially if one is willing to take seriously Rorty’s developments of Jamesian (and Deweyan) pragmatism – but there is no reason to believe that a slide down the slippery slope would be unavoidable. By drawing attention to the continuous meta-level critical (and self-critical) inquiry into our own

commitments, and the truthful commitment to ameliorate our practices of truth (in science, ethics, politics, and everywhere else as well), we should be able to stop that slide. But where exactly it can be stopped is a question that needs to be asked again and again in varying historical and cultural contexts.

In the end, I think, we should defend a pragmatically pluralistic view about truth itself:²³ there are many truths about truth, including realism and the related correspondence theory of truth, to be defended *within* pragmatism. These truths about truth are context-embedded; for instance, we may need a realist correspondence-theoretical account of truth within a political discourse opposing Trump (and O'Brien), but we may, and in my view do, need a pragmatist account within a more purely academic discourse on truth.²⁴ A kind of pragmatic realism is certainly worth striving for: in the "post-factual" era of powerful populists, we should not too much emphasize the pragmatic "plasticity" of truth but, rather, the objectivity and realism inherent even in the Jamesian pragmatic conception of truth.²⁵ The

"truth" about these issues is itself a pragmatic, contextual matter. This, I would like to suggest, is how the pragmatic conception of truth operates at the meta-level. Far from encouraging us to slide down to irresponsible relativism or populism, Jamesian pragmatism urges us to take responsibility for our practice-laden employments of the concept of truth within our everyday, scientific, ethical, political, and religious lives (and any other sectors of human life for that matter). This profoundly ethical nature of truth, integrated with truthfulness, is something that perhaps only a sufficiently deeply pragmatic account of truth can fully accommodate.

Even so, there are further reflexive questions that may be posed: can we really say, for instance, that philosophical theories (about truth, or about anything else), such as pragmatism, are themselves true or false, and in what sense exactly (e.g., in a pragmatist sense)?²⁶ Is it sufficient for a pragmatist to maintain that pragmatism itself is pragmatically true? This is related to the question how far a form of *pragmatic naturalism* can be taken in metaphilosophical reflections. According to philosophical naturalists, even realism may be an empirical theory about science and truth. Whatever kind of naturalism is available to the pragmatist, it should at least be self-consciously *non-reductive*, and thus the pragmatic naturalist must constantly face the challenge that it may be problematic to use the concept of truth in the same sense when applied to philosophical theories as it is used when applied to, say, scientific theories. I must leave this issue open here.

In any event, something like *critical philosophy* is vitally needed to stop the slide along the slippery slope from James via Rorty to Orwell's O'Brien (cf. also Skow-

²³ For alethic pluralism (though in a form not based on pragmatism), see, e.g., Lynch 2009. In fact Wittgenstein (1980, 75) once suggested that we should not choose between the classical "theories" of truth, as all of them contain valuable insights into truth, and none of them is the whole truth about truth.

²⁴ In principle, Rorty's neopragmatism may offer us valuable resources for switching between different context or "vocabularies" and for developing a self-critically ironic attitude to them, even the most "final" ones. Therefore, my assessment of here is not at all purely negative, though I do think we should be concerned with its potential dangers. Rorty himself was laudably active in promoting pragmatism in the former communist East-European countries that opened up to Western ideas of freedom and democracy in the late 1980s and the 1990s – and the emergence of the Central European Pragmatist Forum is indeed part of this history, with a lot of pragmatism-related activities developing in countries like Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The fact that the current situation in Europe does not look equally promising regarding, say, the development Deweyan democracy is of course one of the background factors that need to be taken seriously by pragmatists now critically inquiring into the nature of truth.

²⁵ Critics of pragmatism also need to be constantly reminded that James himself repeatedly emphasized that he is denying neither the "standing reality" external to us nor the idea of truth as a relation of "agreement" between our ideas and that reality; rather, James's investigations of truth are attempts to tell us what these notions can be taken to pragmatically mean – i.e., what they are "known as" in terms of human experience. Another matter that needs further elucidation is the fact that

the context we operate within are constantly in flux; they cannot be just naively taken as self-standing fixed realities. Our ways of using the concept of truth themselves constantly shape the contexts within which we may employ different discourses on truth. This is a crucial element of the kind of pragmatic reflexivity emphasized above. On pragmatist (ontological) contextuality and reflexivity, see also Pihlström 2009, 2015.

²⁶ This, in any case, is hardly a problem just for the pragmatist. The correspondence-theoretician might also have to hold, equally reflexively, that the correspondence theory of truth corresponds to reality (or is made true by the objective facts about what truth is, or something along these lines).

ronski and Pihlström 2019). Critical philosophy is both pragmatist and Kantian in its willingness to take seriously the reflexive questions that haunt us whenever we use the notion of truth or any other concept, we are normatively committed to in the very activities of using it. In quasi-Kantian terms, I would like to phrase my main result as follows: just like Kant saw empirical realism as possible only on the assumption of transcendental idealism, a reasonable form of realism in our contemporary society (and academia) not only needs to embrace a qualified (correspondence) account of objective truth but must at the meta-level be grounded in transcendental pragmatism that makes such realism and objectivity possible.²⁷

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