

Getting to post-post-truth

Catherine Legg

Deakin University

c.legg@deakin.edu.au

Abstract

This piece ponders how teachers might best approach the issue of truth in the classroom, now that traditional models of truth-transmission have been problematised by what social epistemologist Steven Fuller calls ‘second-order awareness’—the apparent social construction of any given ‘truth-game’. Drawing on Charles Peirce’s original theorisation of the ‘community of inquiry’ at the birth of pragmatist philosophy, I argue that, as educators our best response to the recent ‘post-truth’ phenomenon is to pay less attention to our theories, in which we show up to truth-sceptics as experts, and more attention to our own epistemic practices, in which we show up to truth-sceptics as fellow persons. In any real-world encounter between persons, genuine listening and learning can offer practical proof that truth is not dead, notwithstanding the dire theoretical generalisations of sceptics, nihilists and relativists. I conclude by reflecting on some ways I’ve implemented these insights in developing a new first-year undergraduate Critical Thinking unit at my own university.

Keywords

community of inquiry, education, Peirce, post-truth, pragmatism, truth

1. Introduction

In the not-too-distant past, truth was a bedrock concept in schools. Schools’ whole reason for being was in large part understood to be passing on key truths to young people. Moreover, this educative function was understood as positioned in a broader cultural context in which truth also played a vital function. As two noted philosophers of education have powerfully stated, truth was understood to be ‘part of the cultural infrastructure within which we exist and make sense of the world’, and ‘one of a handful of abstract concepts that serve as a kind of intellectual scaffolding in our civilization’ (Peters et al. 2018, p. 3). Yet in the latter half of the 20th century, these matters became considerably more complex and contested in the educational sector. A wealth of new theory emerged in the universities—variously dubbed ‘critical’, ‘postmodernist’ and ‘constructivist’—which challenged the stability, the univocity,

and even the existence of truth. The exact reasons for this shift are complex, and repay deep study, but some useful historiographical hints are provided by two Italian philosophers who note how the unprecedented trauma in Europe caused by World War II shook not merely political but also epistemological foundations in the West:

Pushed by a distrust of 'the truth' and references to 'reality' that were features of totalitarian experiences and authoritative governments in the twentieth century, researchers in these fields pointed out the inevitable lies and masks of those political experiments, refusing to acknowledge the traditionally assumed relationship between reality, truth, and communication that ended up with those experiences. (Gili & Maddalena 2022, para. 1)

This loosening of previous conceptions of truth as omnipresent, univocal and stable was initially cast as a progressive anti-authoritarianism of the mind. So characterised, the shift naturally flowed into schools, where many conscientious teachers began to encourage their most capable students not to spend their entire schooling simply 'learning truths', but also to ask critical questions about 'processes of truth-formation', both in themselves and wider society. Social epistemologist Steven Fuller has introduced a useful concept to describe this more reflexive, allegedly deeper, level of understanding: 'second-order awareness'. At such a level of awareness, Fuller writes, one 'not only plays a language game but also knows that the game is only one of many that she might be playing'. This contrasts with 'first-order awareness', which is the belief (mistaken, Fuller suggests) that 'there is ultimately only one [truth] game in town' (Fuller 2018a, p. 16). We will return to this provocative epistemological distinction below.

Not too long after this shift in the educational space, our broader, cultural concept of truth suffered something of an earthquake, in what is now often referred to as the 'post-truth' phenomenon (and here we might ask whether the connection between these two shifts is *post hoc* or *propter hoc*, which is an interesting question.) The exact nature of the post-truth phenomenon will be described more fully below (Section 3), but it is widely held to pose serious risks for our democracy and well-being. So the question this paper addresses is the following. 'What are the responsibilities of schools now, vis-a-vis the concept of truth?' Do schools have a responsibility to help repair our original cultural infrastructure around this concept? If so, should we simply attempt to reinstall the old idea? (For one typical attempt, see Hobbs 2017). But what

if it has been too thoroughly deconstructed? Again, Gili and Maddalena nicely summarise the dilemma:

[T]he searing critiques ... advanced in the last century are blocking an easy road back. A simple return to ... the view that communication reflects physical and social reality is now difficult both theoretically and practically. What kind of realism is possible now? (Gili & Maddalena, 2022, para. 3)

I am moved to publish my own thoughts on this topic for a number of reasons. Firstly, I have a long-standing philosophical orientation towards American pragmatism, which differs from contemporary mainstream philosophy in explicating truth *more operationally than metaphysically*. In Section 8, I will argue that this approach is particularly helpful at the present time. Specifically, the founder of pragmatism, Charles Peirce, effectively defined truth as that which is produced by the now well-known notion of a ‘community of inquiry’. Although he did not use this exact phrase, he taught that ‘the very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of COMMUNITY, without defined limits, and capable of an indefinite increase of knowledge’ (CP 5.311, original emphasis), and such teachings inspired later pragmatist philosophers.¹ This socialised understanding of epistemology gives rise to a future-directed, ‘limit concept of truth’, which I have previously explored in depth (Legg 2014). The central sections of this paper (5 and 6) explicate this Peircean teaching as I understand it. I will address a long-standing dispute within pragmatist philosophy about whether operationalising the concept of truth undermines its reality, which pits Peirce against influential neo-pragmatist Richard Rorty, and social epistemologist Steven Fuller, both of whom make this assumption in some form. I will argue that a more realist Peircean pragmatist interpretation of truth—which understands truth to be independent in principle from human practices of knowledge-formation—is both possible and preferable.

¹ Maughn Gregory credits philosophers of education Matthew Lipman and Ann Sharp with coining and launching the term ‘community of inquiry’ in the late 1970s, as they developed the ‘philosophy for children’ movement around building philosophical communities of inquiry in the classroom (Gregory 2022; Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan 1977; Sharp 1987). It’s worth noting that there has been discussion concerning to what degree the goals and practice of such pedagogical communities of inquiry match the working research communities that Peirce took as his ideal (e.g. Burgh 2009). Meanwhile, Philip Cam explores how a great deal of intermediate conceptual work between Peirce’s understanding of inquiry, and Lipman and Sharp’s Philosophy for Children movement, was done in the first half of the 20th century by John Dewey (Cam 2011).

Secondly, when the so-called ‘post-truth moment’ arrived in 2016, I was eager to respond with a Peircean pragmatist diagnosis of the problem, so I wrote a book chapter for a collection edited by philosophers of education (Legg 2018). Sections 7 and 8 of this paper draw on this piece, in which I argue that the epistemic challenges of our populist and digital age should be understood not as a ‘post-’ so much as a ‘pre-truth’ moment, as they demonstrate how human societies require certain shared assumptions and social infrastructure to even reach the starting line of inquiry. This diagnosis leads me to draw connections with an insightful philosophical analysis of another ‘pre-truth moment’. Charles Griswold, in an article exploring why Plato wrote philosophy in dialogue form, argues that the genre is no mere stylistic ornament—rather, it constitutes a tactical strategy in a fundamental quest to delineate philosophy, understood as ‘reason-giving as such’, from the realm of mere opinion. Griswold explains how reason-giving as such cannot be defended theoretically without begging the question against those who reject reason-giving as such, but it can be operationalised and role-modelled through dramatic portrayals of people who are shown freely choosing to think and learn—or not.

This operationalised understanding, I suggest, points the way to a ‘post-post truth’ epistemology of praxis, which I explore in the final section (9). Here I draw lessons from recent work developing a first year Critical Thinking unit at Deakin University, in which I pondered how I might help to lead students to not merely know what post-truth is (theoretically), but – consistently with pragmatist philosophy – learn concrete strategies to think better in our new digital landscape. In summary, this paper’s narrative through-line consists in exploring epistemology not as doctrine but as praxis. This, I hope, vindicates the title: ‘Getting to [rather than defining or theorising] post-post truth’.

2. Truth as a philosophical topic

Pragmatism is a philosophy which fundamentally orients itself around purpose (Gava 2014). This suggests that as pragmatist philosophers we would do well to begin the current discussion by asking: ‘What is the purpose of reflecting philosophically on truth?’ This question naturally unfolds into the following sub-questions:

- 1) What is a philosophical account of truth meant to achieve?
- 2) What problems are we trying to solve?
- 3) If we were to solve those problems, what would our situation look like on the other side?

To academically-trained minds skilled in framing definitions and drawing out their consequences, it can seem natural to conceptualise the primary goal as determining a criterion of truth, which would look something like this:

Proposition p is true if and only if ... [fill in the blank]

But I shall argue that one of the biggest lessons of pragmatist philosophy is to give up searching for a criterion of truth, as the very idea that such a thing might be found undermines practices which keep our communal truth-seeking process vibrant and healthy. But if we lack a criterion of truth, does that mean that we lack any useful concept of truth? Pragmatist Richard Rorty thought so, and his teachings on this have echoed across the humanities and social sciences. Here are two representative quotes:

... the history of attempts to isolate the True, or the Good ... (a genre founded by Plato) has outlived its usefulness, and we should not ask those questions any more. (Rorty 1982, p. xiv)

... it is true' is not a helpful explanation of why science works, or of why you should share one of my beliefs ... (Rorty 1985, p. 286)

Such influential writings have led pragmatism to be widely understood as a form of anti-realism in which, 'there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones ...' (Rorty 1979, p. 389). Such claims of course characterise the 'critical', 'postmodernist' and 'constructivist' theory referred to in the introduction. However, as noted, I will be arguing that this conclusion does not follow from its frequently assumed premises. But first, let's explore the post-truth phenomenon.

3. A new 'post-truth regime'?

Although the term 'post-truth' suddenly hit the headlines in 2016, it was actually coined back in 1992, when Steve Tesich wrote despairingly in *The Nation* about his fellow Americans' apparent lack of willingness to pick up and use the kinds of information that other humans have fought long and hard to access:

All the dictators up to now have had to work hard at suppressing the truth. We, by our actions, are saying that this is no longer necessary ... In a very fundamental way we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world ... (Tesich 1992, p. 12)

This quote highlights an issue of epistemic motivation which forms a key dimension of the post-truth phenomenon. I will discuss it further below, but for now, back to the term itself. The term achieved popular uptake when media and politics scholar Jayson Harsin influentially launched the term ‘regime of post-truth’ (Harsin 2015) to signal that this epistemic turn is newly systematic and politically potent. He argued that it constitutes a disturbing new development beyond past deceptions in public life, however egregious (such as Watergate).

What we see now is a wealth of politically-motivated agents using sophisticated, data-driven, online manipulations to influence the emotions and motivations—and thus the beliefs and democratic deliberations—of ordinary people. One notable feature of these manipulations is a deliberate, continued repetition of talking-points, even when they have been clearly rebutted by easily verifiable evidence. Infamously, Donald Trump’s inauguration crowd was described by the White House as ‘the largest audience ever to witness an inauguration’, although photographs clearly showed that Barack Obama’s crowd was far larger, and when Trump staffer Kellyanne Conway was shown these photographs, she remarked that the previous statement merely offered ‘alternative facts’ (Journell 2017).

Another notable feature of the post-truth regime is the denigration of expertise, such that a single uneducated person ‘doing their own research’ is treated as intellectually equal to a consensus of highly credentialled epistemic authorities. Thus, during Brexit, UK Justice Secretary Michael Gove famously stated, ‘people in this country have had enough of experts!’ (Mance 2016). Amazingly, it was not treated as a national scandal for such a high-level government official to say something so anti-intellectual, but the statement was widely viewed as both accurate and useful. This anecdote shows how an outburst of populism in first world countries seems to be deeply implicated in the post-truth regime.

Once the COVID-19 pandemic arrived, the regime proved particularly toxic. The denigration of expertise and spreading of misinformation gave life to conspiracy theories about vaccines, leading to widespread vaccine hesitancy and many deaths of unvaccinated people, despite strong scientific evidence of vaccines’ safety and effectiveness being freely and publicly available (Griffin et al. 2021). The number of these preventable deaths was many times higher than the 9/11 bombings in New York City which caused outrage around the world. Yet where was the outrage at this preventable loss of life? In this way, the ‘cultural infrastructure within which we exist and make sense of the world’ seems in need of drastic repair.

4. Populism and post-truth: Cause or remedy?

When we educators examine how this outburst of epistemic populism has helped to create our current post-truth regime, it is very tempting to denigrate the epistemic agents concerned. Surely these people are both stupid and immoral (in Hilary Clinton's immortal phrase: 'a basket of deplorables'), and should be called out as such? But Steven Fuller urges us to re-examine these knee-jerk tendencies to judge and dismiss our fellow humans. We can gain a deeper understanding of the post-truth phenomenon, he argues, if we take an honest look at how and why we have encouraged knowledge-formation to be increasingly concentrated in institutions of 'higher' learning that are open only to the trained and credentialled. He suggests that we have thereby become complicit in establishing elites who gate-keep the power to set terms by which all of society will operate. Fuller (2018a) calls this 'modal power'. He suggests that we educators can be observed gatekeeping modal power when we sanctimoniously preach 'first-order awareness' about truth to our students and the general public, although we ourselves possess 'second-order awareness' of how the matter is more complex and contested:

[P]hilosophers are most confident appealing to 'The Truth' when they are trying to persuade non-philosophers, be they in courtrooms or classrooms. (Fuller 2018b, p. 13)

Philosophers claim to be seekers of the truth but the matter is not quite so straightforward. Another way to see philosophers is as the ultimate experts in a post-truth world. They see 'truth' for what it is: the name of a brand ever in need of a product that everyone is compelled to buy. (Fuller 2018b, p. 13; see also Fuller 2019)

In this way, Fuller suggests that a spokesperson for post-truth may not be an ignorant wrecker. They may simply be the more honest party in a world where we should all avail ourselves of second-order awareness:

[P]ost-truthers aim to weaken the fact/fiction distinction—and hence undermine the moral high ground of truthers—by making it easier to switch between knowledge games, while the truthers aim to strengthen the distinction by making it harder to switch between knowledge games. (Fuller 2018b, p. 25)

On Fuller's analysis, what is at stake here is a social power struggle. But it is well known that such struggles often follow cycles roughly as follows: Institutions are birthed through the identification of a new and compelling social mission, on the basis of which they rise and entrench their power, but precisely as that power is established, corruption inevitably sneaks in over time, such that advancement of the social mission is replaced by corrupt, 'rent-seeking' behaviours. As the institution loses sight of its mission, it loses its social license and gradually weakens, fails and is replaced. Fuller suggests that our current understanding of universities and their truth-seeking mission—which should be understood in a particular sense going back to Plato's Academy—merely constitutes a particularly long-lasting example of this pattern:

[A]cademia is not simply about efficiently producing knowledge as a public good but also about properly crediting the producers. However, these two goals cut against each other, resulting in the rather tortured path-dependent ways in which academics are forced to make their knowledge claims in the professional literature, namely, by citing 'proper' precursors, which is the functional equivalent of paying rent to maintain one's standing in a domain of inquiry. (Fuller 2019, p. 345)

In this sense, Fuller claims, our current post-truth moment can usefully be understood as a process of what he calls 'epistemic trust-busting'—that is to say, a needed democratisation of inquiry, precisely so that more people can 'do their own research', although he concedes that the road to implementing such greater inclusivity will likely be rather fraught with error. His most important message for our discussion is that in the current outburst of populism lies the solution to our post-truth moment, not merely the problem.

Fuller here presents a fascinating analysis which pushes beyond the incredulous epistemic moralising that often happens when we educators publicly discuss post-truth, and yet which feels so ineffective, leaving us heartsick and cynical in our own industry. But in my view, Fuller slides into begging the question for a Machiavellian anti-realism in his final analysis of the relationship between first- and second-order 'knowledge games'. For instance, he claims, 'truth turns out to be whatever is decided by the empowered judge in the case at hand' (Fuller 2018b, p. 16). Whilst this might be the case for the 'first-order' knowledge-games which he delineates as relatively settled and stable, it does not seem a plausible description of the 'second-order' battles concerning modal power which he so compellingly invokes. If the resolution of such battles were really a straightforward exercise of authority, this would seem to collapse

his whole distinction between first-order and second-order knowledge games. By contrast, it seems to me that the really interesting and important question raised by Fuller's distinction is how second-order battles can and should be settled differently to first-order ones. Recognition of the distinctiveness of this question is what ensures that we cannot return to our original ('pre-critical') cultural notion of truth. In regard to this question, Fuller also arguably forecloses debate by parodying the idea that what confers legitimacy on a knowledge claim might be something outside the process of inquiry, a reality to which it 'corresponds', calling it a 'fake philosophy' (Fuller 2018b, pp. 19-20).

But can't we build an epistemology which enables necessary knowledge-game renovation ('epistemic trust-busting'), without corroding the very idea that knowledge building might—at some sufficient level of generality—answer to a univocal ideal of truth? We can show that this goal is achievable if we can develop a concept of inquiry that is sufficiently broad to transcend all specific cultural contexts, free from the fantasy that we might find a criterion of truth, yet in some sense still realist. Here is where I believe Peirce's long-term and future-directed understanding of truth can be of use.

5. Peirce's limit concept of truth: The problem of fixing belief

Truth has a curious feature that distinguishes it from most other properties: a peculiar opacity. Most often, we inspect the thing itself to determine whether it has the property in question. If I want to know whether my mother's car is large, black, steel, or beautiful, I inspect the car. Assuming that the bearers of truth and falsity are propositions (keeping in mind that although this is an assumption in Western philosophy since Aristotle, it is not the only way of looking at the matter—many Platonic and Eastern philosophers will likely demur) note how it is not possible to know simply by inspecting a proposition whether it is true. If that were possible then science would be a much easier activity than it is. Instead, our methods of inquiry are themselves part of what we must correct as our inquiry develops. This is why, at any given time, we can have no criterion of truth. Given this peculiar opacity of truth, it seems difficult to understand how we might set ourselves an explicit goal of seeking the truth. How will we ever know if our goal is met? For this reason, Rorty entitled one of his key papers, 'Is Truth a Goal of Inquiry?' (1995), arguing strongly that the answer is 'No'. In light of these considerations, we might ask, what motivates us to inquire?

In his famous early paper 'The Fixation of Belief', Peirce (1877) offers an original naturalistic answer to this question. We inquire in order to avoid doubt,² understood as a feeling which directly irritates the human organism, like a mental itch that we are driven to scratch. (There are plausible evolutionary explanations why the human species would develop such sensitivities.) Peirce dubs the process of avoiding such irritation 'the fixation of belief', and he notes that the process may be called 'inquiry', although in some cases that designation is 'not very apt'. Peirce claims that there are four basic methods for fixing belief, and he spends the rest of the paper taxonomising and ranking them in overall desirability.

The first method he dubs the 'method of tenacity'. Here you personally decide what you want to believe. You 'constantly reiterate' to yourself that belief, and if anyone offers reasoned argument or evidence against it, you refuse to consider it. We may not like to admit it, but we all use this method in many real-life situations. Peirce (1877) gives an example concerning global free trade that is still strikingly relevant today (p. 7). The method has significant advantages in situations where it is important to be decisive. For example, if you are a soldier in battle then deciding never to doubt the rightness of your country's war might literally keep you alive. Yet this method also creates problems, since human beings are social creatures who naturally influence each other's beliefs. So, Peirce (1877) claims, this method will not eliminate all doubt 'unless we make ourselves hermits' (p. 7).

The second method Peirce dubs the 'method of authority'. Here you get some group of people to fix your belief for you. Human history has not lacked examples of institutions willing to assume such a role. In order to enforce the preferred beliefs, such institutions must take strict measures: 'reiterate them perpetually, and to teach them to the young; having at the same time power to prevent contrary doctrines from being taught, advocated, or expressed' (Peirce 1877, p. 8).³ Peirce notes that this method produces a marvellous stability in society. Yet it too has problems. It never quite lasts. No matter how powerfully a belief-system is enforced, there will always be people who notice a certain randomness in its source which raises genuine doubt in their minds:

² For a thoughtful discussion of the philosophical depth of Peirce's notion of doubt, see Burgh and Thornton (2016).

³ For instance, in 1277 the Bishop of Paris, incensed by philosophical discussions taking place in the local university, banned 217 propositions! These included, That the absolutely impossible cannot be done by God, and (rather amusingly) That the only wise men of the world are philosophers.

These men possess a wider sort of social feeling; they see that men in other countries and in other ages have held to very different doctrines from those which they themselves have been brought up to believe; and they cannot help seeing that it is the mere accident of their having been taught as they have ... that has caused them to believe as they do. (Peirce 1877, p. 8)

The third method Peirce dubs the 'a priori method'. Here people who naturally resist having their opinions fixed arbitrarily by institutions will seek a 'new method of settling opinions ... that shall not only produce an impulse to believe, but shall also decide what proposition it is which is to be believed' (Peirce 1877, p. 9). Through discussion, such people (many of whom have been philosophers) decide on the beliefs that seem to them most 'agreeable to reason'. This method is superior to the previous two, since, for the first time, reasoning is used in deciding what to believe. Yet Peirce (1877) claims that this is actually the worst method of all for fixing belief, as it is extremely vulnerable to the vagaries of individual taste and fashion:

[M]etaphysicians have never come to any fixed agreement, but the pendulum has swung backward and forward between a more material and a more spiritual philosophy, from the earliest times to the latest. (p. 9)

Peirce's fourth and most preferred method he calls the 'method of science'. Peirce here understands 'science' extremely broadly—as any public investigation organised around the hypothesis that there are things which are real and can be known:

Its fundamental hypothesis ... There are Real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them; those Reals affect our senses according to regular laws, and, though our sensations are as different as are our relations to the objects, yet, by taking advantage of the laws of perception, we can ascertain by reasoning how things really and truly are; and any [person], if he have sufficient experience and he reason enough about it, will be led to the one True conclusion. (Peirce 1877, p. 11)

Peirce claims that only under this method does a full-blooded concept of truth emerge, since only in this method does the reappearance of doubt not produce a breakdown in the method itself, but rather is folded back into the method as stimulus for further inquiry. But we've also seen that reality cannot be approached directly, since truth is

opaque to us. How can Peirce reconcile these claims? Not by denying that the concept of truth has any use (as does Rorty), or by denying that it can be used as a yard stick to reduce the profusion of second-order language-games that humans create (as does Fuller). Instead, he ingeniously ‘triangulates’ truth via the community of inquiry. The next section will explore this idea.

6. Peirce’s limit concept of truth: The end of inquiry

Peirce famously defines truth as what lies at the ‘end’ of inquiry. It’s important to note that this is not ‘end’ in the sense of ‘finish’ — some utopian omniscient future time. It is ‘end’ in the teleological sense of aim or goal. Thus, he writes: ‘The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth’ (CP 5.407).⁴ Note how this definition:

links to a *community* – the community of inquiry

links to a *process* – the process of inquiry

links to the *future*

Thus, insofar as we seek the truth, we become part of a ‘truth-seeking entity’ which is indefinitely large, although as individual inquirers we have finite epistemic powers. If we wish to inquire, we must trust in this entity to — potentially and in the future — know more and better than we can ever do as individuals. Peirce calls such trust ‘fallibilism’. No matter how many people agree on a given belief, it’s always possible that someone else will come along later and manage to overturn it. I have previously expressed this idea in the slogan, ‘The solution to poor opinions is more opinions’ (Legg 2018; see also Misak 2018).

Since Peirce’s fallibilism is ‘operationalised’ through his understanding of the community of inquiry as possessing no definite limits, he teaches, like Rorty, that there can be no criterion of truth. However, unlike Rorty, he avoids concluding that we have no concept of truth. Peirce teaches that our concept of truth is not given by any definitional criterion, but by a vast set of finely interwoven practices. He expresses this idea in a strong metaphorical challenge to the many individualistic chains of reasoning produced in so-called ‘modern philosophy’ — which is generally taken to

⁴ This isn’t a *theory* of truth, so much as a claim that this is what we mean by the truth. It’s also worth noting that in Peirce’s later career, he softened his idea of fatedness from ‘will-be’ to ‘would-be’. He then wrote that truth consists in the satisfaction which *would* ultimately be found if inquiry were continued indefinitely. For more discussion on these points, see Legg (2014) and Misak (2018).

begin with the publication of Descartes' *Meditations*, and which was full of such chains. By contrast, Peirce claims that truth-seeking arguments should never rely on 'single links', but must be multiply reinforced to form a kind of giant cable:

Philosophy ought to imitate the successful sciences in its methods, so far as to ... trust rather to the multitude and variety of its arguments than to the conclusiveness of any one. Its reasoning should not form a chain which is no stronger than its weakest link, but a cable whose fibres may be ever so slender, provided they are sufficiently numerous and intimately connected. (CP 5.265)

Such numerous and intimate connections are incarnated in a community's lived practice of inquiring together.

7. A 'pre-truth' regime?

Now that we have explored Peirce's future-directed understanding of truth, we can see how, in his terms, labelling a set of human behaviours 'post-truth' doesn't make much sense. For Peirce, there is no 'after' or 'beyond' truth; truth effectively constitutes the 'end' of all human discourse. Yet there is much in Peirce's framework that we can use to analyse our current epistemic regime.

We have seen that one characteristic and disturbing phenomenon of the regime is a repetition of talking points that seems immune to counter-evidence or logical argument. In some respects, this fits squarely with Peirce's 'method of tenacity'. We saw that a key aspect of this method is repeatedly reiterating to oneself the beliefs that one wishes to hold. Yet the fit is not quite exact, because the post-truth phenomenon seems to be to some degree communal, with mob-like tendencies. In this sense, it might seem to fall under the 'method of authority', and with respect to this method also we saw Peirce noting that repetition of beliefs (this time by relevant institutions) was an important feature. Yet, at the same time, post-truth behaviour seems to lack much of the stability in belief for which Peirce praised the method of authority. The post-truth regime appears to constitute an ever-shifting kaleidoscope of warring perspectives whose allegiances constantly shift for little principled reason. As such, the current regime also seems to resemble Peirce's 'a priori method', in its giving over of belief-formation to taste, fashion and spurious consensus that is largely untried by direct experience with the subject matters in question.

What all of these methods (and, correspondingly, our current regime) would appear to lack is humble deference to an object external to human opinion. This, as we have seen, is the characteristic of Peirce's fourth and final method, the only one which supports a full-blooded concept of truth and falsity. As such, our current situation, in its heady mix of Peirce's first three methods, might be best described as a degeneration to a 'pre-truth' scenario, in which the cultural infrastructure that scaffolds functional communities of inquiry is unwound. As Peirce (877) put the matter, there are 'assumptions involved in the logical question' (p. 5). This analysis allows us to replace the hyperbolic epistemic ruination narrative that surrounds so much debate around the term 'post-truth' (at least for us educators) with a recognition that we are simply backsliding in a process of epistemic development that is extremely longstanding in human history.

8. The dialectical defence of reason-giving as such

If we are regressing to something of a 'pre-truth regime' in the West, and I have given some reasons to suppose that we are, we might do well to look back in history for ideas about how to deal with it. A really useful analysis has been offered by Charles Griswold (1988), in a discussion of why Plato, whose education was by definition 'pre-Academic', chose to write his philosophy in dialogue — 'dialectic' — form.

Griswold argues that, for Plato, dialectic serves no mere ornamental function, but constitutes a tactical strategy in a fundamental quest to delineate philosophy from the realm of mere opinion. Griswold suggests that Plato was confronting a pre-truth regime, against which discursive reasoning (i.e. non-dialectical philosophy) is largely ineffective. In this context, the real debate did not lie between different philosophical positions, which could be argued using established philosophical theories and methods. Philosophy was not yet sufficiently well established for that. Rather, the real debate lay between philosophers and critics of a full-blooded concept of truth, which Griswold (1988) refers to as 'reason-giving as such' (p. 151). These critics were ancient Athenians who, we might say, had had enough of experts. Griswold's important insight is that the argument between reason-giving as such and its enemies cannot be settled non-dialectically. He claims, '[i]t is not possible to successfully attack or defend philosophy directly' (Griswold 1988, p. 154). Why? The philosopher who argues for philosophy begs the question against the critic of reason-giving as such because to argue for or against philosophy is already unavoidably to engage in philosophy. His opponent cannot argue back (against philosophy) without falling into performative contradiction. Interestingly, Rorty (1979) has put the same point, with respect to

attacking rather than defending philosophy, by claiming that ‘edifying’ philosophers such as himself have no philosophical view.

Many ‘pre-truth people’ are wise to this trap, and the hypocrisy inherent in philosophers’ attempts to engage them in reason-giving as such. This arguably accounts for at least some of the ill-feeling that notoriously attended Socrates’ practices of attempting to seduce into argument his fellow-citizens, who frequently described themselves as having been ‘tricked’ or ‘bewitched’ by him. But Griswold (1988) points out that just because a philosophical notion of truth can’t be defended *theoretically*, doesn’t mean it can’t be defended at all. Ironically, he argues, the essentially dialectic character of the encounter between philosophy and the critics of reason-giving as such means that the defence of philosophy cannot be successfully constructed in the absence of fundamental objections to philosophy (p. 156). Once we philosophers wean ourselves from disputes between positions (as question-begging), this potentially opens us to a whole field of possible disputes between persons. These disputes do not beg the question, as philosophy is something that persons may or may not choose to engage in—and of course in Plato’s dialogues we see all manner of dramatic human choices being made in this regard. Thus, Griswold (1988) writes, ‘[t]he origination of philosophy itself out of the medium of opinion is the most comprehensive theme in Plato’s dialogues’ (p. 153). He claims that conversations between persons who do and do not choose to engage in philosophy are always occasional and never conclusive, yet they are vital. Once again, we might remark, ‘the solution to poor opinions is more opinions.’ We have already observed how, in this human life, truth is unavoidably opaque to us. We cannot prove that it even exists—particularly to those profiting by (or ensnared in) a pre-truth regime. But, Griswold notes, we can practice learning ourselves, and we can help and encourage others to learn. The deed of learning is the ultimate proof that truth exists.

So, what is the upshot of all this for our classroom practice with respect to the issue of truth? From the depths of my commitment to pragmatist philosophy, I urge that, in order to confront the current post-truth regime, we educators need to pay less attention to our theories, in which we show up as experts, which—as we have seen—hold little purchase on the sceptics and critics of reason-giving as such. Rather, we need to pay more attention to our own epistemic practices, in which we show up to the sceptics and critics of reason-giving as such as fellow persons. In fact, similar reflections appear to be at least part of what moved Matthew Lipman to create the Philosophy for Children pedagogy. When teaching at Columbia University at the height of the Vietnam War, he was dismayed by what he saw as the poor quality of

argumentation practices both for and against America's contentious involvement, and decided that the problem needed to be addressed by in-depth training in argumentation practices much earlier in students' lives than their college years.

What personal qualities might we seek to model in encounters with the sceptics and critics of reason-giving as such, which often includes our own students? From the previous discussion, we can see that one really useful guiding question is: 'What human behaviours make a community of inquiry function most effectively?' No doubt much could be said on this. However, one obvious example is that we should listen well to those with contrary opinions—even those who promote them most aggressively. In this regard, I tend to agree with Steve Fuller that we educators have slid too far into certain guild-like behaviours, which ensure that we rarely genuinely engage with the many people who live and work entirely outside of our own industry. It would appear that these people have been developing genuine (what Peirce would call 'living') doubts on a number of beliefs that most of us take for granted, such as political liberalism, and the value of higher education. We could see this slippage as an opportunity for us to grow as educators, rather than simply as a giant social emergency (although the situation is not without that dimension). In Fuller's terms, we might say that the necessary epistemic trust-busting only happens when the stakes are sufficiently high—perhaps when our knowledge economy risks bankruptcy.

9. Epistemology as praxis

I would now like to share some of my own journey with these issues in the classroom whilst developing a new first year Critical Thinking unit at Deakin University. It seems to me that much critical thinking pedagogy (which, as this is a common 'service course', tends to get recycled from year to year) is still very Cartesian, insofar as it largely treats argumentation as a logical chain built by an individual mind that is only as strong as its weakest link. This is why a great deal of time and attention in these courses is standardly devoted to teaching logical fallacies and how to spot them. In my view, this approach can easily lead to an unnecessarily self-satisfied, finger-pointing approach to critical thinking in students that, at its worst, has been dubbed 'Fallacy Bingo', and has even been accused of fostering in students a 'Fallacy Fallacy' (Aberdein 2023). A further aspect of a Cartesian approach to critical thinking pedagogy is that its individualism fosters a disconnection from—which easily becomes a distrust of—the contribution of other inquiring minds to one's own thinking. Indeed, extreme scepticism is a notorious feature of Descartes' philosophy.

Once again, Gili and Maddalena (2022) offer original insights into this problem in light of current 'post-truth' concerns:

[S]cepticism, understood as withdrawing from the pretence of truth and systematically suspending belief in all sources, is at the root of the problem of post-truth and therefore unlikely to be its solution ... The sceptical attitude on which critical thinking relies also carries a negative risk for social relationships: it potentially leads to a mistrust of everyone in a situation in which large chunks of reality can only be known indirectly by trusting the narratives and stories of others. (para. 18-20)

By contrast, a Peircean critical thinking pedagogy seeks to show students how to recognise, and contribute to, an epistemic 'cable whose fibres may be ever so slender, provided they are sufficiently numerous and intimately connected'. In this regard the enormous volumes of data available in our digital age can form a resource, rather than merely a source of confusion and disinformation as they are so often characterised. I have sought to operationalise this insight by teaching my critical thinking students some specific practices used by professional fact-checkers when navigating the vast online world. To this end, I invite the students to ask themselves three questions about every online source:

1. Who is behind this information?
2. What is the evidence for their claims?
3. What do other people say about their claims?

Investigation of these questions naturally leads to a new form of reading, known as 'lateral reading'.⁵ This contrasts with the high trust 'vertical reading' which was characteristic of the age of the book, in which publishers worked hard to ensure epistemic quality control. Ironically, such epistemic assurance perhaps rendered educated folk in the modern era overly gullible to the written word as authority, and the resulting 'fetishisation' of texts in the education sector has arguably led to some of our current problems. By contrast, the online lateral reader continually 'skips off' any given resource, in order to search for further resources which speak to its provenance, which are then similarly checked in turn. Despite the truly incredible number of

⁵ For teaching me the concept of lateral reading, and the three key questions which scaffold the process, I'm grateful to the *Crash Course* online learning series sponsored by Stanford University and Google – specifically, lesson 3 of the course entitled 'Navigating Digital Information', elegantly narrated by young adult author Jonathan Green (Mediawise 2019).

resources now existing online, it is remarkable how quickly a skilful practitioner of such cross-checking can gain a clear picture of who should be believed, not by accepting any particular resource without question, so much as by triangulating across the broader landscape of mutual commentary.

As a specific assessment of these skills, lately I have been asking students to perform lateral reading on a YouTube video in which Jordan Petersen states with great confidence, offering no further evidence, 'It is much better for kids to have two parents'.⁶ I ask the students to fact-check this claim and write a short summary of what they discovered, and whether they think the statement is true, only partly true, or false. I have found that many students embrace this assignment with gusto, and many of their answers assuredly reference relevant peer-reviewed scientific literature. Of course, this does not happen when I set questions on fallacy identification.

Since its inception, pragmatist philosophy has taught that we should avoid dogmatism. In the aspirationally post-colonial humanities and social sciences, this message has joined with much-needed reckonings with past epistemic injustices to make us very nervous of the concept of stable and univocal truth. But what exactly is the opposite of dogmatism (1, below)?

1. Dogmatism: I know the truth about X.
- 2.1. Relativism: There are many, incommensurable truths about X.
- 2.2. Nihilism: There is no truth about X.
- 2.3. Scepticism: No-one can know the truth about X.
- 2.4. Fallibilism: Many of us have beliefs about X, but we could be wrong.

Is it 2.1, 2.2 or 2.3—which all appear to lead us towards various forms of post-truth? Or could it just be 2.4, which invites us to continue a shared quest for truth—not merely at Fuller's 'first order' level, of problem-solving within a given scientific paradigm or knowledge-game, but also at his 'second-order' level, of developing new kinds of 'games' which bring into being new kinds of knowledge. The same point is made by Cam (2011):

It has sometimes been suggested that Dewey is a relativist, and occasionally, likewise, the Community of Inquiry has been charged

⁶ <https://youtu.be/zndPSkuyBBk>

with encouraging relativism. Both charges are mistaken and for the same reason. They equate the denial of absolutism with acquiescence in relativism, failing to see that inquiry provides a middle way. (p. 116)

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