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Something Has Cracked: Post-Truth Politics and Richard Rorty's Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism

Joshua Forstenzer
University of Sheffield (UK)

July 2018

Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation
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Letter from the Editor

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This paper is contributed by Joshua Forstenzer, the Vice-Chancellor's Fellow for the Public Benefit of Higher Education at the University of Sheffield and a recent Democracy Visiting Fellow at the Ash Center. His research interests are in political and social philosophy, American Pragmatism, and philosophy of education. With this paper, Forstenzer answers the call of Harvard Kennedy School's academic dean and director of the Ash Center's Democratic Governance Programs, Archon Fung, who has stated, ". . . in this moment, it is critical to work on the challenges to democracy."

Just days after the election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States, specific passages from American philosopher Richard Rorty's 1998 book *Achieving Our Country* were shared thousands of times on social media. Both the *New York Times* and the *Guardian* wrote about Rorty's prophecy and its apparent realization, as within the haze that followed this unexpected victory, Rorty seemed to offer a presciently trenchant analysis of what led to the rise of "strong man" Trump. However, Forstenzer points to Rorty's own potential intellectual responsibility in the unfolding crisis of liberal democracy.

Forstenzer's paper seeks to elucidate the relationship between Rorty's liberal ironism and contemporary post-truth politics. While the paper ultimately concludes that Rorty is not causally responsible and thus not complicit with the rise of post-truth politics, it contends that Rorty's philosophical project bears some intellectual responsibility for the onset of post-truth politics insofar as it took a complacent attitude towards the dangers associated with over-affirming the contingency of our epistemic practices in public debate. In the last instance, this paper argues that Rorty's complacency is a pragmatic failure and thus cuts to the heart of his pragmatism.

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Tony Saich, *Series Editor and Director*
Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation
Harvard Kennedy School

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Joshua Forstenzer
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Contents

> [M]embers of labor unions, and unorganized unskilled workers, will sooner or later realize that their government is not even trying to prevent wages from sinking or to prevent jobs from being exported. Around the same time, they will realize that suburban white-collar workers—themselves desperately afraid of being downsized—are not going to let themselves be taxed to provide social benefits for anyone else.
>
> At that point, something will crack. The nonsuburban electorate will decide that the system has failed and start looking around for a strongman to vote for—someone willing to assure them that, once he is elected, the smug bureaucrats, tricky lawyers, overpaid bond salesmen, and postmodernist professors will no longer be calling the shots.
>
> […]
>
> One thing that is very likely to happen is that the gains made in the past 40 years by black and brown Americans, and by homosexuals, will be wiped out. Jocular contempt for women will come back into fashion. […] All the resentment which badly educated Americans feel about having their manners dictated to them by college graduates will find an outlet.[1]
>
> (Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*)

Introduction

Selecting intellectual heroes is a dangerous business. They are inevitably riddled with vices (small or large, private or public, ethical or epistemic), no matter how great their virtues. Their ideas go in and out of fashion and are subject to human frailty as well as the vagaries of time, since they can be, and often are, misunderstood or made to serve other masters at the hands of their most ardent devotees as well as their staunchest critics. Worse still, the tensions at the heart of their work, on occasion, can detract from the very causes they aimed to serve. Determining how responsible our intellectual heroes are for the unsavory uses and misuses of their thought is a messy, human affair that inevitably demands that we take them off the pedestal we had once erected in our innermost sanctum just for them.

This is the thought that struck me when, just days after the election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States of America, the passages cited above from Richard Rorty's *Achieving Our Country* were shared thousands of times on social media, even leading *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* to write about Rorty's prophecy and its apparent realization.[2] According to such articles, Trump's election was proof that, to use Rorty's phrase, "something had cracked": the rural white working class voted to run back the clock on racial and gender equality because its economic standing had been so eroded by globalization as to lose faith in piecemeal improvements, liberalism, and social harmony, turning instead to a strongman who would sanction unleashing their pent-up frustration in the form of various shades of bigotry. The Left had thus failed to bind the concerns of the white working classes left behind by globalization and rampant economic inequality with those of the rainbow coalition (comprising primarily women, the young, and people of color) that had carried Barack Obama to back-to-back presidential terms.

This account seems to offer a compelling narrative to explain the rise of "Trumpism."[3] It is also, however, a simplistic narrative that ignores the more fundamental question of whether Trump voters were, on the whole, more motivated by economic distress and political disaffection,[4] belief in outright falsehoods,[5] hostility towards Hillary Clinton,[6] undue political influence—foreign (e.g., Russian interference)[7] or domestic (e.g., James Comey's October 28, 2016, letter to Congress)[8]—or a more or less explicit desire to lash out at the very popularity of liberal pluralism, exemplified—if nowhere else—in Obama's two-term presidency and the prospect of electing the first woman in the history of the country to its highest office.[9]

Nevertheless, in *Achieving Our Country,* Rorty tells a story that potentially explains something that remains baffling to many—namely, how someone like Donald Trump could become the president of the United States of America in the twenty-first century. This explanation is, of course, limited by its prophetic and therefore anachronistic nature as well as by the fact that it was couched in an attempt to elucidate a different problem: how the American Left had lost its luster in the second half of the twentieth century. Indeed, according to Rorty, from 1964 onwards, the Left was torn asunder by the emergence of a "cultural Left" steeped in academic sensitivity and focused on advocating for recognition of the historic oppression of people of color, women, and people whom we might now identify as LGBTQ+. This cultural Left "thinks more about stigma than money, more about deep and hidden psychosexual motivations than about shallow and evident greed,"[10]

thus breaking away from what Rorty called a "reformist Left" that was "in the business of piecemeal reform within the framework of a market economy."[11] In his account, while the cultural Left helped to assert the voices of underrepresented communities, it did so by relinquishing what Walt Whitman called "common dreams" along with the American national project of becoming "the world's first classless society."[12] Rorty further suggested that this schism caused the Left as a whole to move away from effectively addressing inequality through national politics because the academic cultural Left focused its attention instead on articulating visions of participatory democracy and theorizing hegemonic oppression.[13] Ultimately, for Rorty, the cultural Left was guilty of engaging in the politics of spectatorship while the solution lies in rekindling the politics of collective action, building an alliance between the intellectual Left, the labor movement, and the working classes. He therefore proposed returning to an egalitarian reformist agenda articulated within the national myth of American (as opposed to universalistic) solidarity, focusing on a People's Charter that would call for campaign finance reform, universal health care, renewed funding for K–12 education, and increased taxation of the very rich.[14]

With the current debate (if we can call it that) between the moderate and radical wings of the Democratic Party thundering on, it is no surprise that some today find this strategic analysis and recommendation prescient and even potentially useful.[15] However, in spite (or perhaps because) of Rorty being one of my former intellectual heroes, applauding his foresight regarding the undoing of the democratic settlement in America strikes me as a problematic understanding of his own role in the unfolding crisis of progressive liberalism. Why? Crucially, because the rise of "Trumpism" was enabled by framing much of its political project within the rhetoric of post-truth politics. Moreover, its repeated rejection of a strong standard of truth seemingly echoes Rorty's own recurrent assaults—from the *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* onwards—on the very idea that "knowledge," "facts of the matter," or "rational justification" can be anything more than the product of local justificatory practices.[16] In other words, elite rhetoric relating to post-truth politics echoes significant aspects of Rorty's wider philosophical project, a project he once called "postmodernist bourgeois liberalism."[17] In fact, this connection between Trump and his acolytes' style of doing politics and postmodernism is already the object of media discussion.[18] Perhaps the most notable commentaries on this issue come from Daniel Dennett and Andrew Perrin. In a February 2017 interview, Dennett said:

> Maybe people will now begin to realise that philosophers aren't quite so innocuous after all. Sometimes, views can have terrifying consequences that might actually come true. I think what the postmodernists did was truly evil. They are responsible for the intellectual fad that made it respectable to be cynical about truth and facts.[19]

In contrast, Perrin maintains that "[t]he indictments of postmodernism are based on a shallow caricature of the theory and an exaggerated estimation of its effects."[20] We may thus ask: Has the intellectual movement that is post-modernism played a role in the rise of post-truth politics?

It is to go some way towards answering this question that I will seek to articulate a scholarly account of the relationship between Rorty's post-modernism and post-truth politics in this paper.[21] This seems an appealing project for me because I find force in both Dennett's claim that cynicism about our epistemic standards is democratically dangerous and Perrin's claim that it is unhelpful to discuss postmodernism as though it were a clearly defined school of thought.[22] To be clear, I think focusing on Rorty in this discussion is legitimate because: (a) recent attention given to his 'prophecy' invites further intellectual scrutiny;[23] (b) he was one of the few great analytically-trained philosophers who associated himself with post-modernism (even though he came to regret using the label); and (c) I think he would have genuinely been appalled at the thought that his philosophical approach had actually left us with a depleted rhetorical toolbox to confront the threat posed by a virulent strain of xenophobic, chauvinistic, and authoritarian politics.

This paper therefore offers a kind of immanent critique of Rorty's thought, subjecting his views to the test of his pragmatism. While I ultimately conclude that it is not causally responsible for the advent of, and thus not complicit with, post-truth politics, I will argue that Rorty's philosophical project bears some intellectual responsibility for the onset of post-truth politics, insofar as it took a complacent attitude towards the dangers associated with over-affirming the contingency of our epistemic claims. In the last instance, I contend that, since post-truth politics demonstrates that embracing the contingency of one's epistemic commitments has been effectively coupled to a regressive and illiberal political agenda, Rorty's complacency is a failure to properly embrace the pragmatist maxim. To show this, I will (I) offer an account of post-truth politics, (II) present a broad outline of Rorty's

postmodernist bourgeois liberalism, and (III) consider its responsibility for the rise of post-truth politics.

I. What Is Post-Truth Politics?

Truth is not in fashion these days—at least, not in the realm of politics. Perhaps it never was; lies and deception have probably always played a significant role in that part of life.[24] But our collective relationship to the value of truth seems to have taken a turn for the worse in recent years.[25] Indeed, Oxford Dictionaries proclaimed "post-truth" its 2016 word of the year, noting a 2,000-percent increase in its usage over the previous year and defining it as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."[26] Evidence for the claim that we are living in an age of post-truth politics is often found in two events: the Leave campaign's victory in the Brexit referendum and Donald Trump's successful run for the US presidency. Indeed, falsehoods and outright lies are perceived to have played a disproportionate role in these campaigns, with these electoral events culminating in the triumph of the campaigns that told the most egregious untruths.[27] Thus, the "post-truth" character of our politics refers to the relative irrelevance of the value of truth in contemporary public affairs. Yet, the term "post-truth" has a longer history.

Steve Tesich first coined the term in his 1992 article in *The Nation* entitled "Government of Lies."[28] There, he used the word "post-truth" to describe his sense that America had become a society where truth is politically unimportant. Starting with Watergate, but contending that Ronald Reagan's Iran-Contra scandal and George H. W. Bush's fabricated justification for America's involvement in the Gulf War cut deeper still, Tesich explained that tepid popular reaction to lies in politics had shown that the American people would prefer to believe in comfortable falsehoods than confront harsh truths. This realization alarmed him deeply:

> We are rapidly becoming prototypes of a people that totalitarian monsters could only drool about in their dreams. 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, that we have acquired a spiritual mechanism that can denude truth of any significance. In a very fundamental

> way we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world.[29]

In this post-truth world, according to Tesich, we are left to live in a gray and fuzzy moral universe with few absolutes and a "cozy universal appeal," since it justifies and sanctions moral mediocrity. Here, we are bound to wander aimlessly between confusion and quiescence.[30]

From our current vantage point, it is hard not feel the poignancy of this description: the campaigns during the Brexit referendum and the 2016 US presidential elections were not only marked by loudly expressed and oft-repeated falsehoods, but they (each in their own way) also presented limited, unimaginative, and uninspiring moral worlds where the politically viable options merely offered a choice between one type of moral failing (passive acceptance of extreme wealth inequality and of the socially regressive aspects of globalization) and another, far worse still (xenophobic sentiment coupled with an agenda of nationalist retrenchment and a clear disregard for the injustices visited upon members of minority groups within the supposedly hallowed nation).[31] Rather than rallying behind bold, vibrant, and ambitious moral agendas, voters were left to adjudicate between the morally abject and the unspeakably worse. In Tesich's view, this moral quandary is made possible by a lack of social and political currency placed in the value of truth.

While post-truth politics refers to the general diminishment of the significance of traditional epistemic standards in public discourse, I think we must go one step further and recognize that political rhetoric that encourages (more or less explicitly) the deepening of this phenomenon constitutes a highly strategic intervention in the public forum.[32] It is the rate of use of this strategic intervention that distinguishes present day "post-truth" politics from Tesich's early "post-truth world." What is the nature of this strategic intervention? I think post-truth rhetoric operates as what Koopmans and Statham called a "discursive opportunity structure."[33] McCammon et al. explain that discursive opportunity structures are "ideas in the larger political culture that are believed to be 'sensible,' 'realistic,' and 'legitimate' and […] facilitate the reception of" certain political proposals.[34] In other words, discursive opportunity structures act as framing agents for more specific political proposals, facilitating persuasion by tapping into broader ideas with social currency.[35] Discursive opportunity structures can be more or less stable and more or less in tune with wider discursive fields, and political actors may capitalize on them to a greater or lesser degree.

In the case of post-truth rhetoric, it is the blatant breach or diminishment of traditional epistemic norms that serve distinct political agendas (most recently, Brexit in the UK and Trumpism in the US). By "post-truth rhetoric," I mean the discursive mobilization of ideas relating to the absence of epistemic norms regarding political claims to motivate popular support for one's preferred agenda. One type of engagement in post-truth rhetoric is when a speaker makes false assertions and refuses to defend them with reasons when asked to by members of the public or the media. Another type might be when a speaker makes contradictory statements within a relatively short period of time and refuses to clarify which claim they believe to be true. However, perhaps the most powerful type of engagement in post-truth rhetoric is when a political actor makes a direct rejection of traditional epistemic norms and/or of the epistemic authority of those who seek to abide by traditional epistemic norms (such as technical experts, academics, and reliable media outlets).

During the Brexit campaign, when Michael Gove, then British Secretary of State for Justice and one of the leaders of the Leave campaign, said that Britons had "had enough of experts," his words were taken to give license to the idea that no one knows anything better than anyone else.[36] Although Gove later objected to that narrow interpretation of his words, their political effect was to lend credence to the idea that expertise and official sources of knowledge were not to be taken seriously when they said that the consequences of Brexit were likely to be grave.[37] Across the Atlantic, during the 2016 transition, George Stephanopoulos questioned then Vice-President-Elect Mike Pence about a tweet where then President-Elect Trump purported that he not only won the electoral college but the popular vote as well, provided that "you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally."[38] Stephanopoulos pointed out that there was no evidence of illegal voting on the scale suggested by Trump's tweet and asked whether it was a president-elect's right to make false statements. In response, Pence said:

> Well, it's his right to express his opinion as president-elect of the United States. I think one of the things that's refreshing about our president-elect and one of the reasons why I think he made such an incredible connection with people all across this country is because he tells you what's on his mind.[39]

Here, Pence is conflating matters of opinion with matters of fact to occlude the fact that Trump's claim was not grounded in evidence.

During his actual presidency, Trump's political team has been even more explicit about its epistemic commitments (or lack thereof). When Kellyanne Conway, senior presidential adviser, was asked by Chuck Todd on NBC's "Meet the Press" about the claim made by Trump and repeated by Sean Spicer, the White House Press Secretary at the time, that Trump's inauguration was the most attended in the history of the United States, she explained that they were merely offering "alternative facts."[40] After many media outlets insisted that such "alternative facts" were nothing short of falsehoods, Trump started calling the mainstream media "fake news" with alarming regularity.[41] The term "fake news" won the distinction of being the Collins Dictionary's 2017 word of the year and refers to "false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting."[42] In other words, after a campaign during which candidate Trump made 560 false statements according to the Toronto Star,[43] Trump was—without a hint of irony—now claiming that the mainstream media were fabricating facts for the express purpose of politically damaging his administration.

One explanation for this is that Trump and his associates simply do not believe in the existence of an actual fact of the matter. Therefore, in their view, all factual claims are merely expressive of partisan bias. As Trump's associate and former adviser, Roger Stone, explains it:

> Facts are, obviously, in the eye of the beholder. You have an obligation to make a compelling case. Caveat emptor. Let the consumer decide what he or she believes or doesn't believe based on how compelling a case you put forward for your point of view.[44]

Reading these words, it is hard not to find resonance with some of Rorty's most provocative slogans. These include, for example: truth is "what one's peers, *ceteris paribus*, let one get away with saying";[45] "the question of whether justification to the community with which we identify entails truth is simply irrelevant";[46] "[n]o organism, human or non-human, is ever more or less in touch with reality than any other organism";[47] and, perhaps most damningly, "anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed."[48] Although Stone and Rorty were expressing their views in widely different contexts, it is precisely this appearance of chiming that warrants further investigation. That is why I will now discuss Rorty's wider intellectual project.

II. Rorty's Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism

While Rorty began his academic career as a successful mainstream analytic philosopher, he famously became impatient with this approach.[49] From *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* onwards, he began to draw (rather selectively) on Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Dewey to develop an altogether different kind of philosophical project. He called this project many names, including "postmodernist bourgeois liberalism," "liberal ironism," and "pragmatism." It was in this phase of his career that he became "perhaps the most extensively referred to of contemporary philosophers, both inside and to an unusual extent outside academia,"[50] as well as an object of extraordinary academic scorn:

> Conservatives demonize him as a threat to civilization as we know it; Marxists and other political radicals deplore what they see as his complacent and uncritical defence of American capitalism; postmodernists disdain his shallowness compared with the arcane profundities of their European gurus; analytical philosophers shake their heads sadly at a good man gone to the bad; and the leading liberal political theorists for the most part studiedly ignore him.[51]

It is not to add unnecessary opprobrium that I intend to revisit Rorty's central philosophical contribution here, but rather to put his ideas to his own test in the mode of immanent critique. While his style of writing and his detachment from overt logical argumentation makes reading him as a consistent (or even, at times, a coherent) proponent of a central argument difficult, even the most uncharitable reading underlines his central concern with affirming the primacy of practice over theory. Indeed, according to him, the value of a theoretical idea is to be understood by contemplating its practical effects. Rorty's philosophical project is itself a theoretical idea and the worry animating this paper is that it may have played a role in contributing to the advent of post-truth politics. To ascertain whether that is indeed the case, I will endeavor to give a brief, but hopefully fair, account of his philosophical project. At its heart, we find a double stance: on one hand, Rorty urges us to confront the historical and cultural contingency of the justificatory standing of our most cherished beliefs, and, on the other hand, he hopes to convince us to remain as committed as ever to a wide and compassionate moral and political liberalism. To explain how he thinks these commitments hang together, let us consider each in turn.

Truth, Justification, and Ethnocentrism

Rorty has a fraught relationship with the term "postmodernism." On one hand, he is one of the few major analytic philosophers to apply the term to himself; on the other, he relatively rapidly distances himself from the "post-modernist" label because he thinks the "term has been so over-used that it is causing more trouble than it is worth."[52] Rather, he proposes that we think of Heidegger, Derrida and—presumably—himself as "post-Nietzschean" philosophers. Yet, we still find an epistemological continuity in the position referred to by these changing labels—namely, the rejection of the Enlightenment "myth of the neutral justificatory framework."[53] It is this rejection that I will endeavor to explain in this section.

Although Rorty stresses that he does not offer a positive theory of truth, he sometimes summarizes his view of truth by quoting William James's famous words: "The true […] is only the expedient in the way of our thinking."[54] He explains this tension as follows:

> Philosophers who, like myself, find this Jamesian suggestion persuasive swing back and forth between trying to reduce truth to justification and propounding some form of minimalism about truth. In reductionist moods we have offered such definitions of truth as "warranted assertability," "ideal assertability," and "assertability at the end of inquiry."[55]

He therefore begins many of his books with a rejection of the correspondence theory of truth. This is the view according to which p is true if and only if p is the case. This view is problematic for Rorty because he maintains that there is no "God's eye view," no "Archimedean" point, no way to ascertain whether p is the case outside of local, contextually-rooted vocabularies and practices. However, resisting the urge to make truth a relative concept, he insists that there are only limited uses of the term "true":

- Commendation: this happens when I assert that p is true to express that I agree with p and I think you should too;
- Caution: this happens when I ask "p is justified but is it true?"—by doing so I am expressing the thought that p might not be justifiable to other existing or future audiences; or
- Disquotation: this happens when I express how the concept of "truth" is used in a given language-set.[56]

Crucially, for Rorty, truth is not the goal of inquiry. He holds that we can only aim for something if we can know if we have achieved it, because it makes no sense to say that we are aiming for something, the attainment of which would remain obscure to us all the same. He takes it as given that we can never know if we have arrived at truth. In fact, according to him, the cautionary use of truth (or what Rorty takes to be fallibilism) does not point towards a realm of facts waiting to be discovered; rather, it reminds us of the variety of standards of justification and the future possibility of a better theory. Thus, for Rorty, inquiry merely aims for warranted assertability or justification. Warranted assertability and justification, in his view, are never more than the product of human conversation since, "[t]he world does not speak. Only we do."[57] In other words, he rejects the correspondence theory of truth because, while propositions and sentences are a part of the human world, they are not to be found in the nonhuman natural world under the form of "facts." Instead, he proposes his ethnocentric account of justification, according to which justification is always bound by the standards currently in use in one's community.[58] Thus, the kind of human interaction that would make a belief justified is discursive through and through, since a belief must be taken to be justified by one's community in order to be justified. As a result, for him, justification is intensely locally (in terms of where the community begins and ends) and historically (in the sense that a belief might fall in and out of favor) situated. Furthermore, Rorty maintains that communities are contingent formations loosely tied together by the existence of a shared vocabulary.

His use of the term "vocabulary" in this context is somewhat idiosyncratic, since he considers vocabularies to be broad clusters of words and metaphors thanks to which human beings communicate meaning, as opposed to sets of concepts thanks to which we represent distinct parts of the world. He believes this because he holds a pragmatic view of language. Indeed, he illustrates this view by telling a Darwinian story about the evolution of language. According to him, vocabularies come into existence for the same purpose as practical tools—namely, "to help us cope with the world."[59] Further evolutionary processes have helped refine these vocabularies, so that only those best suited for helping human beings prosper in their respective environments remained. But these vocabularies are no more representationally accurate than the chameleon's ability to take on the colors of its neighboring environment. Instead, vocabularies can only be said to be more or less useful. The usefulness of language goes beyond issues of survival, however, in allowing us to pursue our distinctive conceptions of "human flourishing."[60]

Crucially, for Rorty, different conceptions of human flourishing make different vocabularies more or less useful for us. It follows from this that our judgments about which vocabularies—and thus which standards of justification—are better than others will ultimately depend upon our conception of human flourishing. If a new vocabulary is judged to be closer to our ideal of human life, then adopting it will be judged to be rational; if not, then adopting it will be deemed irrational. Therefore, judgments about the rationality of selecting vocabularies and standards of justification depend on our conception of human flourishing. Indeed, according to him, we can determine the relative expediency of a vocabulary in promoting a given set of interests and values, but we cannot neutrally determine which interests and values it is more rational to pursue.[61] When we make determinations of interests or assert the desirability of certain values, we are only ever doing so from within our vocabulary.[62]

But how are we to adjudicate between the determinations of value, standards, and justification made by different communities? For Rorty, there is no neutral standard by which we can answer such a question, because vocabularies are incommensurable with one another—or, as Donald Davidson puts it, "there is no chance that someone can take up a vantage point for comparing conceptual schemes by temporarily shedding his own."[63] The best we can do, according to Rorty, is to judge the various vocabularies from within our own vocabulary, which is by "our lights." Furthermore, he maintains that our admitting that such judgments are limited by our conceptual schemes involves no greater loss than our misplaced belief in the myth of neutral justification. Instead, what we should hope for epistemically is greater solidarity—that is to say, the widening of our community to incorporate more and more people into the justificatory conversation (Rorty sometimes refers to this process as growth in inter-subjective agreement).[64]

And yet, Rorty goes further still. He actively seeks to discourage us from aiming for a final vocabulary which would hold a neutral justificatory mechanism, taking it as expressive of the ambition to impose an unwarranted limitation on human creativity. Moreover, he adds that "the very idea of a 'fact of the matter' is one we would be better off without,"[65] because he believes that talk of "facts of the matter" suggests that "there are procedures of justification which are natural and not merely local."[66] Speaking in a way that suggests that standards of fact, objectivity, or rational justification are somehow outside ourselves, somehow beyond the control of our given community, suggests an implicit commitment to the correspondence theory of truth and a kind of subservience to the world, which constrains human

autonomy by threatening to entrench a contingently held vocabulary as the "Truth" and thus closing down avenues for conversation and playful redescription.[67] Unbridled conversation and playful redescription, Rorty contends, are necessary if we are to fully embrace his liberal ideal.

Rortyan Ironism: Liberalism without Foundations

In "Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism," Rorty asserts that his political project consists of an "attempt to defend the institutions and practices of the rich North American democracies without"[68] grounding such a defense in a transcultural and ahistorical account of rationality, morality, or human dignity. The term "bourgeois," he explains, denotes the historically and geographically situated type of liberalism Rorty intends to defend. He therefore rejects the need to ground his liberalism in what he calls "philosophical liberalism" which he understands to be "a collection of Kantian principles thought to justify us in" our commitment to North American liberal hopes. Rorty goes on to explain that the term "postmodernist" denotes "[a] 'distrust of metanarratives,' narratives which […] are stories which purport to justify loyalty to, or breaks with, certain contemporary communities, but which are neither historical narratives about what these or other communities have done in the past nor scenarios about what they might do in the future."[69] Rorty thus rejects, for example, Kant's noumenal self, Hegel's Absolute Spirit, and Marx's Proletariat, considering these totalizing entities too divorced from the lives and concerns of actual communities to be of any real use. He also suspects that aspiration to "Truth," in the sense of aiming to reach a more than merely ethnocentric justification for one's view, constitutes another such metanarrative he thinks we would be better served by abandoning.[70]

Instead, Rorty takes John Rawls's attempt at justification in *Political Liberalism* to be exemplary of another, altogether preferable, approach. Rather than seeking to ground liberal principles and democratic institutions in a philosophical account of human nature, ethics, truth, or the self, Rawls limits himself to seeking a reflective equilibrium amongst free and equal citizens who are already committed to living in a liberal order rooted in American public political culture. According to Rorty,

> [Rawls] disengages the question of whether we ought to be tolerant and Socratic from the question of whether this strategy will lead to truth. He is content that it should lead to whatever intersubjective reflective equilibrium may be obtainable, given the contingent make-up of the subjects in

> question. Truth, viewed in the Platonic way, as the grasp of what Rawls calls "an order antecedent to and given to us," is simply not relevant to democratic politics.[71]

Rorty admits that this position presupposes that the self is fundamentally plastic and malleable, capable of being reshaped to suit "oneself, to [be] tailored to one's politics, one's religion, or one's private sense of the meaning of one's life. This, in turn, presupposes that there is no 'objective truth' about what the human self is *really* like."[72] Rather, he invites us to envision the self as a "centerless web" involved in a rich process of self-creation. This sense of radical contingency (of the self, of one's vocabulary, of the justification of one's cherished beliefs) is what he calls "irony." Rorty's liberal ironists are thus acutely aware of the contingency of their world view, but nevertheless choose to be firmly committed to liberalism. The key liberal commitment, in this view, is an unwavering attachment to the fundamental rule formulated by Jean Bethke Elshtain: "Don't be cruel."[73]

But that alone does not suffice. If all liberalism demands is to avoid actually being cruel, then liberals might be tempted to sit idly and silently on the side, more or less blissfully unaware of the depths of suffering visited upon those who are not at present members of their community. Thus, Rorty supplements the goal of avoiding cruelty with that of expanding one's sense of community by expanding solidarity, since solidarity is the means by which groups grow into one another, becoming larger, more inclusive, and kinder communities. This is to be achieved by being invested in the project of involving more people in conversation by developing new and varied vocabularies. These new vocabularies would, by Rorty's account, permit manifold groups to come to know one another—this is the meaning of his social hope.[74] Crucially, however, for him, vocabularies among smaller communities often require protection from more influential vocabularies. Or, at the very least, they require protection from the dominant vocabulary of universal rational justification, which threatens to stifle conceptual creativity and innovation and thus shut down conversation. The liberal ironist is therefore engaged in the process of developing the virtues of tolerance, open-mindedness, creativity, inclusivity, and empathy.

How does the liberal ironist square their commitment to liberalism with their awareness of radical contingency? In short, they do so through partition. Their awareness of radical contingency is a private matter, while their commitment to expanding liberal solidarity is a public matter. Yet, it is also

the case that Rorty insists on the fact that the expansion of solidarity is less a matter of epistemic competence and more a matter of emotional education:

> In my utopia, human solidarity would be seen not as a fact to be recognized by clearing away "prejudice" or burrowing down to previously hidden depths but, rather, as a goal to be achieved. It is to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers. Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people. Such increased sensitivity makes it more difficult to marginalize people different from ourselves by thinking, "They do not feel it as we would," or "There must always be suffering, so why not let them suffer?"[75]

Liberals can attempt to bring those who do not share their views about the importance of sympathy and solidarity around to their point of view through playful conversation ("joshing"[76]), but those who prove recalcitrant to the charms of liberalism must eventually just be considered "mad,"[77] "brutes,"[78] or "fanatics."[79] These illiberal types (Nazis and religious fundamentalists, for example), in this view, are people to whom there is no need to justify one's self. They are outside the moral community and no exhortation to become more rational, to attend to "the facts of the matter," to human nature, or to the truth are liable to sway them. Our best hope, as far as Rorty is concerned, is edification via exposure to detailed narratives about other people or narratives that offer redescribed versions of ourselves that encourage people to see others as "one of us" rather than "one of them."[80] He thus advocates a turn away from the search for theory, facts, and criteria, and towards narrative learning for moral and political progress. Our transitional goal, for him, is to avoid "conversation stoppers,"[81] such as appealing to the authority of God, Truth, or History, to defend our currently cherished beliefs. Instead, a thorough awareness of the contingency of our own views serves as the means to ensure that the conversation remains forever open. Thus, the ironists realize

> that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed, and their renunciation of the attempt to formulate criteria of choice between final vocabularies, puts them in a position which Sartre called "meta-stable": never quite

> able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves.[82]

Since Rorty considers himself to be offering his own liberal ironist narrative as a means to encourage broader and richer conversation,[83] we may thus legitimately ask: How effective is Rorty's own ironist narrative at furthering this goal? If nothing else, the advent of post-truth politics has brought a renewed practical saliency to this question that I think is worth addressing. As it stands, post-truth politics has not served the end of broadening the liberal conversation, but of closing it down by bolstering a renascent nativism and growing mistrust between significant portions of the population in the US and the UK. That is why I will now seek to ascertain how responsible Rorty's philosophical project can be legitimately considered to be for the rise of post-truth politics.

III. Rorty's Responsibility for Post-Truth Politics: Complicity, Causation, and Complacency

Establishing Rorty's intellectual responsibility for the advent of an empirical phenomenon (i.e., post-truth politics) is, as I mentioned in the introduction, inevitably a messy, human affair. Nevertheless, to bring as much light and clarity to the topic at hand, it is necessary to introduce three different dimensions of responsibility, namely: complicity, causation, and complacency.[84] I will address these in turn.

Complicity

Complicity involves enabling (i.e., providing a necessary condition for) or facilitating (i.e., making it more likely that another actor will perform) a wrongdoing while not being the principal perpetrator of said wrongdoing. According to Gregory Mellema, the paradigm case of moral complicity is one where "the agent (or agents) is the principal actor by virtue of moral wrongdoing and one or more agents contribute to the outcome in a manner that makes them complicit to the wrongdoing of the principal agent(s)."[85] Crucially, the charge of complicity assumes that the accomplice *intends* to aid a perpetrator in carrying out a certain course of action and plays a causal role in enabling it.[86]

Now, to be clear, my concern is not that Rorty is somehow complicit with *all* of the political agendas associated with politicians who make use of post-truth rhetoric—his compassionate liberalism precludes him from intending to bolster cruel, xenophobic, or authoritarian political agendas. Rather, I am merely worried that Rorty might be complicit with a limited part of these agendas—namely, the part that involves seeking to diminish the significance of traditional epistemic standards in public discourse. We may call this the "post-truth agenda." I contend that the success of the post-truth agenda constitutes a harm in its own right, because it aims to deny politically salient information to citizens. In *How Democracies Die*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt explain that "[c]itizens have a basic right to information in a democracy. Without credible information about what elected leaders do, we cannot effectively exercise our right to vote."[87] In other words, denying citizens credible information results in the diminishment of political autonomy (i.e., citizens' capacity to partake in meaningful democratic deliberation),[88] because it results in a widespread state of confusion in which objects of public deliberation become less discernible and standards of public justification become increasingly arbitrary. Furthermore, Rorty willfully facilitated the occurrence of this particular harm by arguing for the adoption of the post-truth agenda and popularizing certain aspects of post-truth rhetoric. Returning to our previous definition of "post-truth" as "related to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief," it should be clear that any contribution made by Rorty's words to encourage others to forego discussions of fact in favor of emotionally compelling narratives in public discourse would make him complicit with other, more rhetorically powerful actors who share this common goal.

But here one might resist the charge of complicity on the grounds that it assumes an erroneous account of Rorty's intentions. While the early Rorty may have been overly romantic in his calls to give up talk of matters of fact in the public domain, the mature Rorty recognized that this romanticism should only apply in private: in our private activities (such as poetry and philosophy), where aesthetic sensibility and emotional development take priority, freedom of self-creation reigns; in our public activities (such as science and politics), communal norms of justification and liberal consensus-seeking are to remain unchanged (i.e., pursing greater solidarity leads to contingent justification among an ever-widening group while preserving how we ordinarily speak about justification and truth); or so the argument goes. Certainly,

in some moods, the mature Rorty seems to want his readers to reject the pursuit of certainty, objectivity, truth, or a final vocabulary in philosophy and other private musings, but allow citizens to seek inter-subjective agreement within their own terms (including local claims to truth and fact), as well as permitting scientists and social scientists to function as they normally would by seeking knowledge in a manner which they would recognize as being objective (although still only in the sense of being the object of an inter-subjective agreement).[89] Or as Richard Shusterman puts it:

> [The public/private split] performs [Rorty's] postmodern remapping of modernity's tripartite schema of science, art and the ethico-political into a dualism of public discourse based on normalcy and consensus versus a private discursive sphere aimed at radical innovation and individual fulfilment.[90]

However, even in his mature writings, Rorty is not always so discriminating.[91] For example, in *Achieving Our Country* (a part of his later works), he begins with a discussion of the proper place of national pride in democratic politics and rejects objectivity as a relevant goal in this matter. He thus argues for selecting a narrative of national identity to cultivate an appropriate amount of national pride to empower co-nationals to imagine how the nation could be improved, without allowing such pride to escalate into unchecked arrogance, bigotry, and imperialism. For Rorty, the selection of a narrative is a matter of future-oriented choice, never a matter of objective knowledge of one's nation's past. He writes:

> [T]hough objectivity is a useful goal when one is trying to calculate means to ends by predicting the consequences of action, it is of little relevance when one is trying to decide what sort of person or nation to be. Nobody knows what it would be like to try to be objective when attempting to decide what one's country really is, what its history really means, any more than when answering the question of who one really is oneself, what one's individual past really adds up to.[92]

In his view, we only ask such questions because they allow us to try out various self-conceptions that permit the contemplation of various futures; facts about our past do not matter in the slightest. To illustrate his point, Rorty contrasts the attitudes taken by James Baldwin and Elijah Muhammad to the enslavement of black people by white Americans. While Elijah Muhammad's

Nation of Islam holds "that white people started out as homunculi created by a diabolical scientist," James Baldwin maintained that "we, the black and white, deeply need each other here if we are really to become a nation—if we are really, that is, to achieve our identity, our maturity, as men and women." For Rorty, the significant difference between these two visions is that the former is wedded to a politics of spectatorship while the latter is wedded to a politics of engagement, not that the former is false and that latter is at least more likely to be true. While this focus on participation is laudable, Rorty contends that there is no point in arguing about which view is more accurate, because both "are intelligible. Either can be made plausible. But there are no neutral, objective criteria which dictate one rather than the other."[93] For him, the same lack of grounds for epistemic adjudication holds between conceptions of America proposed by the political Left and those proposed by the political Right.[94]

This indicates that even the mature Rorty occasionally intends for his injunction to replace talk of objectivity or "facts of the matter" with talk of better or worse narratives that can be made to look better or worse depending on how we describe them to apply in the realm of politics.[95] Therefore, his intent was (at least on some occasions) to convince others to dispense with strong epistemic norms in the political arena.

However, intention alone is insufficient—the charge of complicity crucially hinges on whether Rorty's words actually played a role in causing or facilitating the rise of post-truth politics. That is why we must consider its causal role more carefully.

Causation

Recently, Richard Evans, the historian and long-standing critic of postmodernism, charged postmodernists with causal responsibility for the advent of post-truth politics. Indeed, he wrote on Twitter:

> Apostles of the "post-fact" era graduated from US universities in the era of postmodernism: Kellyanne Conway 1989, Sean Spicer 1993 . . . If I am wrong, and postmodernist disbelief in truth didn't lead to our post-truth age, then how do we explain the current disdain for facts?[96]

In an interview with historian Deborah Lipstadt about the role he played in the libel case opposing Holocaust denier David Irving (depicted in the

film *Denial*), Evans further explained that he thinks that postmodernism's rejection of the importance and robustness of truth "affected a generation of university graduates in the States."[97] In other words, for him, the causal responsibility of postmodernism for the post-truth age is a pedagogic failing caused by a discursive shift that led to an unhealthy suspicion of epistemic practices. The problem, however, with ascertaining causation is that it invites the following question: Was the advent of postmodernism a necessary condition for the rise of post-truth politics? The answer to that question is a resounding "no." More likely necessary conditions for the widespread erosion of US and UK citizens' concern for truth in politics include:

- The social and cultural fragmentation caused by rampant income inequality;[98]
- The normalization of what Wolfgang Streeck has called "the expert lie," which is the politically-motivated mobilization of expertise to assert politically expedient falsehoods. According to Streeck, notable expert lies include the Laffer Curve to justify reducing taxes on the very rich, the European Commission's "Cecchini Report" promising economic boons in return for the "completion of the internal market," and pre-2008 assurances of US financial experts—including Ben Bernanke, Alan Greenspan and Larry Summers—that "government agencies had no need to take action to prevent the growth of bubbles" in financial markets;[99]
- Public revelations of state mendacity (in addition to the instances Steve Tesich noted in "Government of Lies," Colin Powell's infamous claims about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq come to mind);
- The algorithms and norms that regulate our use and experience of social media, which have given rise to ever-new ways of deceiving one another (as captured by the idiom "catfishing"[100]);
- The rolling "crisis of traditional journalism" marked by audience fragmentation, commercial pressure (resulting in a loss of stable revenue for print journalism), increased political polarization, and loss of trust in the media's general commitment to the public good;[101]
- Systems of primary and secondary education designed to foster testing results rather than student understanding and critical thinking;[102] and,
- A recalcitrant anti-intellectualism coupled with an ardent devotion to a superficial, market-driven, all too often short-term, pseudo-practical mindset (or what Richard Hofstadter called "the mystique of practicality"[103]).

However, adopting a probabilistic account of causation invites considering an alternative question: Did an event (i.e., the rise of postmodernism in certain

academic fields) increase the antecedent likelihood of a particular phenomenon (i.e., post-truth politics) coming to pass? More to the point, has Rorty's work increased the antecedent likelihood of the rise of post-truth politics to prominence? If we take the successes of the Trump and Leave campaigns to be the causes of current disregard for epistemic standards in public debate in the US and UK, respectively, then Rorty likely played no significant role in facilitating these events—as far as we know, key actors in the Trump and Leave campaigns were not avid Rorty readers seeking to implement his philosophical visions.[104] However, if we see the success of these campaigns as the consequences of a wider sociological reality where epistemic norms play a diminished role, then it is not unreasonable to think that Rorty may have contributed (however marginally) to the likelihood that citizens would be more open to dismissing the significance of public representatives brazenly failing to adhere to traditional epistemic norms. And yet, he may well have caused others still to defend their attachment to traditional epistemic norms yet more firmly. Thus, ascribing more than an extremely limited role to Rorty in facilitating (i.e., making more likely) the rise of post-truth politics faces a difficult climb. Therefore, in the absence of strong empirical evidence pointing to such a causal link, prudence requires that we abstain from a hasty conclusion. The causal charge must therefore be rejected at this stage and, along with it, the charge of complicity. But what are we to make of complacency?

Complacency

Complacency is defined as "self-satisfaction especially when accompanied with unawareness of actual dangers or deficiencies."[105] According to Jason Kawall, "[c]omplacency is a vice that does not cause evil or mediocrity; it is a vice that allows these to exist."[106] To be concerned about complacency is to agree with John Kenneth Galbraith that "[i]n all life one should comfort the afflicted, but verily, also, one should afflict the comfortable, and especially when they are comfortably, contentedly, even happily wrong."[107] In this context, to charge Rorty's philosophical project with complacency is to accuse it of failing to demonstrate an awareness of, and thus of failing to effectively challenge, important threats to the realization of its moral vision. As we have seen, Rorty's ethnocentric liberalism aims to liberate creative energies so as to bring more and more people into a broader community of solidarity, united by nothing more than a common conversation, endlessly renewed thanks to a shared awareness of the contingency of any one final vocabulary.

At a theoretical level, Rorty's hope that this free-floating conversation would naturally bolster liberal values has been thoroughly challenged by

many critics. For example, Norman Geras contends that Rorty's ironism is problematic for justice because "whatever the conception, to operate principles of justice, you need to know what has happened or is the case, under some passable interpretation of it within the multiplicity of these that there must, of course, always be."[108] Richard Bernstein points out that even if we accept that our standards of justification are constrained by the social practices of our existing communities, Rorty's "obsession" with endlessly underlining the contingency of our moral and epistemic commitments gets in the way of taking part in the very practical task of arguing with our peers about how "to discriminate the better from the worse" [109] within our current social practices.[110] Jeffrey Isaac criticizes Rorty's liberal ironism on the grounds that it is impractical to "allow ourselves to remain captives of the current state of affairs" when such a state of affairs demands thorough-going critique.[111]

These criticisms point to the potential danger of irrationalism and quiescence within Rorty's work in the face of serious political challenge. When confronting post-truth politics, this danger becomes actual. We must therefore ask: Can Rorty's liberal ironism provide any grounds to challenge post-truth politics? Let us take a practical example. Consider the following claims made by Trump in 2017 and their rebuttals by the *New York Times* (in parentheses after each statement):

> **January 23:** "Between 3 million and 5 million illegal votes caused me to lose the popular vote." (There's no evidence of illegal voting.)
>
> **January 25:** "Now, the audience was the biggest ever. But this crowd was massive. Look how far back it goes. This crowd was massive." (Official aerial photos show Obama's 2009 inauguration was much more heavily attended.)
>
> **January 26:** "We've taken in tens of thousands of people. We know nothing about them. They can say they vet them. They didn't vet them. They have no papers. How can you vet somebody when you don't know anything about them and you have no papers? How do you vet them? You can't." (Vetting lasts up to two years.)
>
> **February 7:** "And yet the murder rate in our country is the highest it's been in 47 years, right? Did you know that? Forty-seven years." (It was higher in the 1980s and '90s.)

One may be tempted to dismiss Trump's claims on the grounds that they are purposefully mendacious.[112] But let us assume that they are expressed in earnest. We must thus ask ourselves: Ought we to believe Trump's claims or the *Times*' rebuttals? Again, one may be tempted to merely dismiss Trump's claims because there is no evidence that they are true. Yet, many people do indeed choose to believe them. Still putting to one side the charge of lying or deceit, I and many others want to say that belief in these claims is misplaced as it is—at the very best—the product of wishful-thinking, confusion, or mistake. But it is not clear that Rorty's philosophical commitments warrant such a conclusion. Why not? In short, because those who believe Trump's statements often claim to be doing so because his claims match their sense of what is true, regardless of the absence of traditional standards of evidence. Worse still, some claim that traditional epistemic norms do not apply because these merely express the interests of another community—the so-called "elite."[113]

On this account, we might conjecture that we are confronting two distinct epistemic communities: E1, for whom there is a fact of the matter which makes certain claims true or false and for whom presenting evidence, making logical arguments, and drawing on expertise are legitimate means of seeking to ascertain which is which; and E2, for whom there is either no fact of the matter about a whole series of important claims and/or for whom evidence, logics, and experts cannot be trusted to determine specific facts. We must therefore ask ourselves: What are the legitimate grounds for adjudicating between these communities? By what criteria can we establish that certain claims are indeed true while others are false? Which group has the epistemic authority to correct the other?

In response, Rorty's work presents us with three potential answers:

A. Members of E1 and E2 are equally legitimate in their epistemic stances (since there is no non-neutral way of adjudicating between vocabularies).
B. Members of E2 are more legitimate in their epistemic stance because they are better ironists, in the sense that they are more acutely aware of the contingency of claims to knowledge than E1—i.e., members of E2 believe Trump but in a mode that makes no claim to "facts of the matter."
C. The epistemic standards of E1 and E2 are not the relevant sources of authority for determining which community is to be believed; rather, we ought to accept the epistemic standards of the group that politically aims to minimize suffering.

Neither A nor B give us grounds to reject E2, but I suspect that a Rortyan might opt for C because, while the liberal ironist may well have little to say about the wrongs of post-truth politics *simpliciter*, they would vehemently object to the political project of Trumpism which mobilizes post-truth politics in order to visit unnecessary suffering and humiliation on many disadvantaged groups (such as people of color, women, undocumented migrant residents, etc.).

However, I contend that this argument only moves the problem further down the field. Why? The political project associated with Trumpism claims to be standing up for a community that it considers to be underserved, suffering, and oppressed—namely, white communities, and especially white men. Speaking at Texas A&M University, Richard Spencer, arguably the leading ideologue of Trump's far-Right white supremacist support base, said that the Left had taken control of the culture and intended to destroy "white racial identity" with "an undifferentiated global population, [a] raceless, genderless, identity-less, meaningless population consuming sugar, consuming drugs, while watching porn."[114] While supporters of this view often consider Islam to be the immediate enemy of white western civilization, they claim the wider enemy, the main source of their purported oppression, is "globalism." According to Trump campaign press secretary, Hope Hicks, globalism is:

> An economic and political ideology which puts allegiance to international institutions ahead of the nation-state; seeks the unrestricted movement of goods, labor and people across borders; and rejects the principle that the citizens of a country are entitled to preference for jobs and other economic considerations as a virtue of their citizenship.[115]

By the campaign's account, globalism caused the Great Recession, the rise in opioid addiction in white working-class communities, the closure of factories in white post-industrial parts of the Rust Belt, and the general weakening of the grip on power of white working men in America. More conspiratorially, some Trump supporters insist that this process is consciously enacted by powerful but shady interest groups including global banks, prominent Jewish people (such as George Soros), as well as powerful figures (such as Presidents Barack Obama and George W. Bush, and the United Nations).[116] According to Lauren Southern, a host on the Right-wing Canadian media site Rebel Media:

> Globalists almost always sneer down their nose at tradition, disdain national culture, laugh at religion and generally despise the West while holding a creepy affection for the third world […] They want open borders, cheap labor, and antinationalism to benefit their business and political visions, and are all too willing to shaft the little people to achieve it.[117]

In other words, many members of E2 consider themselves to be the victims of cruelty visited upon them by "globalists." Moreover, they mobilize ungrounded and conspiratorial narratives to explain why they are experiencing various forms of disadvantage. This, in turn, motivates and justifies their appetite for what they consider to be a kind of redress against minorities (most notably Muslims, Native Americans, African Americans, Latinx people, women, and members of the LGBTQ+ community).

The crux of the matter for Rorty's liberal ironist, presumably, has to involve determining which community stands to suffer most: white people under the yoke of globalism or members of the minority groups and communities whose lives, dignity, and livelihoods are at risk as a result of Trump's political agenda? And yet, the specter of incommensurability haunts the Rortyan here, because it is not clear that they can ascertain which group stands to suffer most. Since they resist establishing criteria, moral or epistemic, that would permit us to establish which is greater than the other, we are left merely with a cacophony of claims and no means to establish which are more serious than the others. In other words, looking across various epistemic communities, the liberal ironist cannot distinguish actual suffering from the mere complaint of suffering. For them, each claim is as good as the next.

However, in response, I think the Rortyan might change tack and say that it is not the reduction of suffering which would guide their rejection of E2's standards but their commitment to tolerance. In "Rationality and Cultural Difference," Rorty defines rationality in three ways: Rationality_1 consists in instrumental rationality; Rationality_2 "establishes an evaluative hierarchy rather than simply adjusting means to taken-for-granted ends"; Rationality_3 "is roughly synonymous with tolerance—with the ability not to be overly disconcerted by differences from oneself, not to respond aggressively to such differences. This ability goes along with a willingness to alter one's own habits—not only to get more of what one previously wanted but to reshape oneself into a different sort of person, one who wants different things than before." Rorty explains that Rationality_3 "goes along with a reliance on

persuasion rather than force, an inclination to talk things over rather than to fight, burn, or banish."[118] The liberal ironist will likely avoid criticizing Trumpists for lacking in $Rationality_1$ (because they clearly do not) and $Rationality_2$ (because the ironist does not believe that such hierarchies can be established), but they can criticize the Trumpists for lacking in $Rationality_3$. In other words, Trumpism fails to be rational in the sense that it is more willing to exclude and fight than to include and talk.

At first glance, this seems to go some way towards providing grounds to criticize the most politically destructive aspects of the Trumpist political project (for example, attempting to ban millions of Muslim people from entering the US on the basis of a possible relationship to Syria, Libya, Iran, Yemen, Chad, and Somalia;[119] threatening to deport "Dreamers" by ending the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program;[120] demonstrating sympathy towards white supremacist groups;[121] sanctioning violence against dissenters;[122] and threatening the media[123]). However, Trump and many of his supporters regularly present themselves as the defenders of peace and civility, arguing that "the other side" is instigating violence or constraining their right to free speech.[124] While I believe that such claims are entirely spurious (as well as purposefully misleading and mobilized for highly strategic political effect),[125] Rorty cannot establish the falsehood of such claims without first determining which community's epistemic standards to adopt in order to evaluate them. Yet, since we need to know which claims are true and which are false regarding each community's commitment to tolerance, conversation, and persuasion to establish which community best respects $Rationality_3$, the mere invocation of tolerance, conversation, and peacefulness is insufficient to effectively reject the claims of an epistemic community that believes itself to be attached to them, but in fact, is not.[126] Rorty is therefore trapped in a justificatory circle, once again left with conflicting claims made by different epistemic communities and no stable ground from which to determine which are more justified. This is practically problematic because it leaves the door open to the practical possibility of wedding even the most thorough-going ironism with authoritarian goals. Ultimately, it is this failure to seriously consider (in the face of repeated warnings) the possibility that a community committed to an illiberal and oppressive political agenda could draw on the ironist's skepticism to explain and defend itself that makes Rorty's philosophical project complacent about the dangers of post-truth politics.

Conclusion

We have seen that Rorty's romanticism led him to hope that widespread ironism would generate a kinder, more compassionate liberal culture. I have argued that our present moment of post-truth politics (in the US and in the UK) has shown us that an overly-contingent epistemic stance (such as that of the ironist) is compatible with illiberal political projects. Even though Rorty wished for the advent of a public discussion where questions of fact, objectivity, and truth, would be less significant, since his philosophical oeuvre is not likely to have played a causal role in enabling or facilitating the advent of post-truth politics, he is not complicit with the rise of post-truth politics. Ultimately, however, it is Rorty's failure to articulate criteria by which we can determine which community's epistemic standards are preferable to those of other communities that demonstrates that his project was complacent towards the dangers of post-truth politics.

In response, I suspect Rorty would have accused me of asking too much of him. Indeed, he wrote:

> It is unfortunate, I think, that many people hope for a tighter link between philosophy and politics than there is or can be. In particular, people on the left keep hoping for a philosophical view which cannot be used by the political right, one which will lend itself only to good causes. But there never will be such a view; any philosophical view is a tool which can be used by many different hands.[127]

Yet, it is precisely his failure to seriously attend to the possibility that a part of his philosophical project (i.e., ironist ethnocentrism) could be mobilized with great effect against another part of his philosophical project (i.e., liberalism), which constitutes Rorty's pragmatic failing. Charles Sanders Peirce's formulation of the pragmatic maxim states: "Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of those effects is the whole of our conception of the object."[128] As a pragmatist, it behooved Rorty to consider the 'conceivable' practical bearings of his philosophical project. Had he attended more carefully to the possibility that asserting the contingency of our epistemic standards could be used to denigrate and, at times, stop conversation, perhaps Rorty would have worried about the rise of the kind of post-truth politics we see today.

Is the upshot of my argument that we have no other choice but to return to an unreformed faith in naïve appeals to pure facts, perfect objectivity, and ultimate truth? No, it is not. But my argument does suggest that critique of traditional epistemic norms must be well-motivated, thorough in its consideration of viable alternatives, and careful to bolster (not diminish) the significance of democratic conversation.

Notes

1. Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 89–90 (hereafter cited as *AOC*).
2. Edward Helmore, "'Something Will Crack': The Supposed Prophecy of Donald Trump Goes Viral," *Guardian*, November 19, 2016, accessed October 28, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/19/donald-trump-us-election-prediction-richard-rorty; Jennifer Senior, "Richard Rorty's 1998 Book Suggested Election 2016 Was Coming," *New York Times*, November 20, 2016, accessed November 17, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/21/books/richard-rortys-1998-book-suggested-election-2016-was-coming.html.
3. Some people refer to the political movement around Trump as "Bannonism" rather than "Trumpism" to underscore the influence of Steve Bannon on Trump's political project (and, perhaps, for those who doubt Trump's capacity for actual decision-making, to cast doubt about his rational agency in shaping this agenda). I prefer to call it "Trumpism" because core elements of the agenda chronologically preceded Bannon's involvement in the Trump campaign, but also because Bannon agrees with this assessment—in a recent interview with the *New York Times* Bannon said that Trump is "the leader of this movement […] because if you look back over the last 25 or 30 years, he has preached this day in and day out. So he embodies it. He is also a charismatic leader. Somebody who galvanizes people. […] I believe] he is a truly global revolutionary figure." From time mark 6:55 to 7:24 in the "Daily" podcast (November 10, 2017), accessed November 15, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/10/us/politics/steve-bannon.html.
4. Frances Moore Lappé and Adam Eichen, *Daring Democracy: Igniting Power, Meaning and Connection for the America We Want* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017), 1–76.
5. Hillary Clinton, *What Happened* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 8–9.
6. Megan Carpentier, "Why Do People Dislike Hillary Clinton? The Story Goes Far Back," *Guardian*, October 18, 2016, accessed November 14, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/oct/18/hillary-clinton-why-hate-unlikeable-us-election.
7. National Intelligence Council (US), *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections* (Washington, DC, 2017), accessed November 15, 2017, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf; Donna Brazile, *Hacks* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017).
8. Nate Silver, "The Comey Letter Probably Cost Clinton the Election: So Why Won't the Media Admit as Much?" *FiveThirtyEight*, May 3, 2017, accessed November 15, 2017, https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-comey-letter-probably-cost-clinton-the-election/.

9. On the racial dimension, see Ta-Nehisi Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power* (New York: One World, 2017), and "Trump Is the First White President," *Atlantic,* October 2017, accessed November 15, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/10/the-first-white-president-ta-nehisi-coates/537909. On the sexist dimension, see Mel Robbins, "Hillary Clinton Lost Because of Sexism," CNN (opinion) (May 3, 2017), accessed November 15, 2017, http://www.cnn.com/2017/05/03/opinions/hillary-clinton-interview-sexism-robbins/index.html.
10. Richard Rorty, *AOC*, 77.
11. Richard Rorty, *AOC,* 105.
12. Richard Rorty, *AOC,* 8.
13. Richard Rorty, *AOC,* 82 and 104.
14. Richard Rorty, *AOC,* 99; also, see his "First Projects, Then Principles," *Nation*, December 22, 1997.
15. Conor Friedersdorf, "The Book That Predicted Trump's Rise Offers the Left a Roadmap to Defeating Him," *Atlantic*, July 6, 2017, accessed November 17, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/07/advice-for-the-left-on-achieving-a-more-perfect-union/531054.
16. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press, 1979) (hereafter cited as *PMN*).
17. Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*: *Philosophical Papers, Vol. 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 197–202 (hereafter cited as *ORT*).
18. See, for example, Paul Waldman, "How Donald Trump Is Turning the GOP into a Postmodernist Party," *American Prospect*, December 5, 2016, accessed November 11, 2017, http://prospect.org/article/how-donald-trump-turning-gop-postmodernist-party; Peter McKnight, "Trump as Postmodernist: Truth No Longer Bound by Facts," *Globe and Mail*, January 28, 2017, accessed March 19, 2018, https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/trump-as-postmodernist-truth-no-longer-bound-by-facts/article33796581; Michael Gerson, "Conservatives Defend Our Post-Truth President," *Register-Guard*, October 25, 2017, accessed March 19, 2018, http://registerguard.com/rg/opinion/36084624-78/conservatives-defend-our-post-truth-president.html.csp; Andrew Calcutt, "The Truth about Post-Truth Politics," *Newsweek*, November 21, 2016, accessed November 1, 2017, http://www.newsweek.com/truth-post-truth-politics-donald-trump-liberals-tony-blair-523198.
19. Carole Cadwalladr, "Daniel Dennett: 'I Begrudge Every Hour I Have to Spend Worrying about Politics,'" *Observer*, February 12, 2017, accessed November 7, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/science/2017/feb/12/daniel-dennett-politics-bacteria-bach-back-dawkins-trump-interview.
20. Andrew Perrin, "Stop Blaming Postmodernism for Post-Truth Politics," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 4, 2017, accessed October 10, 2017, https://www.chronicle.com/article/Stop-Blaming-Postmodernism-for/240845.

21. The most significant contribution to date on this is Eduardo Mendietta's "Rorty and Post-Post-Truth" in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 22, 2017, accessed November 17, 2017, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/rorty-and-post-post-truth/. Here, Mendietta argues elegantly that Rorty holds two conceptions of truth: one that is private and unimportant and one that is public and of civic significance. To his credit, Mendietta points out that Rorty's second version of truth all too often remains inchoate. I discuss this issue in sections II and III, but I should let it be clear here that I think Rorty's insistence on dismissing epistemic standards (such as objectivity or truth) even when he writes about politics renders this distinction ultimately unhelpful.
22. Michel Foucault, for one, doubted that it was, saying in an interview, "What are we calling postmodernity? I'm not up to date . . . I do not understand what kind of problem is common to the people we call postmodern or poststructuralist," in Lawrence D. Kritzman, ed., *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Routledge, 1988), 33–34.
23. Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers Volume 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1 (hereafter cited as *EHO*).
24. Machiavelli, for one, suggested that lies and deception *ought to* play such a significant role in politics: "A wise lord cannot, nor ought he to, keep his promises when such observance would place him at a disadvantage, and when the reasons for which he gave his word no longer exist." In *The Prince*, trans. Maurizio Viroli (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 60.
25. For an excellent discussion on the nature of this phenomenon, see Christopher Robichaud, "Facts Aren't Enough to Save Liberal Democracy," Niskanen Center (blog), January 17, 2017, accessed January 9, 2018, https://niskanencenter.org/blog/facts-arent-enough-save-liberal-democracy/.
26. The website for Oxford Dictionaries, "Word of the Year 2016 Is…" page, accessed November 8, 2017, https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016.
27. See, for example: Matthew D'Ancona, *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back* (London: Ebury, 2017), e-book; Jonathan Rose, "Brexit, Trump, and Post-Truth Politics," *Public Integrity*, Vol. 19, No. 6, 555–558; Michael Peters, "Education in a Post-Truth World," *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, Vol. 49, No. 6, 563–566.
28. Steve Tesich, "Government of Lies," *Nation*, January 13, 1992.
29. Ibid., 13.
30. Ibid., 14. Moreover, Tesich cites President George H.W. Bush: "[The] moral dimension of American policy requires us to […] chart a moral course through a world of lesser evils. That's the real world, not black and white. Very few moral absolutes," 13.
31. To be clear, this is a contingent, not a logical, claim. In this article, I am not concerned with arguments pertaining to whether or not metaphysical or metaethical anti-realism necessarily undermine the practical purchase of

moral claims. Rather, my argument is contingent all the way down: given the fact that the diminishment of widespread popular concern with epistemic norms and practices in politics happens to have gone together with a diminishment of the ambition of politically live moral options in the UK and the US, this poses a pragmatic challenge to Rorty's romantic hope that ironism might bolster a more thoroughly kind, liberal, and compassionate political order.

32. By "traditional epistemic norms," I mean little more than what Robert Talisse calls "the norms of truth and responsiveness." These consist of the following: "being a believer commits one to aspiring to truth"; "aspiring to truth" demands that we respond "appropriately to reasons." "[Therefore] responsible believing calls us to the social enterprise of examining, exchanging, testing, and challenging reasons." "Saving Pragmatist Democratic Theory (from Itself)," *Ethics & Politics* 12, No. 1 (2010), 20.
33. Ruud Koopmans and Paul Statham, "Ethnic and Civic Conceptions of Nationhood and the Differential Success of the Extreme Right in Germany and Italy," in *How Social Movements Matter*, ed. M. Giugni, D. McCadam, and C. Tilly (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 228. Special thanks to Markus Holdo for pointing me in the direction of this important concept.
34. Holly McCammon, Harmony Newman, Courtney Sanders Muse, and Teresa Terrell, "Movement Framing and Discursive Opportunity Structures: The Political Successes of the U.S. Women's Jury Movements," *American Sociological Review* 72, No. 5 (2007), 731.
35. On framing more generally, see George Lakoff's *The All New Don't Think of An Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2014).
36. Gove insists that he was in fact trying to be specific rather than general in his objection. His statement reads: "I think that the people of this country have had enough of experts with organisations from acronyms saying […] that they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong, because these people […] are the same ones who got it consistently wrong." See Ian Katz, "Have We Fallen Out of Love with Experts?" BBC News, February 27, 2017, accessed September 9, 2017, http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-39102840.
37. Gove did add, however, "I'm not asking the public to trust me. I'm asking them to trust themselves." This falls rather close to an outright rejection of the value of expertise in democratic decision making. See Henry Mance, "Britain Has Had Enough of Experts, says Gove," *Financial Times*, June 3, 2016, accessed November 15, 2017, https://www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c.
38. Jennifer Rubin, "Interviewers Cannot Let Trump's Lies Fly By," *Washington Post*, December 5, 2016, accessed September 8, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/right-turn/wp/2016/12/05/interviewers-cannot-let-the-lies-fly-by/.

39. Ibid.
40. Alexandra Jaffe, "Kellyanne Conway: WH Spokesman Gave 'Alternative Facts' on Inauguration Crowd," NBC News, January 22, 2017, accessed December 11, 2017, https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/meet-the-press-70-years/wh-spokesman-gave-alternative-facts-inauguration-crowd-n710466.
41. Christopher Rosen, "All the Times Donald Trump Has Called the Media 'Fake News' on Twitter," *Entertainment Weekly*, June 27, 2017, accessed November 10, 2017, http://ew.com/tv/2017/06/27/donald-trump-fake-news-twitter/.
42. Julia Hunt, "'Fake News' Named Collins Dictionary Word of the Year for 2017," *Independent*, November 2, 2017, accessed November 15, 2017, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/fake-news-word-of-the-year-2017-collins-dictionary-donald-trump-kellyanne-conway-antifa-corbynmania-a8032751.html.
43. Daniel Dale and Tanya Talaga, "Donald Trump: The Unauthorized Database of False Things," *Toronto Star*, November 4, 2016, accessed November 15, 2017, https://www.thestar.com/news/world/uselection/2016/11/04/donald-trump-the-unauthorized-database-of-false-things.html.
44. Mattathias Schwartz, "'Facts Are in the Eyes of the Beholder,' Says Roger Stone, Trump Confidant," *Intercept*, March 6, 2017, accessed November 15, 2017, https://theintercept.com/2017/03/06/facts-are-in-the-eye-of-the-beholder-says-roger-stone-trump-confidante-in-exclusive-interview/.
45. Richard Rorty, *PMN*, 176.
46. Richard Rorty, *ORT*, 177.
47. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), xxiii (hereafter cited as *PSH*).
48. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 73 (hereafter cited as *CIS*).
49. Neil Gross recounts this slow but dramatic conversion in detail and underlines the influence of Thomas Kuhn's philosophy of science as well as the reality of academic politics in *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008), 198–233.
50. Matthew Festenstein, "Richard Rorty: Pragmatism, Irony and Liberalism," in *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues,* ed. M. Festenstein and S. Thompson (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 1 (book hereafter cited as *Critical Dialogues*).
51. John Horton, "Richard Rorty: Pragmatism, Irony and Liberalism," in *Critical Dialogues,* 15.
52. Richard Rorty, *EHO*, 1.
53. Matthew Festenstein, in *Critical Dialogues,* 8. Moreover, Richard Shusterman explains that "since Habermas identifies the postmodern with Nietzsche, Rorty's terminological substitution does not affect the sense of their debate [about the desirability of overcoming the Enlightenment's pursuit of epistemological foundations]," "Reason and Aesthetics: Habermas and Rorty," in *Critical Dialogues,* 149.

54. William James, *Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 106.
55. Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Vol. 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 2 (hereafter cited as *TP*).
56. Richard Rorty, *TP,* 21–22.
57. Richard Rorty, *CIS*, 6.
58. This claim arguably constitutes Rorty's neo-pragmatism's most substantial point of departure from classical pragmatism. While Charles Sanders Peirce's idealized definition of truth as the belief that awaits us at the end of inquiry (provided that we inquire long enough and well enough) stands in starkest contrast to Rorty, neither James nor Dewey held that the justification or indeed the truth of a proposition was *entirely* contingent on the existing epistemic standards of an actual community.
59. Richard Rorty, "Putnam and the Relativist Menace," *Journal of Philosophy* 90, No. 9 (1993), 448–449 (hereafter cited as *PRM*).
60. Ibid., 449.
61. Richard Rorty, *CIS*, 54–55.
62. Richard Rorty, *PRM*, 443.
63. Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 185, as cited by Rorty in *ORT,* 6.
64. Richard Rorty, *ORT*, 21–34.
65. Ibid., 193.
66. Ibid., 22.
67. Ibid., 193–194: "I should argue that in recent history of liberal societies, the willingness to view matters aesthetically—to be content to indulge in what Schiller called 'play' and to discard what Nietzsche called 'the spirit of seriousness'—has been an important vehicle of moral progress."
68. Ibid., 198.
69. Ibid., 199.
70. Richard Rorty, *CIS,* 40: "The final victory of poetry in its ancient quarrel with philosophy—the final victory of metaphors of self-creation over metaphors of discovery—would consist in our becoming reconciled to the thought that this is the only sort of power over the world which we can hope to have. For that would be the final abjuration of the notion that truth, and not just power and pain, is to be found out there."
71. Richard Rorty, *ORT*, 191–2.
72. Ibid., 192–193.
73. Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Don't Be Cruel: Reflections on Rortyan Liberalism," in *The Politics of Irony*, eds. D.W. Conway and J.E. Seery (New York: St Martins, 1992), 199–217; Rorty approvingly quotes Judith Shklar's claim that, for liberals, "cruelty is the worst thing," in *CIS*, 74.
74. See Richard Rorty, *PSH*, 77–83, but especially 81: "From this point of view, moral progress is not a matter of an increase of rationality—a gradual

diminution of the influence of prejudice and superstition, permitting us to see our moral duty more clearly. Nor is it what Dewey called an increase of intelligence, that is, increasing one's skill at inventing courses of action which simultaneously satisfy many conflicting demands. People can be very intelligent, in this sense, without having wide sympathies. It is neither irrational nor unintelligent to draw the limits of one's moral community at a national, or racial, or gender border. But it is undesirable—morally undesirable. So it is best to think of moral progress as a matter of increasing sensitivity increasing responsiveness to the needs of a larger and larger variety of people and things. Just as the pragmatists see scientific progress not as the gradual attenuation of a veil of appearance which hides the intrinsic nature of reality from us, but as the increasing ability to respond to the concerns of ever larger groups of people—in particular, the people who carry out ever more acute observations and perform ever more refined experiments—so they see moral progress as a matter of being able to respond to the needs of ever more inclusive groups of people."

75. Richard Rorty, *CIS*, xvi.
76. Richard Rorty, *ORT*, 193.
77. Ibid., 187.
78. Richard Rorty, *TP*, 205.
79. Richard Rorty, *ORT*, 193.
80. Ibid., 200–1.
81. Richard Rorty, *PSH*, 168–74.
82. Richard Rorty, *CIS*, 73–4.
83. See, for example, Matthew Festenstein, "Ethnocentrism and Irony," in *Richard Rorty: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers, Vol. IV,* ed. J. Tartaglia (New York: Routledge, 2009), 100–6 (hereafter cited as *Critical Assessments*).
84. These were helpfully distinguished by Philip Conway, "Post-Truth, Complicity and International Politics," *E-International Relations,* March 29, 2017, accessed November 15, 2017, http://www.e-ir.info/2017/03/29/post-truth-complicity-and-international-politics/.
85. Ibid., 2.
86. Gregory Mellema, *Complicity and Moral Accountability* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 56.
87. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die: What History Reveals About Our Future* (London: Viking, 2018), 199.
88. For more on "political autonomy," see Joshua Cohen, "For a Democratic Society," in *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 86–138.
89. For example, when asked point blank: "How would you define truth in terms of its function in public life?" Rorty answers, "There are two questions here. I think that what people really worry about is truthfulness. They think they are being lied to all the time, and usually they are right. They are being lied to. And they wish that people would tell them the truth. But what they mean here is not

a question of the nature of truth. They just want people to say what they believe, governments to say the same things to the public that they say to other governments, and so on. Truth as a philosophical problem is a question of whether true statements are representations of reality, or whether the notion of representation applies to statements, and so on. This is really technical." In "There Is a Crisis Coming—Interview with Zbigniew Stanczyk," in *Take Care of Freedom and Truth Will Take Care of Itself*, ed. E. Mendietta (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 57.

90. Richard Shusterman, "Reason and Aesthetics between Modernity and Postmodernity: Habermas and Rorty," in *Critical Dialogues,* 146.
91. For an important discussion of the evolution in Rorty's public/private romanticism see Martin Mueller, "From Irony to Robust Serenity—Pragmatic Politics of Religion and Rorty," *Contemporary Pragmatism* 14, No. 3, 334–349.
92. Richard Rorty, *AOC*, 11.
93. Ibid., 13.
94. I strongly suspect that Baldwin would take issue with this, since, in some places, he affirms—*pace* Rorty—that facing unpleasant truths is necessary if we are to begin to tell a story of how we might change the realities expressed by such truths. Consider, for example, "As Much Truth as One Can Bear," *New York Times Book Review*, 1962, reprinted in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. and introduction by Randall Kenan (New York: Pantheon, 2010), 42: "Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced. […] Most of us are about as eager to change as we were to be born, and go through our changes in a similar state of shock." Also see "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?" *New York Times*, July 29, 1979, accessed November 1, 2017, http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-english.html: "The brutal truth is that the bulk of white people in America never had any interest in educating black people, except as this could serve white purposes. It is not the black child's language that is in question, it is not his language that is despised: It is his experience. A child cannot be taught by anyone who despises him, and a child cannot afford to be fooled. A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is that the child repudiate his experience, and all that gives him sustenance, and enter a limbo in which he will no longer be black, and in which he knows that he can never become white. Black people have lost too many black children that way."
95. Remaining for a moment within the African-American intellectual legacy, one notes that even the notion that truth-talk should be reserved to some impersonal "public sphere" is seriously challenged by Lorraine Hansberry's opening of *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* (New York: Signet, 1969), 45: "For some time now—I think since I was a child—I have been possessed of the desire to put down the stuff of my life. That is a commonplace impulse, apparently, among persons of massive self-interest; sooner or later we all do it. And, I am quite

certain, there is only one internal quarrel: how much of the truth to tell? How much, how much, how much!" Special thanks to Cornel West for introducing me to some of Baldwin's and Hansberry's writings with so much sensitivity, joy, and interpretive zest.

96. As cited by Philip Conway, op. cit. note 84.
97. Harriet Swain, "Richard Evans Interview: The Film Denial 'Shows There Is Such a Thing as Truth,'" *Guardian*, February 14, 2017, accessed November 17, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/feb/14/richard-evans-interview-holocaust-denial-film.
98. See, for example: Danny Dorling, *Inequality and the 1%* (London: Verso, 2014); Joseph Stiglitz, *The Great Divide: Unequal Societies and What We Can Do About Them* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2016); Robert B. Reich, *Saving Capitalism: For the Many Not the Few* (New York: Vintage, 2016); Thomas Piketty, *The Economics of Inequality*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2015).
99. Wolfgang Streeck, "The Return of the Repressed," in *The Great Regression*, ed. Heinrich Geiselberger, (Malden, Mass.: Polity, 2017), 159–60.
100. Thanks to my "Life Worth Living" students for introducing me to this term.
101. See, for example, Paolo Mancini, "Media Fragmentation, Party Systems and Democracy," *International Journal of Press/Politics* 18, No. 1 (2013), 43–60; Markus Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Paul Starr, "An Unexpected Crisis: The News Media in Postindustrial Democracies," *International Journal of Press/Politics* 17, 234–242.
102. See Gert J. Biesta, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement: Ethics, Politics, Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Gert Biesta, "Why 'What Works' Still Won't Work: From Evidence-Based Education to Value-Based Education," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 29, No. 5 (2010), 491–503; Michael Fielding, "The Human Cost and Intellectual Poverty of High Performance Schooling: Radical Philosophy, John Macmurray and the Remaking of Person-Centred Education," *Journal of Education Policy* 22, No. 4 (2007), 383–409. Special thanks to Tim Herrick for introducing me to this important literature.
103. Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (Toronto: Vintage, 1966). Many thanks to Carrie Roush for pointing me in the direction of this important book.
104. However, a widespread misconception regarding Trump supporters is that they are primarily working class and under-educated (and therefore unlikely to have ever been introduced to postmodernist intellectual themes). According to Nicholas Carnes and Noam Lupu, Trump's supporters in the Republican primary were mostly affluent people with a similar rate of college degrees as registered Republicans more generally (approximately 30 percent). Moreover, Carnes and Lupu add that the American National Election Study "showed that in November 2016, the Trump coalition looked a lot like it did during the primaries."

See their "It's Time to Bust the Myth: Most Trump Voters Were Not Working Class," *Washington Post*, June 5, 2017, accessed February 2, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/06/05/its-time-to-bust-the-myth-most-trump-voters-were-not-working-class/.

105. *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "Complacency (*n.*)," accessed September 19, 2017, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/complacency.
106. Jason Kawall, "On Complacency," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 43, No. 4 (2006), 343.
107. John Kenneth Galbraith, "In Pursuit of the Simple Truth," *Guardian*, July 28, 1989, as cited in Jason Kawall, ibid.
108. Norman Geras, "Language, Truth and Justice," in *Critical Assessments,* 346. To explain further, holding that the "fact of the matter" is the description that helps us cope best, or the one that our peers let us get away with asserting, or one that is merely coherent with regard to the rules of a specific language game, simply eludes what is at stake when a citizen claims to be the victim of a miscarriage of justice or when unrecognized victims level allegations against purported perpetrators who in turn assert their own side of the story. In those circumstances, justice hinges on one claim being closer to the facts than the other. Thus, Geras contends that Rorty either abandons any robust concern for justice or unduly helps himself to an idea of getting the world right.
109. Richard J. Bernstein, "Philosophy in the Conversation of Mankind," in *Critical Assessments*, 50.
110. In "One Step Forward, Two Steps Backward: Richard Rorty on Liberal Democracy and Philosophy," *Political Theory* 15, No. 4 (1987), 560, Bernstein warns that Rorty's unease with talk of "standards" or "criteria" to evaluate political projects endangers the very project of defending an inclusive, egalitarian liberal democratic ideal: "It is time that Rorty himself should appropriate the lesson of Peirce, 'Do not block the road to inquiry,' and realize that rarified meta-philosophical or meta-theoretical discussion can never be a substitute for struggling to articulate, defend, and justify one's vision of a just and good society. Rorty, who has eloquently called for open conversation, fails to realize how his rhetorical strategies tend to close off serious/playful conversation about liberalism and democracy […] The pragmatic legacy (which Rorty constantly invokes) will only be recovered and revitalized when we try to do for our time what Dewey did in his historical context—to articulate, texture, and *justify* [Bernstein's italics] a vision of a pragmatically viable ideal of communal democracy."
111. Jeffrey Isaac, "Is the Revival of Pragmatism Practical, or What are the Consequences of Pragmatism?" in *A Pragmatist's Progress? Richard Rorty and American Intellectual History*, ed. John Pettegrew (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 167.
112. Although Rorty seems to think, at times, that we can dismiss those who lie, this is problematic because accusing someone of lying typically requires

establishing both that the claim is false and that the speaker has the intention to mislead their addressee. Part of the challenge with Trump is that his intentions are rather hard to ascertain in any given context [for one line of explanation, see *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump: 27 Psychiatrists and Mental Health Experts Assess a President*, ed. Bandy Lee (New York: St Martin's, 2017)]. Moreover, above establishing intention, what is at stake here is determining by what criteria Trump's statements can be said to be false.

113. At least, that is one way of understanding the claims of various Right-wing commentators. See for example, Ann Coulter's *In Trump We Trust*: *E Pluribus Awesome* (New York: Penguin, 2016), especially 1–37; Milo Yiannopoulos, *Dangerous* (Boca Raton: Dangerous Books, 2017); and Danuta Kean, "Milo Yiannopoulos Labels Low Sales Figures of *Dangerous* Memoir 'Fake News,'" *Guardian,* July 13, 2017, accessed November 17, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jul/13/milo-yiannopoulos-labels-low-sales-figures-of-dangerous-memoir-fake-news. In fairness, a more reasonable way of interpreting much of this is that many on the Right are involved in propaganda themselves (see, for example, Carole Cadwalladr, "Robert Mercer: The Big Data Millionaire Waging War on Mainstream Media," *Guardian*, February 26, 2017, accessed November 17, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/feb/26/robert-mercer-breitbart-war-on-media-steve-bannon-donald-trump-nigel-farage. However, for Rorty, the problem remains the following: How, on his view, are we to determine who is telling the truth and who is propagandizing?
114. Michael Phillips, "The Elite Roots of Richard Spencer's Racism," *Jacobin,* December 20, 2016, accessed November 17, 2017, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/12/richard-spencer-alt-right-dallas-texas/.
115. Liam Stack, "Globalism: A Far-Right Conspiracy Theory Buoyed by Trump," *New York Times*, November 14, 2016, accessed November 17, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/15/us/politics/globalism-right-trump.html.
116. Ibid.
117. Ibid.
118. Richard Rorty, "A Pragmatist View of Rationality and Cultural Difference," *Philosophy East and West* 42, No. 4, 581.
119. BBC News US/Canada, "Trump's Executive Order: Who Does Travel Ban Affect?" February 10, 2017, accessed November 17, 2017, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38781302.
120. The outlook on this is not promising, but there is still some measure of hope that a legislative solution might be found before Dreamers are threatened with arrest and deportation. See Brian Bennett, "DACA Negotiations Slow as Trump Demands More than Democrats Will Give," *Los Angeles Times*, November 17, 2017, accessed November 17, 2017, http://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-trump-daca-20171117-story.html.
121. Michael Shear and Maggie Haberman, "Trump Defends Initial Remarks on Charlottesville; Again Blames "Both Sides,'" *New York Times*, August 15,

2017, accessed November 17, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/15/us/politics/trump-press-conference-charlottesville.html.

122. Kate Somers-Dawes, "All the Times Trump Has Called for Violence at His Rallies," March 12, 2016, accessed November 17, 2017, http://mashable.com/2016/03/12/trump-rally-incite-violence/#1PoBEvGYIiqg.
123. Chris Cillizza, "Donald Trump just issued a direct threat to the free and independent media," CNN, October 12, 2017, accessed November 17, 2017, http://www.cnn.com/2017/10/11/politics/donald-trump-media-tweet/index.html.
124. White supremacist activists (who often describe themselves as "alt-Right") and Right-wing Republicans (such as Ann Coulter) have been arguing that they are the victims of censorship and that they are the true advocates of free and open discussion. See, for example, Alheli Picazo, "How the Alt-Right Weaponized Free Speech," *Macleans*, May 1, 2017, accessed January 17, 2018, http://www.macleans.ca/opinion/how-the-alt-right-weaponized-free-speech/. Moreover, after a deadly vehicular attack on anti-racist protesters in Charlottesville, Virginia, on August 12, 2017, Trump maintained that the "alt-left" had been "very, very violent" and that there was blame "on both sides." See Shear and Haberman, 2017, accessed January 21, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/15/us/politics/trump-press-conference-charlottesville.html.
125. I agree with Jennifer Saul that Trump's use of racial "figleaves" not only permit him to appeal to racist voters, it also shifts the norms of public speech. See Jennifer Saul, "Racial Figleaves, the Shifting Boundaries of the Permissible, and the Rise of Donald Trump," *Philosophical Topics*, Vol. 45, No. 2, 97–116 (2017).
126. While I suspect that few informed readers are likely to believe that Trump, his political associates, and most of his supporters earnestly believe themselves to be defenders of tolerance and civility, anecdotal evidence suggests that a sizable number of Trump supporters do. See, for example: Tom McCarthy, "No Regrets: One Year after They Voted for Trump," *Guardian*, October 26, 2017, accessed January 31, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/oct/26/no-regrets-one-year-after-they-voted-for-trump-has-he-delivered. In the case of Brexit, many Leave voters were explicitly motivated by an attachment to the parliamentarian value of sovereign self-determination, and others still were motivated by a Left-wing analysis of the European Union's attachment to neoliberalism. In both groups, many citizens likely believed themselves to be—rightly or wrongly—the defenders of civility, tolerance, and reasoned argument. See, for example, Anonymous academic, "I Voted Brexit—Why Do Academic Colleagues Treat Me Like a Pariah?" *Guardian*, September 15, 2017, accessed January 2, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2017/sep/15/i-voted-for-brexit-why-do-academic-colleagues-treat-me-like-a-pariah.
127. Richard Rorty, *PSH*, 63.
128. Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Essential Peirce* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1992–99), 132.

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