Guardians of the Possibility that Claims Can Be False

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Abstract

It is difficult to be a philosopher in this postmodern era. This is so because philosophers, who heretofore have been the archetype of persons eager to engage in reasoned discourse, regardless of their differences, suddenly seem unable to talk to each other, primarily due to claim by postmoderns that non-postmoderns are naïve in their blindness to the fact that truth the claims cannot be true in any objective sense, and that claims to objectivity have been used maliciously throughout the ages to wield oppression. After exploring some of the seductive arguments of the post-modern position, and suggesting a re-working of the non-post-modern position, this paper will conclude that philosophical educators carry a heavy responsibility for limiting the real-life damage that has been produced by this philosophical truth-storm by siding firmly with its less contentious opposite by becoming guardians of the possibility that claims can be false.

Keywords: post-modern, truth, regimes of truth, realists, falsification.

1. Introduction

It is difficult to be a philosopher in this postmodern era. This is so because philosophers, who heretofore have been the archetype of persons eager and willing to engage in reasoned discourse, regardless of their differences, suddenly seem unable to talk to each other. Though this discord had been described in various ways (Reed, 63-90), its fundamental touchstone is grounded in the claim by postmoderns that non-postmoderns are naïve in their blindness to the fact that truth claims cannot be true in any objective sense, and that claims to objectivity have been used maliciously throughout the ages to oppress. *It is true that homosexuals are mentally ill (just look it up in the annuls of Psychiatry). It is true that females are constitutionally incapable of great scholarship (browse through the genders of the authors who have written great books—including philosophy books!). It is true that blacks are inferior to whites (you don't see any Africans kidnapping white Europeans and sending them into slavery, do you?).* People thus seem to be getting away literally with murder, by cloaking their actions with the veil of truth. Surely, it follows, then, that any serious attempt to de-escalate human harm must include the banning not only of literal armed weapons, but all notions of truth as well.

While on the surface this argument seems to have some merit, we need to recognize that if we take this claim seriously, not only is it hard to be a philosopher, it is hard to imagine being anything—educator, doctor, parent, whatever. If there is no truth, what do you teach students? If there is no truth, how can you evaluate one remedy compared to the next? If there is no truth, there can be no better or worse ways to raise a child, so who cares?

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And that is the problem, **who cares**? Ultimately, it is a belief in the possibility of truth that is the magnet that keeps self-conscious language-users trying to improve their ability to live life well in the face of infinite struggle. And while postmoderns scoff at the Enlightenment idea that humanity in general is somehow making progress toward a better world (though Steven Pinker (2018) offers a range of empirical evidence to contradict this postmodern view), if, in doing so, they undermine the belief that individuals can construct better or worse ways to deal with the challenges they face, then for sure, why not just wallow in the falsity of the fake world described so eloquently by Baudrillard (1994)?

In what is to follow, I will try to sketch out a viable position for non-postmoderns (whom I refer to as "optimists") in the face of this challenge. We will begin with a summary of why these two positions have difficulty engaging in dialogue. It will then be suggested that bridging this impasse might be helped by introducing the notion of "truthier." This will be followed by brief sketches as to why Foucault and Rorty are so suspicious of the notion of truth, and briefly explore what insights may be gleaned from their positions. We will then move to real life and, on the one hand, show how the postmodern scorn of truth shows itself in a personal one-on-one encounter, while on the other, move the focus to journalists, whom *Time Magazine* has called "The Guardians" (*Time Magazine*, 2018), and who, quite literally, stake their lives in defense of truth. It is from this article that the present one borrows its name.

Ultimately this tangle about truth lays down the gauntlet to those of us who are philosophical educators as to how to guide our students (whether they be primary, secondary, or university students) in their thinking about this issue. Do we hold up the "Guardians of Truth" as role models, or do we pied piper them down the road of postmodern truth-bashers? The answer that will be suggested is this: we carry a heavy responsibility for limiting the real-life damage that has been produced by this philosophical truth-storm by siding firmly with its seemingly less contentious opposite: namely, that it is possible for claims to be false. If we are guardians of this possibility, we will, in turn, be able to support the creative impulse to imagine every conceivable alternative to any given suggestion, situation or problem, as long as we also assume that it will then be critically assessed as to whether the reasoning or evidence supporting the suggestion is faulty (relative to other alternatives).

This position is one that was most famously promulgated by Karl Popper (1934, 1960a, 1960b) and one that has the potential to flourish in the Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CPI)—the heart of the Philosophy for/with Children (P4/wC) movement—*as long as* facilitators of CPIs recognize the importance of being such a guardian, and so eschew the false democratic relativist seduction (along with the titillation of being a member in good standing of the latest postmodern fad) of assuming that everyone's opinion is as good as everyone else's.

And so, let us begin.

2. Why dialogue between postmoderns and non-postmoderns is so difficult?

Faith in reason has been, for many of us, the source of an abiding optimism that somehow we can learn to bridge the divides that we humans "naturally" create (a view shared by Joshua Greene (2014) who writes so eloquently about the inevitability of *Moral Tribes)*. We "optimists" believe that surely we can reason together that skin color is not a valid indicator of merit; that having a different religion does not justify murder; that poverty cannot be equated with laziness.

But what happens when reason (and its presumed goal: truth) becomes the divide? What happens when this tribal tendency is articulated as "us" against "those who worship at the alter of logos"? The divide, then, becomes nuclear. Any attempt to dissipate this kind of "othering" can, by definition, only entrench it. If the "logos others" try to reason that this divide is not helpful,

by that very reasoning, they are reinforcing their position as those who worship at the alter of logos. And those on the "us against logos" side remain utterly immune from critique, as any kind of "reasonable" critique is precisely the sort of move that is definitional of those "others" who worship at the alter of logos and hence, is inadmissible.

And this rabbit hole is so deep and so dark that those who would argue against "othering" of this sort are ipso facto sucked into "othering" those who are "othering," and so inevitably partake in a move that they are recommending against. This kind of othering, in other words, renders the optimist potentially powerless and speechless.

Those who worship at the alter of logo might still try to defend their position by first acquiescing to the charges that logos can be dogmatic and moralistic. Indeed, logos IS dogmatic and moralistic: logos will indeed dogmatically defend, for instance, the moral claim that difference in skin color alone cannot be justified as grounds for discrimination. And those who worship at the alter of logos will also admit that there have been atrocities and power moves that have been committed in the name of truth that turned out to be patently untrue. But they will argue that atrocities and power moves have been committed in the name of love as well, and that in both these cases, the most reasonable move is to get rid of the bathwater only.

But, none of this can possibly bridge the divide, can it (?), because this argument is reasonable and hence, by definition, is not admissible to those intent on "othering" reason itself.

It would seem that once this divide is established, loyalty toward one side or the other can only be a matter of aesthetic judgment and emotional appeal; a decision about what kind of human being one wants to be. It would seem that once this divide is established, the world toward which the optimist is striving cannot be.

Speaking as an optimist, I would recommend to other optimists that rather than engaging in a battle that cannot be won, they focus, instead, on cleaning up their own houses: that they discard the tendency to embrace righteousness (Haidt, 2012), but rather, (1) try to soften the edges of what others have found worrisome of about truth and reason, and (2) try to dive into the opposing position in order to glean whether that perspective enhances one's understanding of the issue at hand.

It is to these two moves that we will now turn, first by articulating the advantage of adopting the notion of "truthier" (what I have elsewhere referred to as "truth with a small t", 2009, 29-33) instead of sticking firmly to the absolutist notion of "Truth," and then by visiting briefly with Foucault and Rorty, both of whom have deep worries about the notion of truth.

3. "Truthier"

The term "truth" is common in science, but it is not an accurate turn of phrase. A more accurate way of speaking about claims that are held to be true would be to refer to them as claims that have not yet been proven false (Gardner, 2009: 28). What a good scientist does, when faced with an intriguing hypothesis, is to flip it on its head and try and prove it false (the null hypothesis). Only after s/he has failed to prove the theory false (i.e., it is not the case that theory X is not true) is s/he justified in proclaiming its truth but even then only conditionally: s/he must always be open to reevaluating her position in light of new reasoning and/or evidence (Gardner, 2009: 28).

Always being open to reevaluate one's position seems admirable until we reexamine our assumptions about truth. Truth, after all, carries with it the notion of infallibility. If a claim is not "True" for all time, then it is not "True" at all. Something cannot be True now, and false later (Gardner, 2009: 29).

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The answer to this apparent conundrum is that when scientists use the word "true," they are not referring to a product that is independent of the process. And since the process is not one of verification but falsification, when a scientist says that a theory or claim is true, what she means is that "a rigorous, objective, multifaceted and public attempts to prove the theory false have been futile." Since this phrase is cumbersome, and since theoretically the opposite of being false is true, labelling it true with a lower-case "t" – as opposed to absolute Truth with a capital "T" – seems fairly innocuous.

On the other hand, using the label "true," even with a lower-case "t," is only innocuous if those within the discourse understand the truth-seeking process; that this process requires that one first try to falsify each proposal in and of itself (local sufficiency: Gardner, 2009: 33) and thereafter compare its relative adequacy to competing alternatives (global sufficiency: Gardner: 33). Given the fact that the winner of the truth-seeking process is always relative to alternatives, and given the fact that it is impossible for we mortals to ever eliminate all possible contenders for Truth but one, we can know for sure, that we can never reach Truth with a capital T. Since using the word "true" always carries with it the potential that someone may think we mean True, with a capital "T",[1] it may be helpful to refer to the survivor of this two-step process as "truthier," as it will remind us that this accolade is a function both of the number of alternatives considered and the rigor of the falsification process. It will also remind us that the "truth" to which mortals have access is never absolute, and that, as in science, so in ethics, we must always be open to reevaluating our positions in light of competing alternatives[2] (Gardner, 2009: 31).

With this softening of the notion of "Truth" by adopting the notion of "truthier," let us move now to two figures who are deeply worried about truth to see if, given this move, any complementary energy might emerge.

4. Foucault

Only two months before he died in 1984, Michael Foucault gave a series of lectures at the Collège de France entitled *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II*. Through a detailed analysis of various works from Antiquity, Foucault argues that, like Socrates, it is imperative that all of us recognize that care for ourselves requires that we have the courage to tell the truth – or what he refers to as "parrhesia" (free-spokenness) (2). He says:

> ...in his act of telling the truth, the individual constitutes himself and is constituted by others as a subject of a discourse of truth, the form in which he presents himself to himself and to others as someone who tells the truth (3).

This emphasis of truth-telling as the concluding remarks of his life's work may seem at odds with the common assumption that it is Foucault who ushered in an era of post-truth (defined by Oxford dictionaries as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Fake News, 2019).

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[1] Thus, Reed and Johnson (1999) make the claim that non-postmoderns are after "absolute certainty. They are after a truth which is indubitable, which is proven, and which is beyond suspicion" (p. 68).

[2] Lee McIntyre (2015) echoes this view when he says "No scientific theory, no matter how well corroborated by the evidence can ever be proven absolutely true." "*All* scientific belief. . . is tentative and open ended." "In science, truth is a guiding ideal, not a destination. . . . it nonetheless leads us *toward* truth and so is a model of respect for the formulation of true beliefs" (p. 9).

Yet Foucault emphasizes in these last lectures that when he says it is imperative that we all tell the truth, this cannot mean simply saying how you feel or whatever comes to mind. Such a person, Foucault says:

> …then becomes and appears as an impotent chatterbox, someone who cannot restrain himself, or at any rate, someone who cannot index-link his discourse to a principle of rationality and truth (9-10).

Thus, the 50 million-dollar question with regard to telling the truth is that, given Foucault's own assumptions about the circular relation between power and truth – that the former constitutes what we take as true, while the latter reinforces the former, how can a potential "parrhesiast" know whether s/he is authentically telling the truth, or merely parroting the views of the powerful forces to which s/he is subject?

Lorenzini (2015) argues that an explanation lies in noting that the notion of "regimes of truth" changed fundamentally for Foucault, beginning with his 1980 lecture at the Collège de France. In that lecture, Lorenzini claims that Foucault adopted the dominent epistemological conception of truth, and rejected the notion that one might speak of "regime of truth" as one does of a political regime. "Truth, if it is really true, does not need a supplement of force, an enforcement, a supplement of vigor and constraint to be accepted."

Lorenzini goes on to say, however, that the notion of "regimes of truth" nonetheless remains helpful in that "under every argument, every reasoning, every "evidence," there is a certain assertion that doesn't belong to the logical realm, but rather is a sort of commitment…" "…No game of truth has the privilege of being "pure": every game of truth is necessarily linked to a regime of truth that determines the obligations of the individuals who are implicated in it…"

It is this notion of "regimes of truth" that has played mischief in the public at large, with Rorty (1998) noting, for example, that

> "Some over enthusiastic Foucauldians, alas, have tried to make the term 'rational persuasion' inapplicable to *anything*: they have done so by treating even the most judicious, courteous and apparently unfettered parliamentary of academic debate as an instance of "violence," because certain alternatives that the participants consider unworthy of serious consideration are 'marginalized'" (p. 93).

Mischief aside, however, keeping the notion of "regime of truth" in our back pockets may be helpful in reminding us that, once under the influence of such a regime (which we always are – see reference above to *Moral Tribes*), we need to beware that our base-line assumptions, which are inevitably implicated in our identities, may make it difficult to see the positives aspect of opposing positions. Such an awareness, in turn, might help dissipate the intractability of inter-regime clashes that are clearly evident in politics, (liberals versus conservatives), religion (sects even within the same religion), in general customs (e.g., the West's contempt for Eastern modesty), as well as in academia: materialists vs. non-materialist, behaviorists versus non-behaviorists, Marxists versus non-Marxists, and so on. Keeping alive this notion of a regime of truth may also turn out to be an important antidote to Kuhn's notion of paradigms (1996), as it at least leaves open the possibility of "inter-regime communication" in a way that inter-paradigm communication does not.

So being alert to the possibility that what you take to be true may be more a function of regime loyalty than considered reason is an important step forward toward "truth." However, it does nothing to solve the original problem of how a so-called parrhesiast can know that s/he is telling the truth and not simply parroting the dictates of the regime to which s/he is subject.

Looking once again at Foucault's last lectures, since more than 40% of this work is devoted to describing the Cynic, it would seem that he is implicitly advocating that we follow in

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the Cynic's footsteps whom he describes as a militant (pp. 280-285), who battles against every propriety, custom, convention, institution, law, and attitude, in her aspiration to change the world.

This suggestion that we become parrhesiasts by bashing away at all that is accepted, or common practice, harmonizes well with the new popularity of Freire's (2000) notion of bashing away at oppressive structures, as well as the recent emphasis in education on "questioning." And echoing this view, Moghtader in his book *Foucault and Educational Ethics* (2015), argues that is it imperative that in education we problematize what is considered normal (p. 10), that critique as an attitude and activity is absolutely essential in transforming the subject (pp. 18-20), and that it is critical that students question the regimes of truth (p. 97).

Interestingly, bashing away at what is considered normal also seems like a project right at home in a falsification truth-seeking process described above. However, there are two dangers lurking in this emphasis on cynical critique. One is that a deeper look suggests that such a "regime" is underpinned by a kind of "original sin" mentality with regard to human kind: if it is human-made, it must be bad. It thus gives rise to the image of a self-destructive psychosis hitting the crew of the Ship of Theseus driving them to bash away at all the planks of the ship at the same time[3]. Otto Neurath (1921), an original member of the Vienna Circle uses exactly this metaphor when arguing that science doesn't need an unchangeable solid foundation; we could continuously replace old truths with new truths, as long as we don't try to do it all at the same time. Though slightly different in its intent, Matt Lipman (1991: 16) also uses a boat metaphor: that like a captain of a ship, in a CPI, one tacks one way, and then another, but always goes forward. Gardner (2009: 30) uses the more modern metaphor of a jet engine that we go forward towards truth by throwing out what is false. In all cases, though, the integrity of the structure as a whole is critical in making any kind of progress. One need not be a misanthrope, in other words, in order to be a truth-teller.

The second danger in promulgating critique alone is that such cynics are in danger of puffing themselves up with arrogant holier-than-thou attitudes solely on the basis that they are bashing away at conventional wisdom in a way that others are not. Such wholesale critique is not worthy of admiration. As Popper was at pains to point out (1960a: 134-5), in order for critique to do any useful work at all, one must first come up with a myriad of creative intuitive and bold (1960b: 191) ideas and conjectures that are only thereafter subject to falsification in order to test their potential worth. Creative positive interesting and relevant (Popper, 1960b: 190-191) suggestions that are potential answers to our problems (p. 190) are what is to be admired, otherwise, critique is just barren and destructive (p. 189).[4]

In conclusion, then, while critique is to be admired, it must be focused on one precise bounded issue at a time, and accompanied by a genuine attempt to articulate a positive alternative. This is an important principle for all facilitators of CPI's: that they be encouraged to avoid CPI's that are little more than pity-parties, and instead ask participants to suggest alternatives to structures, institutions and actions with which they disapprove.

5. Rorty

When my 80-pound Rottweiler puppy, Tsara, sees "the cat on the mat," she will react on assumption that this is **true,** not—as Rorty (1999) claims humans do – because of some language game or because she is able to persuade a large portion of her fellow canines that she is

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[3] Since assumptions about truth are the nails that keep the planks of any convention in place in the first place, turning one's back on the possibility of truth has the same impact.

[4] This sort of barren and destructive smugness was painfully evident at the start of 2019 when the British Parliament voted down Teresa May's Brexit plan by historic margins despite no one offering even a hint of a positive alternatives.

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justified in that belief. She starts the chase because she has an acute Darwinian sense of what is and is not true, or real, as a function of her past bodily interactions with the world. She is, as am I, a realist.

Rorty claims to be an anti-realist, at least in the sense of trying to show that realists who believe that they can tap into reality as it is in itself (p. 72), to understand reality in a "view-from-nowhere" are wrong (p. 45, p. 68). But neither Tsara or I are realists in that sense. Indeed, such "view-from-nowhere realists," or what might be called using Kant's phraseology "noumenal realists," are, it seems to me, non-existent (a position in line with Charles Taylor, Rorty, p. 86) unless one counts Searle who claims that it is at least possible to imagine a world of molecules without an embodied perceiver in a way that imagining blue solid objects in such a world is not (Searle, 1992: 211).

So perhaps the more apt description of Tsara and me (again using Kant's terminology) is that we are "phenomenal realists" in the sense that we believe that our sense of reality, *whether we like it or not*, emerges as a function of our continuing bodily interaction with world (this wall is solid relative to my body but would not be if I were intelligent electron). And the stability of these beliefs in the real world – about whether or not it is true that "the cat is on the mat," – endure as a function of the fit between inter-sensory predictions – that, once the chase is initiated, there is a fluffy solid object that yells "meow" and scampers away (a position that mirrors Samuel Johnson's refutation of Berkeley Idealism[5] by kicking, and hence feeling, a stone after it has been perceived).

What is important about being a "phenomenal realist," as opposed to an anti-realist, is that it allows one to make a distinction between self-world concepts over which I, as an individual, have no control (a rose is a rose, is a rose), and self-other concepts, such as "What is fair?" "What is just?" which are ones that demand my input. The latter fall far more easily under Rorty's rubric of language games than the former, and hence, such a restriction helps us see what is important and insightful about Rorty's position. Interestingly, this distinction between self-world and self-others is one that Wolf and Gardner (2018) argue is important for youngsters to understand, not because youngsters tend to be Roritarians, but, rather, because they tend to be the opposite: since they have no input on what counts as a cat, they assume that, likewise, they have no input into what counts as fair.

A second advantage of being a phenomenal realist is that it helps us to make an important distinction between two different ways that the word "objective" is used. Though Rorty would disagree (p. 6, p. 29, p. 63) and call us "metaphysical activists" (p. 29), a phenomenal realist can argue that the term "objective" can be used when making a claim about "matters of fact" in the phenomenal world. This sense of objective, let's call it "objectivity 1," finds its meaning in juxtaposition to "subjective appearance" in the sense that minds can't just wish cats on and off mats. This sense of objective, which is appropriately used within the self-world conceptual framework, is ultimately grounded in the correspondence theory of truth (something Rorty is trying strenuously to deny).

Within the self-other conceptual framework, i.e., when we are talking about values, there is much merit to Rorty's suggestion that we toss out the use of "objective" in the above sense. Rorty says "we deny that the search for objectivity is a search for reality and urge that it be seen instead as a search for the widest possible intersubjective agreement" (p. 63).

Still, one gets into a tangle, as Rorty does, when pressed to explain how appeal to the widest possible audience is anything more than a fallacious "appeal to the crowd." Rorty specifically denies that this notion of intersubjective justification is a matter of counting heads (p. 55), and tries to find a way out by appealing to "better audiences" (p. 22). Since Rorty wants to get

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[5] https://askaphilosopher.org/2015/10/13/when-dr-johnson-kicked-the-stone/.

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rid of any notion of objectivity, he is blocked from borrowing from Pierce (1955: 5-22) the notion of the ideal community of inquiry whose primary descriptive is "objectivity" in what we can refer here to here as "sense 2": that by subjecting claims to opposition in communal inquiry, we can be more assured that our views are not colored by special interests, ideology, willful blindness, and so on. "Objectivity in sense 2," in other words, finds meaning in juxtaposition to the notion of "subjective bias": that we know our minds can change our perception of reality, so beware. This is in contrast to "objectivity in sense 1": that we know that there are parts of reality that our minds cannot change, so beware.

Being a phenomenal realist, thus, has many advantages, so the question arises as to why Rorty adopts such an adamant anti-realist and anti-truth position. The answer seems to rest with Rorty's view that the notion of truth does no work (p. 19). Once I have come up with the best possible justification, I cannot do anything else to show that a claim is true, so why not just say that the claim is justified? Why add true?

This is an important challenge, particularly since we have already conceded Rorty's point that, when using the word "true," we are not referring to a product that is independent of the truth-seeking process. So why not go along with Rorty and toss truth? The answer is that since the phenomenal realist believes that, for all practical purposes, there really are real lions, tigers and bears, it follows that the true/false distinction carries with it a unique normative force that is tied to the baseline value of survival. Clearly, it is absolutely imperative that all animals teach their offspring to be what Rorty pejoratively calls "well-oiled representation machines" (32) and to "get it right" when it comes to dealing with real-world threats. And this quest for truth for physical survival built into all animate beings, in turn, migrates into the quest for the survival of "who it is that I want to be" for self-conscious entities. Hence the urgency to answer such questions as "Is it true that this is fair?" Is it true that this is just?" Without this notion of truth, the point of attempting to justify one's claims to wider or better audiences evaporates. [6]

Rorty is unmoved by this argument and so, in claiming that the justification can be measured as a function of the quantity and/or quality of the audience persuaded, Rorty takes his place near or at the head of the pack of Postmodernism. Given Rorty's project, however, we should note that the title "*post*modern" is really a misnomer as it fits just as well under the distinctly *pre*modern schema of the Sophists (you should enhance your rhetorical skills to convince an ever wider audience) or the Rationalists (the only thing that counts is in the mind). This is turn should alert us to the fact that, to do justice to Rorty's position, an extensive review of multiple major trends in the history of philosophy would be required (empiricism versus rationalism, early versus later Wittgenstein, Kant versus Hegel, justification versus causation, and so on).

For that reason, let us revert back to our original goal of working out a position that a philosophical educator might feel justified to embrace in light of Rorty's long shadow. My suggestion is that we should be comfortable with leaving Rorty behind for the following six reasons.

(1) It is not clear how one can coherently make the claim that "it is true that there is no truth," nor is it clear, even on Rorty's own terms, how he can consider his position justified given

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[6] Crispin Wright (1992), who takes on this notion of reduction to justification only, argues that warranted assertibility and truth are distinct in that although aiming at one is, necessarily, aiming at the other, success in one need not be success in the other (19). To this Rorty answers "the fact that beliefs can be justified without being true does not entail that two norms are invoked. …It merely show that what can be justified to some audiences cannot be justified to others" (27). Though we ought to note that it is not evident what Rorty could possibly mean by saying that a claim could be justified but not true, as on his reduction, this collapses into saying that a claim is justified and not justified.

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that even he admits that his viewpoint appeals to a much smaller audience than that of the realist (p. 41).

(2) Nor is it evident how one can, on the one hand, claim that we should appeal to wider and wider audiences while on the other saying that there are no such things as external objects, and hence no people to make up an audience.

(3) The whole project is shockingly anthropocentrically arrogant in that the use symbolic language (which is most obviously pronounced in the human animal) takes up all the oxygen in the room, while the living body, which is common to all animals, and whose survival depends on "getting it right," is noticeably absent.[7]

(4) Since believing that one could be wrong depends on believing that one could be right,[8] and since a healthy belief in one's own fallibility is absolutely essential for opening up the possibility to being open to a better and deeper understanding of any situation, paradoxically a belief in truth, and hence its opposite, will help to knock us off our pedestals of certainty (Burton, 2008).

(5) Since the motive for engaging in the difficult sometimes arduous task of inquiry depends on the magnet of truth that, in turn, ultimately gets its value from survival (either of the body or the self), throwing out truth will magnify the seduction of just believing whatever one wants to believe.

(6) Embracing Rorty's position that "to say that truth is our goal is merely to say something like: we hope to justify our belief to as many and as large an audience as possible" (p. 39), is to adopt an attitude that does little good and much harm, at least in the sense of contributing to the disorientation that is rampant in Trump's world (though, of course, not just in US). *Let's get as many people as possible to believe that more migrants are slipping into the United States than ever, though, those who are paid to keep track, say the reverse. Let's get as many people as possible to believe that the killing of students in Tiananmen Square was justified because otherwise they would have overrun the Chinese army. Let's get as many people as possible to believe that the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia had nothing to do with the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoogi because Crown Princes, after all, don't do that sort of thing. Let's get as many people as possible to believe that there is no such thing as climate change (well that should be easy given the oceans of money available to Big Oil).*[9]

In an interview with *The Guardian*[10] while touring the UK to promote his new book *From Bacteria to Bach and Back* (2018), American philosopher Daniel Dennett, in discussing the recent upheavals in contemporary politics said the following: "Philosophy has not covered itself in glory in the way it has handled this. 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.

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[7] Rorty recognizes and simply dismisses this worry and overtly claims that "we have no duties to anything nonhuman" (p. 127).

[8] The very idea of error or of doubt (in its normal straightforward sense) implies the idea of an objective truth that we may fail to reach (Popper, 1960b: 186).

[9] In a 2018 *National Post* article entitled "It's true, Humanity is winning," Rober Fulford, writes: A year ago, Donald Trump said, "The murder rate in our country is the highest it's been in 47 years, right?" No, dead wrong. The rate is close to historic lows, at less than half its peak. But Trump wasn't lying. He had heard that idea somewhere, and probably it felt right to him, so he said it. And he promised to end this American carnage." This actually matches the public perception. During the 1992-2015, a majority of Americans told pollsters that they believed violent crime in the US was steadily increasing, though violent crime rate was steadily decreasing all those years. Thus Rorty's appeal to ever wider audiences.

[10] https://www.philosophytalk.org/blog/postmodernism-blame-post-truth.

They are responsible for the intellectual fad that made it respectable to be cynical about truth and facts."

Disregard for truth, however, is not evident only in world events; its invisible harm shows up in ordinary person-to-person communicative interchanges – something of which we all ought to be aware.

6. Scorn for truth in the most ordinary of interchanges

Scorn for truth is found not just in philosophy nor in obviously self-serving political pronouncements; it also invades, in the most insidious way, ordinary real-world communicative interaction. For that reason, we all need to be alert to that possibility, so that we are not flummoxed, as a Canadian Professor of Philosophy (P) was in 2018, when engaging in a perfectly ordinary informal conversation with a first-year university student (S).

P: So, you are from Iraq?

S: Yes (with a bit of a grimace)

P: How long have you been in Canada?

S: About three years.

P: I suspect you have some difficult memories.

S: Things are terrible in Iraq. A lot of my family is still there. All the fighting is awful. It is practically lawless. I hate the Americans.

P: I can understand why you say that.

S: You don't understand! Everything is all their fault! The Shia and the Sunni all got along fine until the Americans starting stirring up trouble. And I know why they are continuing to stir up trouble. If there were no factions in the Muslim world, we would be the strongest group in the world. The Americans know that. That is why they are ensuring the Shia and Sunni keep fighting each other.

P: But, Ramni, The Shia and Sunni have been fighting each other since Mohammed died in 632. America only came into existence in 1783. So, the Shia and the Sunni were killing each other for more than 1000 years before America even came into existence.

S: I don't care. That is what is what I need to believe. If it weren't for America, I know that the Shia and the Sunni would not be fighting each other. I will argue with anybody about that. It is important for me to believe that, so that is what I believe.

It is a sad day to hear a university student say, "I will believe that I need to believe." Still, a silver lining in the above black cloud can be found in the fact that this student eventually enrolled in a critical thinking course that required an emersion into strategies of finding "truthier" answers to real-life questions that students faced. What was particularly interesting was this student's comment that she was intrigued by the suggestion that what she should count as true was not up to her. She said it never occurred to her. So, contra Dennett, perhaps philosophy can actually do some good after all.

7. In defense of truth

In stark opposition to post-truth pressures, there are a whole group of people who quite literally stake their lives in defense of truth. These are the courageous journalists whom *Time Magazine* named as the 2018 "Person of the Year." Edward Felsenthal, in the article "The Choice,"

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writes that "From Russia to Riyadh to Silicon Valley, manipulation and abuse of truth is the common thread in so many of this year's major headlines, an insidious and growing threat to freedom" (p. 44). And he goes on to argue that while the press sometimes gets it wrong, nonetheless, for their effort in pursuit of greater truth, for their insistence on speaking up and speaking out, a tactic that saw 52 journalists murdered in 2018 (p. 45) and 262 imprisoned in 2017 (some for life), we are all in their debt.

In the same issue, Karl Vick, writes, "efforts to undermine factual truth, and those who honestly seek it out, call into doubt the functioning of democracy" (p. 57). "We can't reason together if we don't know what we are talking about. But the information must be trusted" (p. 57).

So why should we trust the information that journalists provide? Well, for one, journalism is a profession bound by five core principles,[11] the first of which is "truth and accuracy." The alternative (which somewhere over two thirds of Americans embrace, Vick, p. 62) is social media, which is notoriously populated by self-serving manipulators, and technically designed to solidify personal bias.

According to Thomas Jefferson our freedom depends on a free press, and he even went so far as to say that, if given the choice between government and newspapers, he would do without government (Vick, p. 65). He would rejoice in recognizing journalists as heroes.

8. Conclusion

In his book detailing the neuroscience of how we make decisions, Jonah Lehrer (2010), makes the case similar to the one articulated by Daniel Kahneman (2013), that there are two kinds of thinking: the fast kind in which alternatives are assessed unconsciously (p. 18) as a function of predictions of dopamine hits (emotional rewards) (p. 36), and the slow kind that involves rational thought. He argues that rationality would virtually never kick in unless we not only made mistakes, but focused on learning from them (p. 52). Lehrer calls this the "oh, shit!" circuit (p. 38) and argues that "the best decision makers are students of error, determined to learn from what went wrong" (p. 250).

However, as Popper has pointed out (1960b: 186), "the very idea of error or of doubt (in its normal straightforward sense) implies the idea of an objective truth that we may fail to reach." So, if we throw out truth in order to placate our postmodern friends, then we throw out error, and if we throw out error, we will entrench this post-truth era in which decisions are made as a function of whatever emotive script we happen to have introjected. The result will not only be the loss of truth, the loss of reason, and the loss of democracy, it will ring the death knell for both individual autonomy and human dignity.

We, who are philosophical educators, and hence, presumably, devoted to the pursuit of wisdom, have a responsibility protect all in our circle of influence from this utterly dehumanizing outcome. It is for that reason that it is imperative that we professionals, like our journalistic cousins, adopt a professional ethic that ensures that we are committed to be guardians of the possibility that claims can be false.[12]

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[11] https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/who-we-are/5-principles-of-journalism.

[12] I am happy to note that a very recent and excellent P4C book by Topping, Trickey, and Cleghorn, entitled *A Teacher's Guide to Philosophy for Children* (2019) devotes an entire chapter to making the case that all whiffs of post-truth assumptions must be dissipated with vigor from philosophical education.

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Acknowledgements

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