The Ballistics of Inquiry in a Post-Truth Age

Dave Beisecker
The University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Winner of the Glenn Joy Award

I. A POST-TRUTH AGE?

Echoing an iconic cover from the '60s, an April 2017 issue of *Time Magazine* featured no image at all, but rather asks, "Is Truth Dead?" Many shudder at the specter that we have entered a new, so-called "Post-Truth" age, in which truth has been toppled from its perch as the *summum bonum* of thought and inquiry. Wouldn't such a world only give aid to those anti-intellectual troglodytes who wish to dismiss the value of science and other responsible inquiry as "fake news," inconveniences which can be brushed aside simply by advancing "alternative facts?" Absent truth, how can we value honesty in our political discourse? Indeed, what would become of philosophy itself, if truth no longer served as its norm or highest aim? In a recent advertising campaign, *The New York Times* reassures us that The Truth, though hard to find and hard to know, is nevertheless "more important now than ever."

At the same time, recent accounts in the popular press have sought to pin our current anti-intellectual climate upon forces from within the academy itself. In particular, it has been suggested that pernicious elements of the American pragmatist tradition have paved the way for truth's demise. For instance, Christopher Scalia (and son of the Supreme Court Justice) writes in *The Washington Post* that the pragmatist label "could very well lend Trump that always-coveted air of gravitas, gilding his unpredictable and inconsistent ideas with a semblance of respectability and intellectual seriousness."[1]

To which, defenders of the tradition respond that American pragmatism,

correctly understood, is just as committed to objective truth and reality as other perennial philosophies. If there are villains and co-opters within that tradition, they would have to be misguided followers of Richard Rorty (who after all was the eponymous subject of a 2003 BBC4 documentary entitled "The Man Who Killed Truth").

Such is the view of the prominent contemporary pragmatist Cheryl Misak. In *The American Pragmatists*, Misak draws an opposition between those pragmatists who follow Peirce and endorse a substantial, intersubjective norm of truth and those who follow either James by adopting more subjective or individualistic notions of the aims of inquiry, or Dewey by subscribing to a picture of truth as "mere" warranted assertibility. Misak staunchly advocates a pragmatism of a neo-Peircean variety. Her story is one in which self-styled pragmatists who have urged us to follow the insidious paths blazed by James and Dewey have wrought untold damage to the pragmatist label. In her eyes, the chief villain is indeed Richard Rorty, who famously aimed to do away with any account of truth as an accurate representation of an antecedent inquirer-independent reality. Rather, Rorty is notorious for suggesting that truth-talk is merely a salutary way of speaking about what we can get away with saying (perhaps in the long-term). So Rorty appears then to elevate eloquence as an intellectual virtue over any concern for actually getting things right. Misak is rightly appalled by any flat-footed understanding of that idea, and so she cautions us against being taken in by so-called "neo-pragmatists" who, in Rorty's wake, would try to convince us that we could get by with some insubstantial account of truth, or more accurately, some purely deflationary account of truth-talk.

All of which puts me in a rather awkward position. For I happen to share that Rortyan suspicion that truth is an idle notion that has perhaps outlived its usefulness as a concept fit for heavy philosophical lifting. At the same time, I don't wish to give any aid and comfort to the philistines with their cynical nihilism regarding intellectual norms. Stranger still, I am a serious and generally sympathetic reader of Peirce—though not so much enamored by the bits that captivate Misak. Elsewhere, I have argued that a proper and serious understanding of logic need not involve any great appeal to a substantive notion of truth. In this paper, I extend that claim to a proper and serious understanding of empirical and other responsible inquiry. My job, then, is to tell you how we may yet "Remain calm, and carry on" in a world in which the notion of truth no longer does any work.

II. Misak: Truth as The Regulative Ideal of Inquiry

Articulating what might be called the common conception of the aim of inquiry, Misak endorses Peirce's contention that it is a "fundamental hypothesis" of the method of science that:

> There are Real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them; those realities affect our sense according to regular laws, and, though our sensations are as different as our relations to the objects, yet, by taking advantage of the laws of perception, we can ascertain by reasoning how things really are, and any man, if he have sufficient experience, and reason enough about it, will be led to the one true conclusion. (Peirce CP 5.384)

Accordingly, Misak tells us that since an appropriately "scientific" method of inquiry is one that "takes experience seriously," its results are not simply what this or that inquirer chooses them to be (Misak 80). In her eyes, the chief virtue of the scientific method is that its pursuit allows inquirers to overcome their specific biases or idiosyncrasies—contingent features about their history, personal inclinations, and so on. For this reason, the differences between individual inquirers pursuing inquiry in accordance with scientific methods would—ideally, and in the long run—wash out, and they would come to a consensus upon what we would understand to be reality or "the facts."[2]

Thus, while Misak generally (and, I think, wisely) shuns Peirce's talk of an "ideal end of inquiry" or beliefs that an inquiring community is "fated" to believe, she nevertheless thinks that there is content to the notion of a stable and lasting truth of the matter to which our beliefs, assertions, and inquiries ultimately answer. An acceptable resolution to inquiry would be one that is ultimately defensible across challenge coming from any potential quarter. In our very aspiration that doubts and disputes within inquiry admit of resolution, our notion of inquiry itself commits us to a realism about the way things are. Inquiry itself, to be worthy of the name, needs to understand itself as aiming at the truth—as animated by a faith that were it to be pursued long enough and well enough, we inquirers would arrive at "the" (a?) single best answer to any given question.[3] A substantial notion of truth is thus a regulative ideal for honest inquiry.

For Misak, pragmatism's fundamental insight is that philosophical conceptions need to be elucidated within the context of our best practices. At this point, Misak points to the work of Huw Price showing that the pragmatic role that truth plays in our discursive practices is that of making sense of disagreement. Price begins by noting that for several of the statements we make, we take on a commitment to dispute those who disagree with us. At least in inquiries into what we deem to be substantial matters of fact, we cannot rationally accept the judgements of others who adopt contrary points of view. Indeed, this intolerance of disagreement serves to distinguish what we take to be substantial matters of fact, from insubstantial matters, such as whether or not a certain restaurant or style of bar-be-que is to be preferred over another. The latter are matters of "merely opinionated assertion," which, though rationally criticizable on grounds of sincerity and internal

consistency, are nevertheless matters for which we may cheerfully "agree to disagree" and leave it at that.

So Price argues that our actual discursive practices—specifically our resolve to settle (or "get to the bottom of") disputes—indicate that we take bona-fide inquiry to require a "third norm" beyond mere sincerity and internal consistency. The notion of truth can be understood as playing the role of articulating and making explicit this third norm; it provides inquiry with a "friction" that prevents alternative points of view about objective matters from sliding past one another (Price 182).

For Misak, then, Price's defense of a third norm of assertion entails that inquiry itself presupposes truth as a regulative ideal. Our felt commitments to resolving intersubjective disagreement (when possible) between contrary points of view presuppose a corollary commitment to a truth of the matter at hand waiting (if conditions for inquiry are favorable) "out there" to be discovered. When we disagree with one another, we must hope that our disagreement would admit of some "determinate" resolution—if only inquiry were to be pursued long enough and well enough, and circumstances were such that determinate answers could be found.

III. Of Truth and Cannonballs

This story about the role of truth as a regulative assumption in inquiry is well-illustrated by an account the documentary filmmaker Errol Morris relates about his obsession with a couple of photographs taken by Robert Fenton during the Crimean War. One of these photographs, "In the Valley of the Shadow of Death," depicts a landscape blasted by war, with a roadway running through it covered in cannonballs. It is an iconic image of that conflict, which graced the pages of the *London Times*. Years after its publication, another photograph surfaced, depicting that exact same battle-scarred landscape, but without the spent artillery littering the road. A question naturally arises (which obviously concerns the ethics of using doctored or staged scenes in photographic journalism: which of these scenes is the one that Fenton first encountered? Did Fenton increase the poignancy of the published photograph by salting the roadway with cannonballs? Or did a detail pass through the road later on collecting those balls for reuse?

While most commentators blithely conclude that Fenton must have altered the scene to amplify its emotional impact, Morris notes that they do so primarily based upon what they have heard from others or upon armchair assumptions about Fenton's motivations. That is, they rely upon what Peirce would have called the methods of authority or a priority. They are not appropriately grounded upon specific evidence provided by historical details or the photographs themselves. Nagged by an irritation of doubt, Morris proceeds to engage in an exemplary instance of Peircean inquiry taken to a wonderful and thoroughly entertaining

extreme (Morris, Abumrad and Krulwich). By his own admission, Morris tells us that "the pursuit of truth shouldn't stop short of insanity."[4] As he recounts in *The New York Times* and an episode of *Radiolab*, his obsession with settling the question leads him to the Crimea, where, among other things, he is able to identify the exact location from which the photographs were taken, with the hope of using shadows in the photographs to estimate the times at which they were taken. Eventually his efforts to locate the scene of the crime(a) are successful, as are his efforts to determine which photograph came first.

Here we have a nifty, live example of what Peirce called a "buried secret." At least judging from his own remarks, Morris' investigations is animated by the faith that there is a determinate, stable answer to our question, along with an overarching hope that his inquiries will be able to latch upon the correct hypothesis—the one we would understand to be true. Morris is proceeding on the common assumption, which most find compelling—even platitudinous—that there must be an "objective" fact of the matter as to which photograph was taken earlier. One of the possible answers is determinately correct from an appropriately detached perspective, the other is incorrect; it fails to correspond or agree with an appropriately impartial point of view. This is so, even when we recognize all our intellectual fallibilities and limitations. There is a truth that is out there, and hard as we may try to attain it, it just might come apart from our most warranted beliefs or assertions. The aim of inquiry clearly goes beyond merely warranted belief or solidarity with our fellow inquirers. All of this seems hard to deny; to do so, it might seem, would be to commit that gravest of Peircean sins: blocking the path of inquiry (Misak, *Cambridge Pragmatism* 50).

IV. An Alternate Ballistics of Inquiry

And yet I do wish to deny this common conception of inquiry as aiming at objective or impartial truth. That is not to deny Price's contention that there is a third norm of inquiry beyond sincerity and internal consistency. While the prevailing attitude is that this further norm must be understood in terms of truth, there might be other—indeed, better—ways of thinking about that very norm. Indeed, that seems to be what Rorty is gesturing towards when he calls for solidarity in the resolution of our inquiries rather than objectivity. Similarly, I would like to reconceive this third norm around something other than a notion of impartial truth, though I would like to do so around something more objective or disposition-transcendent than mere intersubjective agreement.

My contention is that most folk altogether misconceive the norm of assertion and inquiry; they get it backwards. Consider a case of genuine disagreement, such as that faced by Morris, in which one is confronted with contrary conjectures. Acceptance of one precludes acceptance of the other. Inquirers are thus placed in a position where they must rationally reject (at least) one hypothesis or the other.

Resolving disagreement, then, is really a matter of showing how some hypothesis or other is ultimately *indefensible*; after all, successful hypotheses are those that robustly resist any and all challenge. While evidence that directly favors one hypothesis is evidence against the tenability of any of its contraries, one can also always show that a hypothesis should be rejected on independent or internal grounds. However, though the rejection or elimination of a competitor may be enough to remove genuine doubt in a hypothesis on some occasions, there is always the possibility of inquiry producing grounds for rejecting them *both*, in favor of embracing an as yet unconsidered, but more encompassing, alternative. Thus, though sufficient grounds for rejecting one hypothesis may be sufficient to resolving a disagreement between it and one of its contraries, that need not by itself be sufficient grounds for embracing the contrary. For there may yet be other grounds for rejecting the contrary as well.

The point—made famous by Popper and his followers—is that the goal of resolving actual disagreement is that of showing how one hypothesis or another (perhaps a "null" hypothesis) should be *rejected* as unworkable. The hypothesis that remains standing is accepted, at least provisionally, for the chief source of its doubt—namely the acceptance of its competitor (or competitors)—has been shown to be implausible. That is actually the course of action that Morris pursues. Essentially he builds a case for why it would be *implausible* to think that one photograph comes before the other—on grounds that actually come from the photographs themselves. Now if we accept this as an account of how such disputes are generally and ideally resolved, then the regulative ideal of inquiry—the hope that animates it—is that in the face of any genuine disagreement, one can find grounds for *rejecting* one or another hypothesis as unworkable. An acceptable resolution of a disagreement is not so much that of finding which is *correct*, as that of finding out at least one that is *untenable* and thus best rejected. This is not so much a commitment to there being a "truth" of things, so much as it is of ensuring that one doesn't embrace an hypothesis that is demonstrably *un*acceptable. This suggests in turn then then that the "true" goal of inquiry (or norm of assertion) is not positive, but negative: inquiry (and assertion) does not aim at the truth, but rather avoids error and falsity. One should not believe hypotheses that are indefensible.

Such a norm certainly accords well with the Peircean idea that we should adopt beliefs that are defensible in the long run. But how is this norm any different? Isn't the goal of avoiding claims that are demonstrably unworkable equivalent to that of aiming for the truth? Surely, in the contest between hypotheses and their contraries, we can find at least a few in which the considered alternatives are not just mutually exclusive, but exhaustive as well. For in showing that some hypothesis is unacceptable, doesn't one thereby show that another—namely its negation—is thereby true? Indeed, isn't that the case with Morris' investigations of the Fenton photographs? By showing the implausibility of one's photograph

being taken earlier than the other, doesn't one thereby show that the rival hypothesis is "the true one?" Here is where Misak tells us that pragmatists of an appropriately Peircean stripe will also adopt the law of bivalence as a further regulative assumption in inquiry.

> It is a regulative assumption of inquiry that, for any matter into which we are inquiring, we would (or it is probable that we would) find an answer to the question we are inquiring. Otherwise, it would be pointless to inquire into the issue: 'the only assumption upon which [we] can act rationally is the hope of success.'… Thus the principle of bivalence—for any proposition *p*, *p* is either true or false—rather than being a law of logic, is a regulative assumption of inquiry. It is something that we have to assume if we are to inquire into a matter. (Misak, *Cambridge Pragmatism* 49)

However, I can't help but see this justification for bivalence as a non-sequitur. This insistence that a hope for success in our inquiries commits us to a semantical theory centered upon truth values strikes me as an egregious attempt—on par with Aristotle's discussion of future sea battles—to get logic to perform metaphysical work for which it is particularly unsuited. Logic is simply in the business of explaining how certain *sentences of ours* follow from others; it isn't in the business of investigating grander claims about the nature of reality or the end of inquiry (though that is not to say that logic does not figure into inquiry). Moreover, I think this appeal to bivalence—or more accurately, the law of excluded middle—is one place where philosophical practice and thinking has itself ossified around traditional representationalist semantic theories, which accord pride-of-place to truth-values and a truth-functional understanding of logical vocabulary.[5] That is, Misak is attempting to enshrine a questionable semantic hypothesis as a metaphysical article of faith. It takes a little philosophical imagination of the sort that Rorty applauded to dislodge us out of these semantic doldrums. As Peirce recognized, the law of excluded middle (and assumptions of bivalence) need to be relaxed when the concepts or vocabularies that compose claims come into question. For instance, they may be unacceptably vague or introduce undesirable inference licenses.[6]

While Misak eschews conceiving truth as correspondence to some antecedent reality, she nevertheless believes in determinate and stable answers to our questions, that are not held hostage to contingent features of inquiry. But such stable and ultimately defensible answers still need to be couched in some vocabulary or other—and though she doesn't understand those answers as mirroring or corresponding to reality, her appeal to the law of bivalence rests in turn upon some notion or regulative assumption of an ideal or final vocabulary in which those answers are pitched. In this sense, Misak's Peircean position still holds

on to some vestige of hope for a "God's eye perspective" or "Book of Nature" in which the truths of the world—the answers to our inquiries—are couched.[7] It is this commitment that rails against properly Rortyan sympathies.

Rorty's abiding concern was that of developing ever improving vocabularies for coping with a physical and social world that is in constant flux. Specifically, he was concerned with expanding our imagination and expressive power to deal with our ever-changing environs. For Rorty, the attitude of fallibility and intellectual humility that pragmatists have traditionally emphasized as required for healthy inquiry, amounts to the sense that there is *always* room for improving the ways in which we talk to one another and think about our worldly challenges. This is the part of Rorty that I find so inspirational. Far from being a vision that denies intellectual and moral progress altogether, progress is instead seen and measured in retrospect. The lesson to be learned from Rorty is that assertion and inquiry is not to be understood in terms of a norm of aiming at the truth, but rather the norm of putting distance between us and our relatively ignorant and error-fraught forebears.[8]

So rather than viewing inquiry as getting us ever-closer to a stable realm of truth, Rorty urges that we view ourselves as moving away from states of relative ignorance, expressive powerlessness, and barbarity. Thus the proper ballistic metaphor for inquiry is not that of the archer aiming an arrow, but rather that of the distance thrower hurling a javelin or shotput. That is, intellectual and moral progress is measured not by how close one approaches a target, but rather by how far one has managed to travel from an origin. Instead of conceiving our inquiries on a hyperbolic course approaching an asymptotic, and ideal, limit of absolute truth, one in the grip of this Rortyan vision is free to view the march of science on an unbounded parabolic trajectory. There are no worldly or logical limits, except those provided by our own collective imagination. In particular, there is no ideal vocabulary with which a Creator wrote the book of the world, and to which our own way of speaking should ultimately correspond.

Since we shouldn't regard any vocabulary as ever truly final, we should not accept the law of excluded middle even as a regulative assumption. And since we shouldn't accept the law of excluded middle, we shouldn't accept that the meanings of our claims must be governed by the law of bivalence. Hypotheses may be rejected on substantial grounds independently of us; the refutation of competitors is perfectly objective. Still, the settled, objective rejection of the workability of a hypothesis need not mean that we have come any closer to "The Truth." So this picture of inquiry—salted as it is with a healthy dash of Popper—would have us view exemplary inquiry as moving progressively outward with no fixed destination, even in the ideal. Without a substantial notion of truth, or ideal limit or aim of inquiry, the Rortyan is free to view the particular path of successful inquiry as open-ended.[9] As long as one is progressing in the sense of dispelling relative ignorance, precariousness, and barbarity, then there may be multiple

divergent paths for successful inquiry to proceed, some of which may be incommensurable with one another due to their vastly different vocabularies, histories, and background commitments.

V. Conclusion

As Misak points out, there are two distinct strands in the pragmatist tradition—one that takes truth to be "the" aim of inquiry, and one that does not. While she is in the former camp, my aim has been to sketch a picture of responsible inquiry—one with an alternate ballistics—that does justice to the latter. The aim of inquiry, is not to produce beliefs that are true so much as to produce those that are the most defensible or resistant to serious challenge. If this is a form of relativism, it certainly isn't one in which objectivity has entirely gone out the window. Vocabularies—ways of speaking or "forms of life," if you will—still need to be tested against a tribunal of experience (understood here as a history of application) to see if they are workable.[10] Understanding inquiry as governed by a norm of avoiding error is well within the pragmatist spirit of a Peircean sense of ideal belief being that which would resist all challenges. The mistake is to think that that in turn commits one to a substantive norm of truth for belief.[11]

I have a particular friend of mine, who—when told that she is right or correct, likes to quip, "Well, I'm not wrong." Her response points to how we might substitute the idea of truth being the aim or end of inquiry, with the idea that inquiry should instead be oriented around a substantial negative norm of avoiding or superseding error or ignorance. I recommend that you try it yourself, as part of an effort to take truth out of your lexicon (except in overtly deflationary uses, such as registering your approval or agreement). Doing so helps us to focus upon what really matters in our discourse: sincerity and the ability to stand up for our assertions. That—more than any allegiance to truth—is where the troglodytes who defecate upon our intellectual heritage fall short. It's not so much that what they spew is not true, so much as it is indefensible. What is most alarming—what makes their spewing such bullshit—is their galling lack of concern about responsibly defending claims at all. In a recent tweet, "Psycho" Joe Scarborough asked, "Why do you keep lying about things that are so easily disproven? What is wrong with you?". Sadly, I doubt that the target of his tweet will ever bother to mount a responsible defense.

Notes

1. In addition to *The Washington Post*, other similar charges appear in *Die Suddeutsche Zeitung* and *Le Monde*.

> Characteristically prescient, Rorty predicted this reaction: "This is why philosophers like myself find ourselves denounced in magazines and newspapers

> which one might have thought oblivious of our existence. These denunciations claim that unless the youth is raised to believe in moral absolutes, and in objective truth, civilization is doomed. Unless the younger generation has the same attachment to firm moral principles as we have, these magazine and newspaper articles say, the struggle for human freedom and human decency will be over." (Rorty xxviii)

2. Of course, that is to say nothing about just what particular inquirers actually go about choosing to be the subject-matter of their inquiries. That could well be determined by idiosyncratic inclination. It's just that the products of those inquiries - the answers that they would come to if inquiry were pushed seriously and successfully enough— are not held hostage to such contingent factors.

3. For instance, consider three contrary positions held by three distinct groups of inquirers: A, B, and C. Misak's picture of inquiry as aiming toward the truth is one in which there is a proper resolution of this dispute, and it does not matter upon such contingencies as which groups come together first to resolve their differences. If A and B get together to resolve their disagreement first, and then resolve their dispute with C, then the answer should be the same as if B and C resolve their dispute first, and then settle their joint differences with A. Proper disagreement resolution in inquiry would thus obey a certain principle of association: {[A r B] r C}={A r [B r C]}.

4. c.f. 9:15 - 10:00 in the *Radio Lab* interview (Abumrad and Krulwich). It is worth remarking in passing that Morris happens to be a former student of philosophy, whose encounters with his erstwhile graduate-advisor Thomas Kuhn eventually drove him away from a career in the field.

5. There are non-representationalist semantic theories available, which give a much more "human" picture of logic centered upon our practices of accepting and rejecting claims, including those not usually thought of as assertoric or truth-apt (see Beisecker, which serves in part as an elaboration of Brandom's "incompatibility semantics"). Instead of conceiving entailment in terms of the (metaphysical) possibility of some sentences being true while others are false, such semantics conceive of entailment in terms of the permissiveness of accepting some claims while denying others. I think a pragmatist especially ought to find such alternatives attractive. See also Misak's extended discussion in *Cambridge Pragmatism* of how Ramsey and Peirce both plumped for an understanding of logic that is much more "human" than that articulated by Russell and the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*.

6. Consider Dummett's well-worn example of the concept of BOCHE. As Dummett tells us (perhaps apocryphally), the concept issues an unacceptable inference license from someone's being of German extraction to their being excessively cruel by nature. Now consider whether or not your kindest German friend is or is not BOCHE. To affirm the claim is to affirm their barbarity. But to deny it is to deny their heritage. The appropriate attitude to take is to reject the vocabulary in question altogether, and to neither affirm nor to deny of anyone that they are BOCHE. One takes the same attitude that Oscar Wilde is said to have taken toward "blasphemy": "That word is not part of my vocabulary." Essentially the same point applies with discarded scientific concepts, such as phlogiston or *elan vital*, which also issue unworkable inference licenses. Surely, we do not want to say that the air in this room is phlogistinated, but to insist that it is not phlogistinated would

require us to conclude that we couldn't breathe it. Once again, the law of excluded middle fails to hold, because the vocabulary in question is found to be unworkable to our situation.

7. "The aim of inquiry is to settle on propositions that remain stable under further progress— and that aim is only achieved if the language remains unmodified…If you continue to think of progress in teleological terms then the aptness of the language will consist in the fact that it is, in some sense, "Nature's Own" (Kitcher 478).

8. Kitcher (478) calls this an *originary* notion of progress, as opposed to a *teleological* form of progress. Though Kitcher doesn't go so far as to talk about the aims of inquiry, he too identifies this other form of progress as being more pragmatist in spirit.

9. Consider, once more, our three communities of inquirers: A, B, and C. On the alternative conception of inquiry, the most reasonable resolutions to their joint dispute might well hinge upon the order in which these groups come together. The associative equivalence - {[A r B] r C}={A r [B r C]}— need not obtain: reasonable courses of inquiry may well be path independent.

10. "This is why we pragmatists see the charge of relativism as simply the charge that we see luck where our critics insist on seeing destiny." (Rorty xxxii)

11. See Kitcher (479):

> The progressivist narratives of Hegel and Marx have waned in their appeal, leading many scholars to be wary of utopian "final states" and, on that basis, to repudiate social progress. The inference, however is unwarranted. If there can be progress of a non-teleological stripe, the rejection of teleology doesn't warrant the dismissal of progress."

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