

Afterword: Viral Modernity



From Postmodernism to Post-truth?

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Declarations of the death knell of postmodernism are now quite commonplace. Various publications such as those below suggest that, if anything, postmodernism is at an end and has been dead and buried for some time. An age dominated by playfulness, hybridity, relativism, and the fragmentary self has given way to something else, as yet undefined. McHale (2015) describes the life cycle of postmodernism in terms of the “big bang” in 1966 with Derrida’s seminal paper “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” at the Johns Hopkins conference “The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man” symposium; its peak years 1973–1989; uncertainty and reorientation in the 1990s; and the aftermath and beyond after 2001. What happened in the intervening period?

Beginning in the late 1980s and extending into the 1990s, there was a plethora of books proclaiming the end of postmodernism in a variety of contexts and disciplines—*Sociology after postmodernism* (Owen 1997); *Thinking Again: Education after postmodernism* (Blake et al. 1998); *After Postmodernism: Education, Politics and Identity* (Smith and Wexler 1995); *Encounters: Philosophy of history after postmodernism* (Domanska 1998), etc. The flow of books continued well into the 2000s—*Philosophy after postmodernism*, (Crowther 2003); *Feminism after postmodernism* (Zalewski 2000); *Painting after postmodernism* (Rose 2016); *Literature*

The original version of this chapter was revised: The Afterword: Viral Modernity has been reissued as last chapter of the book. The erratum to this chapter is available at https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-8013-5_19

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after postmodernism: reconstructive fantasies (Huber 2014); *Value, art, politics: criticism, meaning and interpretation after postmodernism* (Harris 2007), and so on.

In a letter to the editor in *The Lancet* responding to Muir Gray's (1999) "Postmodern medicine", Watts (2000) succinctly expressed a particular current of opinion that coagulates concerns around the concept of truth: "I think of postmodernism as a condition of despair caused by the belief that it is impossible to know truth, and which is sometimes accompanied by the belief that it is not possible to know right and wrong. Postmodernism has shot itself in the foot in the same way as logical positivism a few decades ago." Watts here ascribes a kind of agency to postmodernism here, as a cause of the condition that we have come to call post-truth. And there are today any number of academic doyens and public intellectuals who share the view that it was left leaning intellectuals such as Michel Foucault and Richard Rorty (rather than, say Donald Trump or Steve Bannon, for instance) who brought about our present situation in which post-truth thrives.

In a recent piece written for *The Conversation*, "The surprising origins of 'post-truth'—and how it was spawned by the liberal left", Calcutt (2016), makes the following observation:

Punditry on the "post-truth era" is often accompanied by a picture either of Donald Trump (for example, BBC News Online: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-37995600>, or The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/15/post-truth-named-word-of-the-year-by-oxford-dictionaries>) or of his supporters (The Spectator: <http://www.spectator.co.uk/2016/11/post-truth-politics-dont-be-so-patronising/>). Although The Spectator article was a rare exception, the connotations embedded in "post-truth" commentary are normally as follows: "post-truth" is the product of populism; it is the bastard child of common-touch charlatans and a rabble ripe for arousal; it is often in blatant disregard of the actualité.

He then goes on to claim: "Left-leaning, self-confessed liberals, they sought freedom from state-sponsored truth; instead they built a new form of cognitive confinement—'post-truth'" (Calcutt 2016).

In an article with an even more sensationalist heading, "Richard Rorty and How Postmodernism Helped Elect Trump", Read (2016) argues that "Our whole culture and civilisation has features which probabilify a tendency toward a notion that we live in 'post-truth' times" including consumerism that "one can 'buy' whatever subjective truth one wants". A further example, also from *The Guardian*, is in an interview Cadwalladr (2017) with the distinguished philosopher Daniel Dennett: "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. You'd have people going around saying: 'Well, you're part of that crowd who still believe in facts.'" As one final case in point, take the article by Sonne (2017), which asks "Is Trump a Postmodern Prophet?" The author argues that the election of Donald Trump illustrates the victory of the postmodern definition of truth. These examples could be multiplied, of course. They are all cases of what we might call "fake intellectual history", in the sense that rather than a serious discussion of a very serious matter, we are offered clickbait: a way of consolidating and confirming

prejudices within one group as a means of demonizing and disparaging another (even if, in this case, the groups in question are hardly known outside of seminar rooms).

The assertion that Foucault (or Derrida, or Rorty) is responsible for the post-truth condition is false, and fatuously so. In ignoring the complexity of the cultural context in which ideas are formed, propagated, integrated, and transformed as well as the historical facts of the matter with regard to relevant occurrences and developments which give those ideas substance, the claim itself fits neatly into the post-truth format of oversimplification, falsification and appeal to visceral reactions rather than reason and deliberation. This kind of axe-grinding has become commonplace among certain analytic philosophers (as well as some natural scientists with chips on their shoulders about the humanities, and even humanities scholars who harbor an abiding abhorrence for “theory”).

But let’s take a closer look at the role of Truth in twentieth-century philosophy. We can begin with the “verificationism” of the Vienna Circle and the Logical Empiricists, which held sway in the 1920 and 1930s in Europe and which, largely through the migration of its proponents to the US and the cross-pollination with native American Pragmatism, was important to the development of what was to become mainstream Anglo-Saxon analytic philosophy. By 1960, the movement had lost steam and, by the 1970s, it had largely folded as a going concern (Creath 2017). But the history of Logical Positivism (as opposed to its internal historiography) has only recently begun to be written. A common understanding of the relationship between language, truth, and logic (the title of A. J. Ayers’ famous pamphlet) has yet to be established for all work that is described or describes itself as “analytic philosophy”.

Given that there is no universally accepted account of the historical development toward a generally recognized conception of truth, it is difficult to say what exactly it means to suggest that some philosophers (say Derrida, or Rorty) are post-truth by dint of criticizing the assumptions of the mainstream. Rather, the denunciation of “postmodernism” as a purveyor of “post-truth” seems to be mostly a way of signaling that analytic philosophers disapprove of theoretical or critical projects that implicitly undermine their own basic assumptions. It doesn’t mean that the philosophers denounced are really “post-truth” in some broad, all-encompassing sense. On the other side of the equation, more recent, historically sensitive retrospective accounts of the development of analytic philosophy have indicated that, as a movement, it has no coherent set of unifying principles that define its present borders (Biletzki and Matar 1998; Grafton 2004). What exactly are the reviled postmodern philosophers “post”?

The history of analytic philosophy (see also *The Journal of the History of Analytic Philosophy* <https://jhaponline.org/>) is the history of a specific kind of engagement with a historically specific set of questions concerning truth, language, and meaning. But the work emanating out of those questions today is largely based on the application of formal methods to arrive at formal definitions, which is to say that the “truth” of professional epistemologists does no real work outside of the seminar room and journal articles. Already in 1967, in his famous paper “Truth and

Meaning” (1967), Donald Davidson concludes that natural languages are not amenable to the direct application of formal methods to construct a correct definition of the expression “true sentence” in harmony with the logic and spirit of everyday language use, which is where the question of truth actually gets interesting.

But leaving the history of “truth” within the mainstream twentieth-century theory of knowledge aside, the heart of the matter regarding the accusation of epistemic treason on the part of intellectuals working in other traditions, is to what extent the case being made against the latter has some substance. If we take the case of one of the usual suspects regarded as bearing much of the responsibility for our current hankering for “alternative facts”, Michel Foucault, the first thing we ought to notice is that he is interested in a *history of truth-telling (parrhesia)* rather than a notion of conceptual or factual truth. Indeed, he draws the distinction between an analytic account of truth and a history of truth-telling (Foucault 2001). Foucault writes: “My intention was not to deal with the problem of truth, but with the problem of truth-teller or truth-telling as an activity.” Moreover: “What I wanted to analyze was how the truth-teller’s role was variously problematized in Greek philosophy. And what I wanted to show you was that if Greek philosophy has raised the question of truth from the point of view of the criteria for true statements and sound reasoning, this same Greek philosophy has also raised the problem of truth from the point of view of truth-telling as an activity” (Foucault 2001, p. 169). In sum, the questions Foucault was raising were not the same ones as those discussed in most mainstream analytic epistemology. He was not “post-truth” in the sense that he was denying or making assertions about truth or truth conditions; he was not part of *that* discussion at all.

Similarly, Derrida also sees himself as a philosopher very much concerned with upholding truth: “The value of truth (and all those values associated with it) is never contested or destroyed in my writings, but only reinscribed in more powerful, larger, more stratified contexts” (Derrida 1988, p. 146). Elsewhere, he distinguishes between two interrelated notions of truth in the Western tradition: truth as presence and truth as agreement:

“Truth” has always meant two different things, the history of the essence of truth – the truth of truth – being only the gap and the articulation between the two interpretations or processes [...] The process of truth is on the one hand the unveiling of what lies concealed in oblivion [...] On the other hand [...] truth is agreement (homoiôsis or adaequatio), a relation of resemblance or equality between a re-presentation and a thing (unveiled, present), even in the eventuality of a statement of judgment. (Derrida 1981, pp. 192–193)

In the Blackwell *A Companion to Derrida*, Norris (2014) corrects the misunderstanding that Derrida’s project is to undermine the notion of truth:

[far] from rejecting or denouncing the notion of truth, Derrida can be found insisting on its absolute indispensability to philosophical enquiry in general and – more specifically – its crucial pertinence to the project of deconstruction (LI, 162–254). [H]e went out of his way to controvert the widespread belief (put about chiefly by detractors in the mainstream analytic camp) that deconstruction amounted to nothing more than an update on ancient sophistical themes or a bag of crafty rhetorical tricks with absolutely no regard for

reputable, truth-apt standards of debate (Searle 1977). All the same Derrida's reiterated protests – asserting his strict and principled allegiance to just those criteria of valid argument, logical rigor, and conceptual precision – are often dismissed, by those so minded in advance, as a routine show of respectability designed to conceal his indifference to truth in whatever commonplace or technical guise.

The point here is not to defend Derrida or to castigate his critics, but simply to note that the misleading notion that post-structuralist, hermeneutic, phenomenological, pragmatic, or Wittgenstein-inspired philosophers deny any sense to the idea of truth, to criteria for the application of the term, and so forth, is an old canard. The claim has almost exactly the same form today as it had 30 or 40 years ago, namely, as a visceral reaction to the unfamiliar. In the best cases, some effort is put into building an argument on the basis of the antipathy toward the kind of philosophizing that falls roughly under the heading of “continental”, even if they normally make assumptions that undermine the relevance of the arguments they want bring to bear. But in the worst cases, examples of which were enumerated earlier, the attacks have the form of Trumpian innuendo, dismissive hand-waving, bullying and character assassination.

To call everyone who poses other questions than those common to a certain academic tradition “postmodern” is intellectually slothful, and contributes to the general confusion rather than helping to clear it up. What has one really accomplished by packing together Wittgenstein, Peirce, James, Nietzsche, Popper, Foucault, Derrida, Rorty, and others as “anti-foundationalists”? Whatever it is, it is not a contribution to, nor a basis for a rigorous, balanced and open dialogue about how to think about our notions of truth. It is rather the sort of move described by Rorty as a “conversation-stopper”.

So we have in this picture of “postmodernist philosophy” both a false picture of the history of contemporary philosophy and a fictionalized portrayal of a dangerous “post”- or even “anti”-truth movement that goes under the heading of “postmodernism”. We have here also a rather sweeping idea of the postmodern as well. In this context, it is useful to remind ourselves that there is a distinction to be made between postmodernism in architecture, art and literature, and poststructuralism. In “(Posts-) Modernism and Structuralism: Affinities and Theoretical Innovations”, Peters (1999) provides an account of poststructuralism, distinguishing it from postmodernism, and from its predecessor movement, structuralism, noting that while there are philosophical and historical overlaps between the two, it is important to distinguish between them in order to appreciate their respective intellectual genealogies and their theoretical trajectories and applications. He stresses in particular the difference between their *theoretical objects*. Poststructuralism takes as its theoretical object “structuralism”, whereas postmodernism takes as its theoretical object “modernism”. Each movement is an attempt to supersede in various ways that which went before. The two movements—post-structuralism and postmodernism—while now intertwined and often equated with the other or their terms and meanings conflated, are distinguished by a peculiar set of theoretical concerns most clearly seen by tracing their respective historical genealogies. Of course, if one doesn't do the work, one will not see the difference,

which goes a long way toward explaining why the two terms are often used interchangeably in philosophical polemics.

We have up to this point argued that the idea that the post-truth condition has been created by a certain “postmodern” strain of philosophy is “fake news”, an “alternative fact”, at least from the historical perspective. The issue at stake, however, is not merely one of intellectual history, but also of political economy. The crux of the matter is what we have, in the title of this book, referred to as “viral modernity”. Viner (2016), editor-in-chief of *The Guardian*, relates the story of the circumstances surround the news of David Cameron’s alleged intimate involvement with a part of a pig’s anatomy while a student at Oxford, an anecdote extracted from a new biography but the veracity of which no one could establish as fact. *The journalist who perpetrated the story and co-wrote the biography could not verify a source or verify whether it was true*. After the story had gone viral, she asks “Does the truth matter any more?” Viner (2016) widens her report to include Brexit and refers to Arron Banks, a major sponsor of the Leave. EU Campaign who explained the basis of the publicity offensive:

“It was taking an American-style media approach,” said Banks. “What they said early on was ‘Facts don’t work’, and that’s it. The remain campaign featured fact, fact, fact, fact, fact. It just doesn’t work. You have got to connect with people emotionally. It’s the Trump success.” (cited in Viner 2016)

Viner (2016) asserts that, “[i]n the digital age, it is easier than ever to publish false information, which is quickly shared and taken to be true[...].” Quoting Emily Bell, the director of the Tow Centre for Digital Journalism at Columbia University, she comments on the dramatic changes of the news ecosystem: the concentration of ownership and power especially distribution; the automation that filter news through platforms and algorithms; and the shift to consumerism, the so-called domination of user content. Viner’s (2016) explanation is not ideology-driven. Rather, she proposes an analysis of what the advent of digital media means for truth in a world dominated by global media infrastructures owned by the few that count billions among their users and utilize a distributive logic that displaces the authority of journalism with personal belief based on the emotional charge of the issue for the individual or group.

If representatives of research and higher education in general, and in particular, those self-appointed guardians of Veritas, the philosophers, fall into a mob mentality of alarm, agitation and acrimony rather than liberality, curiosity and interest toward opinions, ideas or traditions that are different, alien, or foreign to them, then they unwittingly, and surely unwillingly, are part of the post-truth atmosphere of mistrust and self-delusion which they are at such great pains to dispel. For let us not forget what a powerful force a clearly focused common object of hate is:

The horrible thing about the Two Minutes Hate was not that one was obliged to act a part, but that it was impossible to avoid joining in. Within thirty seconds any pretence was always unnecessary. A hideous ecstasy of fear and vindictiveness [...] seemed to flow through the whole group of people like an electric current, turning one even against one’s will into a grimacing, screaming lunatic. And yet the rage that one felt was an abstract,

undirected emotion which could be switched from one object to another like the flame of a blowlamp. (Orwell 1949, Chap. 1)

The idea that mastery of certain formal methods of extremely limited application in the real world can inoculate one from the conventionalism, sadism, and provincialism of group-thinking is a dangerous illusion, especially for intellectuals. We should be wary of those who are already sure they know what the Truth is; so well, in fact, that they are satisfied to reject dissenting opinions emphatically, with or without good arguments.

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