

Communicative Deficits and Pragmatic Truth
One More Peircean Take on the Post-truth Debates

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Four years have now passed since the infamous nomination of “post-truth” as “word of the year” by Oxford Dictionaries. In spite of the apparent flaws of the term – such as the much-lamented evocation of some lost golden age of “truth” (see, e.g., Carlson, 2018; Farkas & Schou, 2019) – its appeal is still very much in evidence. Casual references to “post-truth” are today fairly commonplace in journalistic, political, and even popular parlance; and there is a steadily growing body of academic work analysing its significance and wrestling with its potential implications. Still, the uses of the word are varied and frequently frustratingly vague. The oft-cited OD characterisation of “post-truth” as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” is meant to be adjectival; but in addition to talk about such things as “post-truth politics” or the “post-truth era”, “post-truth” is also being employed substantively or hypotactically – that is, as a general concept without further specification. Thus, as Matt Carlson (2018) observes, the concept has in effect become “an ambiguous indicator of a shifting context invoked by critics interpreting the ills of the contemporary information environment” (p. 1881).

To add to the confusion, “post-truth” is sometimes recognised as a distinctive informational ailment in its own right, while also serving as a collective name for communicative disorders like “filter bubbles”, “echo chambers”, “fake news”, “rumour bombs”, and “alternative facts” (cf. Harsin, 2018). However, although equivocations like this can cast doubt on the serviceability of “post-truth” as an analytical tool (cf. Gudonis, 2017), the ensuing debates have at least had the beneficial consequence of bringing distinctions between concepts such as “disinformation”, “malinformation”, “propaganda”, and “bullshit” to the fore. “Post-truth” is perhaps most befittingly associated with the last of these, understood in Harry Frankfurt’s (2005) sense; but as a wider conception, it can be construed as covering a shifting constellation of them all – and probably other related terms as well. In this broader respect, its utility is primarily that of a sensitising concept that provides “a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances” rather than clear-cut criteria of inclusion and delimitation (Blumer, 1954, p. 7). This “sensitisation” has tended to lead commentators to identify post-truth as an epistemic, technological, and/or politico-social syndrome, which in spite of its indefiniteness actually affects our lives in various worrying ways; and hence, most of the post-truth debates and inquiries have been fixated on identifying the sources of the purported condition, typically followed by recommendations for remedies.

Indeed, if there is one thing that stands out in the post-truth debates, it is the blame game. As is to be expected, the Brexit vote and the 2016 US presidential election are regularly referenced; but in general, these tend to be viewed as symptoms of deeper causes. The culprits have included an increasingly gullible public, new media technologies, mediatisation, postmodernism, and a lack of

grasp of postmodernist insights – accompanied by varying proposals for cures. In more critical media and communication studies, the root causes of post-truth seem to be increasingly identified as unbridled capitalism and the subordination of democracies to global markets – or, simply, as neoliberalism. In this case, the proposed solutions include recovering social trust by battling inequality and a fundamental transformation of the capitalist order (Harsin, 2018) or “re-politicisation” by means of an “agonistic” radicalisation of democracy (Farkas & Schou, 2019). Here, it is not the public that is to blame. Rather, the post-truth condition – whatever that may exactly entail – tends to be treated as a more or less reasonable reaction to circumstances produced by injurious policies.

However, while the diagnoses differ quite radically, there is one thing on which the vast majority of analyses agree: the view that post-truth is something detrimental (or a sign thereof) that calls for countermeasures of some kind. Thus, Mark Migotti (2018) has averred that “no reflective person can be in favor of post-truth”, for unlike “postmodernism, postcolonialism, post-Christianity, post-Kuhnian philosophy of science, or whatever, post-truth [...] isn’t something about which reasonable people can disagree; it’s a malaise that needs to be diagnosed and deposited in the dustbin of history, not a new ‘controversial’ way of thinking that needs to be judiciously examined ‘from both sides’” (p. 178).

Yet, although champions of post-truth – that is, people that openly advocate for the adoption of a post-truth mindset – have not been easy to find, they do exist. It may be tempting to simply dismiss such campaigners as unreasonable; but *contra* Migotti, I believe it can be worthwhile to consider on what grounds somebody would undertake to promote such a widely disparaged outlook. In what follows, I will take a closer look at some arguments put forward by Steve Fuller, who has enthusiastically embraced post-truth from the vantage point of his idiosyncratic variant of science and technology studies (STS), as well as certain objections raised by his “veritist” critics. This may look like yet another manifestation of a timeworn philosophical quarrel; but as the dispute is linked to things such as climate change denial, vaccine hesitancy, suspicion of expertise, and challenges to communicative ethics, it is evident that it can have real-life implications. I will then move on to argue that certain ideas culled from pragmatist philosophy – mainly from Charles S. Peirce’s classic 1877 article “The Fixation of Belief” – can help us move further beyond the post-truth impasses by means of its account of four methods of “fixing belief” in inquiry. This turn to Peirce is not an altogether novel suggestion; similar proposals have recently been put forward by Migotti (2018) and especially Catherine Legg (2018). But I will also draw attention to some features of the Peircean model that I believe merit more attention as well as some aspects of it that may need to be modified or complemented. Although the original motivation for Peirce’s theory was to establish the advantages of the scientific method over other ways of dealing with doubt, I believe that with the proper

adaptations, his model can also provide fruitful means to address contemporary challenges facing other truth-seeking activities, such as journalism.

The merchant of post-truth

Analyses of “post-truth” have often connected the concept to the notion of “bullshit”, which Harry Frankfurt (2005) famously characterised as a “lack of connection to a concern with truth” or an “indifference to how things really are” (pp. 33-34). As such, “bullshitting” is not equivalent to lying or deception; nor does it necessitate a denial of the existence of truth and facts. But as this conception of post-truth entails a rebuff of prevailing epistemic norms, such as demands for objectivity and evidence, it does appear to be irreconcilable with scientific inquiry.

However, a conception of post-truth-as-bullshit is arguably compatible with Steve Fuller’s understanding of post-truth science as a politically charged power game.¹ Fuller’s recent adoption of an explicitly post-truth stance is a natural development of the radical “social epistemology” that he has been fostering since the 1980s. But he does not really regard post-truth as something novel; it is rather portrayed as a broad and deep-seated feature of “at least Western intellectual life, bringing together issues of politics, science and judgement in ways which established authorities have traditionally wished to be kept separate” (Fuller, 2018a, p. 6). Thus, although Fuller regularly makes a distinction between two battling factions – identified as the “truthers” and the “post-truthers” – one implication of his polemical probes is that we have always been in something akin to a post-truth condition, concealed by the powers that be. Hence, he portrays the developments of 2016 more like processes of revelation than as harbingers of a new era. According to Fuller (2018a), the “post-truth campaigns that resulted in victory for Brexit and Trump [...] are better seen as the growth pains of a maturing democratic intelligence” than as products of “‘anti-intellectual’ populism” (p. 180) – a stance that has produced rather dismayed reactions (see Sassower, 2018, p. 58). But Fuller also wants to credit STS for inventing some common “post-truth tropes” – including the propositions that what “passes for the ‘truth’ in science is an institutionalized contingency”, that consensus “is not a natural state in science but one that requires manufacture and maintenance”, and that “normative categories of science such as ‘competence’ and ‘expertise’ are moveable feasts, the terms of which are determined by the power dynamics that obtain between specific alignments of interested parties” (Fuller, 2018a, p. 59).

In Fuller’s view, perhaps the most important contribution that STS has made to “the general intellectual landscape” is “to think about science as literally a game – perhaps the biggest game in

¹ Fuller (2018a, p. 47) associates “bullshit” with a kind of epistemic double agency practiced by the proponents of post-truth; but if I read him correctly, he does not disapprove of this way of playing the knowledge game.

town” (Fuller, 2018a, p. 62). In this purported contest, the “post-truthers (aka “foxes”) challenge the *status quo* – that is, the cognitive norms defended by the “truthers” (aka “lions”).

My [...] way of dividing the ‘truthers’ and the ‘post-truthers’ is in terms of whether one plays by the rules of the current knowledge game or one tries to change the rules of the game to one’s advantage. Unlike the truthers, who play by the current rules, the post-truthers want to change the rules. They believe that what passes for truth is relative to the knowledge game one is playing, which means that depending on the game being played, certain parties are advantaged over others. Post-truth in this sense is a recognisably social constructivist position, and many of the arguments deployed to advance ‘alternative facts’ and ‘alternative science’ nowadays betray those origins. They are talking about worlds that could have been and still could be—the stuff of modal power. (Fuller, 2018a, p. 53)

In spite of their obvious differences, there is purportedly a sense in which both the lions and the foxes may be characterised as “post-truth merchants” that “try to win not simply by playing by the rules but also by controlling what the rules are” (Fuller, 2018a, p. 3). For the “lion’s strategy is all about quashing the counterfactual imagination, the thought that things might turn out to be other than they are”. This is an exercise of what Fuller (2018a) characterises as “modal power”, “the capacity to decide what is and is not possible” (p. 139). The truthers “acquire legitimacy from tradition, which in science is based on expertise [...] that derives its authority from the cumulative weight of intergenerational experience” (Fuller, 2018a, p. 4). Fuller associates this clout with Kuhnian “paradigms” and “normal science”. In contrast, the foxes are engaged in “revolutionary science”, an attempt to instigate a paradigm-shift. Put differently, “post-truthers aim to weaken the fact/fiction distinction—and hence undermine the moral high ground of truthers—by making it easier to switch between knowledge games, while the truthers aim to strengthen the distinction by making it harder to switch between knowledge games” (Fuller, 2018b, p. 25). The claim, however, is that post-truthers and truthers alike are engaged in a meta-level effort to wield power and thereby control the rules by which the epistemic games are to be played. In this sense, they are both caught up in what Jayson Harsin (2015) has designated as an “overall regime of posttruth”, a condition “where power exploits new ‘freedoms’ to participate/produce/express (as well as consume/diffuse/evaluate)” and truth games proliferate in a “new digital ‘participatory culture’” (p. 327).

What, then, can be said of the role of truth in such a presumably all-inclusive post-truth regime? Fuller (2018b) adopts a resolutely internalist viewpoint, where “truth” is characterised as a “procedural” rather than as a “substantive” notion – “a second-order concept that lacks any determinate meaning except relative to the language in terms of which knowledge claims can be expressed” (p. 19). This implies a rejection of the correspondence theory of truth – that is, the idea that “truth” entails some kind of fidelity to an external target. Still, Fuller (2018b) maintains that “a ‘post-truther’ does not deny

the existence of facts, let alone ‘objective facts’”; s/he “simply wishes to dispel the mystery in which the creation and maintenance of facts tend to be shrouded” (p. 19). It is not “correspondence to external reality” that explains what makes something a “fact”. Rather, facts are produced in language games or within specific “regimes of truth”. Thus, in this picture, “truth is ultimately a social achievement” (Fuller, 2017a, p. 50)

Of course, such critiques of the correspondence conception are nothing new. However, the main thrust of Fuller’s position is not located in some original contribution to theories of truth, but rather in the correlated questioning of scientific expertise and consensus. For Fuller (2018a, p. 13), the “expert” is plainly a repressive figure, whose appeals to training and past experience are in effect arguments from authority. And rather than being upheld as a more or less reliable indicator of truth being approached, the kind of scientific consensus that appeals to truth-seeking is taken to be an expression of collective authority – something to be met with deep suspicion in a post-truth world. In its place, Fuller prescribes something that he dubs “Protscience”, short for “protestant science”. This peculiar neologism is meant to capture “a pattern evident in the parallel ascendancies of, say, intelligent design theory, alternative medicine and *Wikipedia*”; it is “the latest phase of secularization, whereby science itself is now the target rather than the agent of secularization (Fuller, 2018a, p. 107). The result of his analysis can be described as a kind of neoliberal – or, perhaps more accurately, ordoliberal – utopia, where the public is conceived to act as “customers” or “shoppers for knowledge” in a free marketplace of ideas. Thus, Fuller links post-truth to a growth of egalitarianism and empowerment resulting from the open access to the means of cognitive fabrication.

I believe that a post-truth world is the inevitable outcome of greater epistemic democracy. In other words, once the instruments of knowledge production are made generally available – and they have been shown to work – they will end up working for anyone with access to them. This in turn will remove the relatively esoteric and hierarchical basis on which knowledge has traditionally acted as a force for stability and often domination. (Fuller, 2018a, p. 61)

Deliberately or not, Fuller thus in effect turns the tables of on the critics of neoliberalism. While he acknowledges the link between neoliberal views and post-truth, he does not interpret this as a reason to combat neoliberalism. Rather, here the neoliberal agenda emerges as an liberator of knowledge and communication, paving the way for something reminiscent of a radical democratisation that is manifested as the post-truth condition. Whether this is a plausible position is another matter.

Normative deficits and “fake philosophies”

In its sustained rejection of external authority, Fuller’s account of post-truth thus eschews all normative concerns – with one notable exception. As Erik Baker and Naomi Oreskes (2017b, p. 69)

have pointed out, neoliberal “freedom” stands out as the singular overarching good of his narrative.² That is, it prescribes the elimination of boundaries and “rent seeking” in cognitive activities; in the post-truth marketplace of ideas, all individuals are to have full freedom of expression, whether they are trained scientists, experienced journalists, cavalier re-tweeters, or manufacturers of fake news and conspiracy theories. In this spirit, Fuller has not only promoted initiatives like transhumanism; he has also gained notoriety by defending the pursuit of creationism and intelligent design theory in the face of “Darwinist” consensus. But as Baker and Oreskes also note, it is rather odd that the only acceptable normative agenda in scientific inquiry should be of a non-cognitive nature. Fuller might counter by underscoring his deliberate conflation of politics and science. But apart from the embrace of a hazy democratic animus, he does not provide any compelling reason why the external demand for freedom and access for all ought to trump internal norms of truth-seeking, evidence, and the like. And one can of course wonder what kind of invisible hand guarantees that the outcome – that is, the “social constructions” – of “liberated” epistemic power games is conducive to greater democratic freedom.³

At stake here is not merely a philosophical dispute over normativity or a political quarrel over neoliberalism, but the standing of organised inquiry of different kinds. The obvious risk is that the kind of debunking of scientific authority implied by some STS studies – actively promoted by Fuller – can easily be exploited by unscrupulous interests. According to Ralph Sassower, this is precisely what the agents of post-truth have been doing; but in stark contrast to Fuller’s free-market optimism, he does not take the end result to be increased democratisation.

The discrediting of science has become a welcome distraction that opens the way to radical free-market mentality, spanning from the exploitation of free speech to resource extraction to the debasement of political institutions, from courts of law to unfettered globalization. In this sense, internal (responsible)

² Fuller is not alone in perceiving liberating potential in post-truth rhetoric. For example, Eric Knight and Haridimos Tsoukas (2019) have noted that while “post-truth and alternative facts tend to be used in a negative way to highlight power holder’s’ sway over a malleable reality, few scholars have yet highlighted the potentially positive outcomes from this same post-truth meaning-making process, at least in the sense of subverting entrenched power” (p. 192). Rightly or wrongly, they single out the #MeToo social media campaign as a prime example of such a process. In his radical take on politics and pedagogy, Derek Ford offers a curious twist on the presumed benefits of post-truth. Much in the same vein as Fuller, Ford (2019) maintains that post-truth has the potential to upset old power structures; but for him, this entails “an occasion to refuse the liberal nostalgia for the democratic and civil public sphere based on truthful exchange at the marketplace of ideas” (p. 2) – in the place of which he advocates communist party organisation and activism.

³ According to Fuller (2018a), market “transactions provided the original template for the idea of ‘social construction’” (p. 45). Whether that is correct or not, Fuller does identify some interesting links between the early constructivists and neoliberals. And clearly, his particular version of epistemic neoliberalism aims at removing barriers for open social construction; its goal is free the marketplace of ideas by combatting “rent-seeking monopolies” on knowledge (that is, academic and other cognitive elites) as well as promoting “deregulating” measures (that is, removing normative demands that can block epistemic innovation).

critiques of the scientific community and its internal politics, for example, unfortunately license external (irresponsible) critiques of science, the kind that obscure the original intent of responsible critiques. Post-truth claims at the behest of corporate interests sanction a free for all where the concentrated power of the few silences the concerns of the many. (Sassower, 2018, p. 52)

Such concerns imply a close link between the current post-truth condition and so-called “merchants of doubt”, operators who use questionable rhetorical tactics to manufacture doubt in cases where a scientific consensus has been virtually achieved, for example with regard to the risks of smoking and the impact of global warming (see Oreskes & Conway, 2010). But the phenomenon is not restricted to scientific inquiry. The marketplace of ideas / free speech arguments often employed in these controversies are also familiar from the contemporary media sphere, where established practices have been challenged by a plethora of new-fangled sources of information and disinformation. Here, the professional journalist stands out as the epistemic expert, whose authority is increasingly mistrusted or bypassed in a “post-gatekeeper world” (cf. Leetaru, 2019). Is not difficult to see how such appraisals – especially ones advocating something like “subjectivity” in place of the much-maligned standard of objectivity (e.g., Gaber, 2014) – might be utilised by post-truth merchants to motivate indifference to norms of communication. This is not to say that such critiques would not be justified in many instances, or that the solution would be a return to some mythical era of objectivity; but the question of responsibility can be raised in this context as well. If nothing else, the manifest escalation of post-truth manifestations in a “mediatised” world points to a need to take questions of normativity seriously.

In response to the perceived normative deficit of post-truth social epistemology, Baker and Oreskes (2017b) have advocated “veritism” and the “re-inclusion of the cognitive dimension of science in STS – including some notions of evidence, empirical adequacy, epistemic acceptability, and truth without square quotes” (p. 67). Apart from an insistence on the significance of such factors – especially the truth-seeking aspect – Baker and Oreskes do not really clarify what their veritist position may entail; but they do reference an article that links the conception to philosopher Alvin Goldman’s influential variant of social epistemology. In Goldman’s (1999) terms, veritistic epistemology is concerned with “the production of knowledge, where knowledge is [...] understood in the ‘weak’ sense of *true belief*” (p. 5). Thus, the veritistic emphasis entails an “orientation toward truth determination”, which in its turn implies a study of which “practices have a comparatively favorable impact on knowledge as contrasted with error and ignorance” (Goldman, 1999, p. 5). As these premises imply a combination of a normative perspective with a more pragmatic inquiry into specific epistemic questions, it is easy to comprehend why a position like this could be deemed attractive as a starting point for science studies and similar pursuits.

However, for Fuller, this turn to veritism is a non-starter. Most of his arguments and polemics are predictable enough; but in an almost unnervingly recognisable rhetorical move, he goes so far as to label the veritistic view a “fake philosophy”. According to Fuller (2018b), the “‘fakeness’ of this philosophy comes from [...] its studied refusal to engage with the ‘essentially contested’ nature of ‘truth’ and related epistemic concepts, which results in a conflation of first- and second-order concerns” (p. 20). But what especially offends Fuller’s post-truth sensibilities is a perceived attempt to elevate the epistemic authority of “scientific consensus” by portraying it as a criterion of game-transcendent truth. In his exposition, veritism posits a truth “out there” as a “a necessary constraint if not the primary goal of any legitimate inquiry” (Fuller, 2018b, p. 20), and it takes consensus to be a sign that the scientific opinion represents it accurately. Fuller (2018b) does not accept such “cognitive authoritarianism”, “whereby the self-organising scientific community is the final arbiter on all knowledge claims accepted by society at large” (p. 21). For him, scientific consensus has no natural legitimacy. It “neither corresponds to some pre-existent ideal of truth nor is composed of some invariant ‘truth stuff’”; it “is a social construction, full stop” (Fuller, 2017b, p. 44). While Fuller maintains that “there is nothing wrong with trying to align public opinion with certain facts and values”, this ought to be seen as part of a contingent epistemic game – “the stuff of politics as usual” (Fuller, 2017b, p. 44). Put differently, the post-truth view of consensus formation is “rhetorical”. (Fuller, 2018b, p. 22).

However, Fuller misrepresents the veritist position in (at least) one crucial respect. While Baker and Oreskes (2017b) do not treat consensus as a matter of rhetorical / social construction in the strong sense, they do not hold it up as a definitional criterion of truth either; rather, they portray consensus “as one of many possible *heuristics* to guide rational assessment (especially among non-experts) of the state of the science on a particular issue” (p. 66). At the same time, they are wary of a post-truth neoliberalism that maintains that “the role of public-sphere institutions—including newspapers and universities—is simply to place as many private opinions as possible into competition (‘free exchange’) with one another” rather than the attempt to promote public consensus about facts and values (Baker & Oreskes, 2017a, p. 1). Thus, they allot consensus a substantial role in inquiry; but it is not foundational in the way that Fuller implies.

Still, Fuller may be onto something in his reproach of Baker and Oreskes’s insufficient attention to their key concept of truth (without scare quotes). While they express a wish to avoid “a return to a naïve correspondence theory of truth” (Baker and Oreskes, 2017b, p. 67), Goldman (1999) maintains that a “veritistic epistemology requires some sort of correspondence conception of truth” (p. 10). In fact, as their primary emphasis lies on the question of truth-seeking rather than on definitional or criterial issues, Baker and Oreskes make hardly any effort to spell out how truth is to be construed.

For this reason, veritism, at least at it is has been articulated by Goldman, does not provide a suitable framework for the kind of approach Baker and Oreskes wish to advocate. It leaves them with a “primitive” epistemic notion of which there is really nothing more to be said.

Putting my cards on the table at this stage, I am sympathetic to Baker and Oreskes’s attempt to find a plausible alternative to conceptions of inquiry as power games or marketplaces; but I feel that the approach that they have outlined will not suffice to meet the post-truth challenge. What, then, could provide a more promising alternative than the veritistic position? One option would be a return to a more robust objectivist conception of truth, as some critics of post-truth have proposed. Thus, Colin Wight (2018) has averred that “we need to recover an ontological concept of truth, a truth that resides in the way the world is (or was), not in what we claim about the world” (p. 21). But such a solution typically comes with rather heavy metaphysical baggage and its own problems. Wight, for instance, is led to postulate “facts” as social constructions (or interpretations) to which we have access, which seems to posit truth as an inaccessible “thing-in-itself”. To me, a more promising path is suggested by the Fuller vs. Baker and Oreskes debates, where both parties at times refer to unexplored pragmatist options. Thus, while looking for plausible alternatives to the game view of science, Baker and Oreskes (2017a) speak of “the early American pragmatism of John Dewey and William James, a politically constructive alternative to both naïve foundationalism and the textualist rejection of the concept of truth found in the work of more recent ‘neo-pragmatists’ like Richard Rorty” (p. 7). They do not follow up on this proposal. For his part, Fuller makes the surprising suggestion that the “way of redeeming ‘veritism’ from its current status of fake philosophy” is shown by Charles S. Peirce, “whose idea of truth as the final scientific consensus informs Baker and Oreskes’ normative orientation” (p. 50). Via a rather peculiar religious link, Fuller (2017) then recommends an updated version of the “unified science” project seeking to establish “some common currency of intellectual exchange” – “the analogue of the original theological project of humanity reconstituting its divine nature, which Peirce secularised as the consensus theory of truth” (p. 51).

Taking a hint from Fuller, I will next turn to Peircean pragmatism for some redemption. But I will not exactly expound a “consensus theory of truth” – at least not in the manner I suspect that Fuller understands this term – because I believe that to be a misleading description of the upshot of Peirce’s endeavour. And rather than pursuing some kind of grand unified science vision, I intend to discuss Peirce’s basic doubt-belief model of inquiry, relating it to some the questions of post-truth that I have already touched upon.

Steps toward a pragmatist recovery

Looking to the pragmatists for guidance in the post-truth wilderness may seem rather wrongheaded. Pragmatism has been portrayed as permeated by a deep scepticism of truth, and as such classified alongside such “veriphobic” views as social constructivism, postmodernism, and cultural studies (Goldman, 1999, p. 7). But although such a categorisation might be justified in some cases of pragmatist thought – the neopragmatism of Richard Rorty probably being the first to come to mind⁴ – it is arguably not an accurate characterisation of the so-called “classic” variants of pragmatism, especially that of Peirce.

Yet, it is important to realise that what Peirce provides in his early texts on pragmatism is not really an epistemology in the contemporary sense. In “The Fixation of Belief”, the primary aim is not to give a technical explication of concepts such as truth and knowledge, to delineate criteria of epistemic justification, or the like, but rather to provide a narrative that explains how we arrive at a notion of objective truth via four different ways of fixing belief. The account is developmental and partly grounded in history, but so idealised and hypothetical in nature that it cannot be called historical. Furthermore, as T. L. Short (2000) has noted, the progression from one method to another is not supported by firm arguments; instead, what the text does is to virtually invite us to probe different ways of tackling doubt, with a given conclusion in sight. In view of the contemporary predicament, the fixation types outlined can arguably be surprisingly relevant.

One of the appeals of the story told in “Fixation” is that it does not start from the assumption that truth-seeking is the aim of inquiry or from some substantial conception of truth. It is, in this respect at least, free from metaphysical preconceptions. And rather than focusing on knowledge, the Peircean epistemology zooms in on inquiry, by which is meant any process of fixing habits (Legg, 2018, p. 44). The setting is simple, but perhaps deceptively so. It involves only three basic ingredients designated “belief”, “doubt”, and “inquiry”. Belief is a satisfied state from which one does not wish to part under normal conditions; it guides one’s desires and shapes one’s actions (CP 5.371). Put differently, belief is an established habit that would lead us to act under certain circumstances (CP 5.397). Doubt is an uneasy state that disrupts some belief or beliefs; if it is the genuine article and not what Peirce dubs “paper doubt”, it is an uneasy state from which one desires to escape (CP 5.372). Inquiry is “a struggle to attain a state of belief” caused by the irritation of doubt. That is, inquiry is the attempt to establish a new belief-habit that would eliminate or at least ease the irritation of doubt.

⁴ Richard Rorty is frequently listed among thinkers bearing responsibility for the post-truth condition. For a thorough and balanced account of Rorty’s culpability, see Forstenzer (2018).

These premises include no mention of truth, knowledge, or reality. Although a developed cognitive state that would not involve them in some form or another is perhaps practically inconceivable, Peirce underscores that the basic dynamics of inquiry does not require them.

...the sole object of inquiry is the settlement of opinion. We may fancy that this is not enough for us, and that we seek, not merely an opinion, but a true opinion. But put this fancy to the test, and it proves groundless; for as soon as a firm belief is reached we are entirely satisfied, whether the belief be true or false. And it is clear that nothing out of the sphere of our knowledge can be our object, for nothing which does not affect the mind can be the motive for mental effort. The most that can be maintained is, that we seek for a belief that we shall *think* to be true. But we think each one of our beliefs to be true, and, indeed, it is mere tautology to say so. (CP 5.375, 1877)

Accordingly, inquiry as such does not require any conception of truth at all; in this respect, the primary belief-doubt model might be characterised as a description of a pre-truth condition.

In the following part of the story, Peirce identifies different ways of combatting doubt by establishing firm beliefs, whether true or not. The simplest of these is nicely summarised by Migotti:

...“if the settlement of opinion is the sole object of inquiry, and if belief is of the nature of a habit,” Peirce wonders why we shouldn’t “attain the desired end by taking any answer to a question which we may fancy”? Those who adopt this method of inquiry (or “inquiry”) will, the moment doubt insinuates itself, seize on some belief or other which quells it, and then “constantly reiterate” this chosen opinion to themselves, “dwelling on all which may conduce to [it] and learning to turn with contempt and hatred from anything which might disturb it.” Followers of this method of fixing belief adopt a policy of make-believe in the precise sense of making themselves believe; Peirce calls it “the method of tenacity.” (Migotti, 2018, pp. 180-181)

Migotti finds this to be an almost prophetic depiction of communicative culture in the era of “echo chambers” and the like. The viability of such buzzwords might be questioned; but it is true that the Peircean method of tenacity does seem to capture some characteristic traits of the post-truth media condition – although, it should be stressed, the method of tenacity does not yet involve a conception of truth. Still, as Legg (2018, p. 51) stresses, Peirce also acknowledges that the first method – like all non-scientific ways of fixing belief – have their benefits. There are circumstances when avoiding doubt can be crucial for mental health and even physical survival; and it is probably not too bold to suggest that we all constantly employ the method of tenacity in our everyday lives. A distinctively post-truth application of the method of tenacity would involve indifference to common epistemic and communicative norms, such as near-systematic ignoring of evidence.

Still, Peirce argues that a sweeping and consistent adoption of the method of tenacity cannot hold for the simple reason that we encounter other testimonies. What he designates as the “social impulse” – the force of communication – is simply too strong to resist. Thus, unless “we make ourselves hermits, we shall necessarily influence each other's opinions; so that the problem becomes how to fix belief, not in the individual merely, but in the community” (CP 5.378). This leads to the “method of authority”, where some group undertakes to fix the beliefs of others by some form of coercion. What Peirce primarily has in mind are authorities like religions that dictate what it is acceptable to believe and what not; but with regard to the preceding discussion, one might also identify softer forms of authoritarian force. In Fuller’s account of the post-truth condition, truthers like the scientific elites impose their “consensus” by means of modal power. But then, his “political” characterisation of the epistemic-communicative field hardly leaves room for any other mode of settling belief than an authoritative one, where post-truth entails a proliferation of players vying for control of the rules of the game.

However, as Migotti (2018) suggests, there seems to be a kind of method that is not captured by Peirce’s initial partitioning: “a ruthless and ridiculously rigorous egalitarianism of opinion” characteristic of post-truth, where “*no one is entitled* to judge any given opinion to be inferior or superior to conflicting opinions on the same subject” (p. 185). This extreme egalitarianism is reminiscent of Fuller’s anti-authoritarian position; as it is clearly social, it might be construed as a rhetorical method of settling opinion located somewhere between the methods of tenacity and authority. And other hybrids may also be needed to describe the varying epistemic and communicative strategies proliferating at the moment, for example a kind of shared tenacity that has proliferated on social media and on the Internet in general. But be that as it may, the sway of Peirce’s first two methods in the current media sphere is striking. This might be construed as a symptom of the alleged post-truth malady; but in their rationale, tenacity and authority are essentially *pre-truth*, in the sense that their practice does not generate any conception of truth.

In comparison, Peirce’s third method of fixing does not feel quite as topical. Building on the premise that the social impulse, brought on by contact with deviant views and different cultures, will also eventually lead to dissatisfaction with the method of authority, he maintains that the next natural step is to look for a method of settling opinions that “shall not only produce an impulse to believe, but shall also decide what proposition it is which is to be believed” (CP 5.382). The solution is to inquire into what is “agreeable to reason”, leading to what Peirce designates the “a priori method”. The choice of name is a bit unfortunate, insofar it suggests a turn toward individual mind, while it is meant to cover things like public opinion, dialectic, and – rather cryptically – “fermentation of ideas” (CP 5.563). Perhaps the most general way to characterise it is an appeal to reason, whether that “reason” be

individual or social. Clearly, finer distinctions would be needed here as well. In particular, it is not clear how a settlement of opinion by open discussion or communicative consensus formation fits into the picture. Tentatively, I would suggest that it may need to be recognised as a method in its own right – as the “method of deliberative democracy” – if the third method is not reformulated so as to allow sufficient space for such a sub-method. But be that as it may, the important point here is that appeal to reason and social consensus does not yet provide us with a conception of truth; they too remain in the sphere of pre-truth.

Peirce contends that the a priori method will ultimately fail because it leads to a fixing of belief by tastes and inclinations, which are notoriously varied and unstable. Because of frustration with such fluctuation of opinion, the following natural step is to look for a method by which our beliefs may be fixed by something external – that is, “by something upon which our thinking has no effect” (CP 5.384). This purportedly introduces a new conception, that of “reality”. This is the key contribution of what Peirce designates the “method of science” – again, a somewhat unfortunate choice of words, as he maintains that the scientific method is not restricted to institutionalised science; it is rather something used by all people in their everyday activities. The alternative name “method of experience” might be better. Legg summarises its key assumptions and implications as follows:

...only the method of science allows an object entirely independent of human thought, which it is appropriate to call *reality*, to determine what our beliefs should be. But that reality cannot be approached directly since [...] truth is opaque to us. So how is Peirce, as a naturalist pragmatist epistemologist who wants to locate his theory of inquiry in human lived context, to give an account of such an opaque concept? Ingeniously, he ‘triangulates’ truth via the community of inquiry, writing famously in his paper ‘How to Make our Ideas Clear’ that, ‘the opinion that would be agreed to by all who investigate is what we mean by the truth’ (Peirce 1931–1958). This definition of truth is often summarized in the slogan: Truth is the end of inquiry. It’s important to note that this is not ‘end’ in the sense of finish: some utopian future time where all questions are settled. It is ‘end’ in the teleological sense of aim or goal. (Legg, 2018, p. 53)

This is a distinctly normative, yet non-transcendental, conception of truth. Here, truth is understood as describing something ideally indefeasible; a “true belief [...] would not be improved upon; or would never lead to disappointment; or would stand up to all the evidence and argument, no matter how far we were to pursue our inquiries” (Misak, 2000, p. 114). This entails that reality is ideally knowable.

However, a couple of qualifications concerning this pragmatist conception of truth and reality need to be underscored. Firstly, the Peircean position is thoroughly *fallibilist*, affirming the function of truth as a regulative aim and a real possibility while recognising that no method – not even the most rigorous version of science – provides us with complete certainty. In this particular sense, truth is not simply

out there, but comprehensible as a *telos* internal to certain ways of fixing belief. In a sense it is an ideal of inquiry, a *hope* that there is something objective to which our beliefs may come to conform if we were able to carry out our investigations far enough. Thus, Peirce is not putting forward a metaphysical theory of truth, but rather striving to provide a pragmatic exposition of what “truth” means – that is, a clarification of how the acceptance of a certain conception would entail for practice. Thus, secondly, he also stresses the significance of acknowledging the public nature of truth.

Unless truth be recognized as *public*, - as that of which any person would come to be convinced if he carried his inquiry, his sincere search for immovable belief, far enough, - then there will be nothing to prevent each one of us from adopting an utterly futile belief of his own which all the rest will disbelieve. Each one will set himself up as a little prophet; that is, a little “crank,” a half-witted victim of his own narrowness. But if Truth be something public, it must mean that to the acceptance of which as a basis of conduct any person you please would ultimately come if he pursued his inquiries far enough; - yes, every rational being, however prejudiced he might be at the outset. [---].

But, you will say, I am setting up this very proposition as infallible truth. Not at all; it is a mere definition. I do not say that it is infallibly true that there is any belief to which a person would come if he were to carry his inquiries far enough. I only say that that alone is what I call Truth. I cannot infallibly know that there is any Truth. (SS 73)

Again, there is something prescient in Peirce’s words. The Internet has its fair share of cranks and prophets, which in a post-truth spirit pay no attention to public norms. Peirce’s hope for rational resolution can certainly feel naïve in view of present-day predicaments; but it really should be stressed that truth is here not something pre-given in the transcendental, Habermasian sense, where we only need to reflect on the conditions of our most fundamental practices to realise to find the solace of objective truth guaranteed. In the pragmatist picture, the “method” of science or experience is only the best means to fixate habits of beliefs so far; and as recent events have shown, it has formidable rivals in the public sphere.

It should be emphasised that this Peircean model of inquiry is not limited to science in the institutionalised sense. It is meant to cover any practice that involves the fixing of belief-habits, of which journalism would be another distinctive instance. In fact, I believe that the pragmatic conception of objective truth, which stresses the emergent and telic character of truth-seeking, can provide a better philosophical frame for journalistic objectivity than e.g. traditional correspondence and coherence theories. As all human beings, the journalist employs all kinds of methods of belief-fixation; the challenge is to motivate the elevated status of truth-seeking. And that can only be achieved by drawing a contrast to other means of belief-fixation and actively arguing for the public benefit of a method committed to truth.

So, how does all this pan out in view of the quarrel between post-truthers and veritists? Fuller's advocacy of personalised truth-making in the marketplace of ideas would arguably fall short of Peirce's demand for publicness. But the pragmatic conception of truth espoused here is not substantial in the sense assumed by Fuller's portrayal of the truther commitment to the correspondence view. As I noted, the pragmatist account offers us a conception of truth without metaphysical commitments. In this respect, it can be construed as a pragmatic clarification of "truth" rather than a full-blown theory of truth. However, at the same time, it is a distinctively normative notion, thus meeting Baker and Oreskes's requirements. However, it is also developmental in the sense that truth is not simply given; it is conceived of as a product of inquiry. And inquiry, in its turn, is not primarily conceptualised as truth-seeking. Rather, it is, at bottom, a *product* of the wish to settle beliefs or to find habits of action (including habits of feeling and interpretation) that work as well as possible. This links truth with a way of settling beliefs – that of science or experience – in rivalry with other ways. Thus, the pragmatist does not simply assume a primary relation of truth; in a sense, truth-seeking must justify itself – and it may not turn out to be the best solution for all intents and purposes.

This is not to say that the Peircean conception would not need to be complemented, of course. In addition to modifications already proposed, the emphasis on external reality in scientific inquiry needs to be further clarified and possibly qualified if it is to play a role in human and social inquiry. With a nod to Fuller, more would also need to be said about the danger of science adopting the authoritative mode in public discourse and the causes of doubt – including its wilful manufacture – require more attention. The minimal Peircean model outlined here has an obvious limitation; it says practically nothing about the means of knowledge acquisition and truth-seeking practices. To fill this gap, it would be beneficial to look to Peirce's and others' work on abduction.

How, then, does the Peircean picture fit into the wider post-truth debates? Or, to use Fuller's lingo, is Peirce to be classified as a truther or a post-truther? Given his emphasis on the significance of public truth, many would probably opt for the former – and it would no doubt be more accurate than the alternative. But I would be inclined to say "neither". The reason for this is that his take on truth suggests that there is a sense in which we are *always* in a pre-truth regime – not only because of our continued employment of non-experiential methods of belief-fixation, but also because in this view, truth is an elusive even if pragmatically effectual ideal. On the one hand, then, what Peirce offers are conceptual tools to deal with the possible slide back toward what might be designated "a pre-truth regime" (cf. Legg, 2018); but on the other, the pragmatist position serves as a reminder that we are – have always been and will probably always be – in a pre-truth state in the sense that we can never assume that truth has been achieved. As fallibilists, it is something with which we simply should learn to cope, in scientific inquiry as well as in journalism and other cognitive and communicative practices.

Failure to do so leads to the kind of cognitive “authoritarianism” that Fuller abhors, which is partly – not solely, of course – responsible for producing what has been designated “post-truth”. The concluding morale, then, of these reflections is that we should beware that well-intended cures for the perceived ills of post-truth do not end up producing conditions conducive to post-truth mindsets. Optimistic as it may seem, I believe that a pragmatic, fallibilistic conception of truth can, to a modest degree, help us to avoid such mistakes.

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