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Abstract

This article uses differing interpretations of a thread of narrative taken from Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a springboard to exploring the connection between philosophical truth and political liberalism. It argues that while no positive connection exists between realist truth and political liberalism, minimal negative connections do exist between Rorty's humanistic account of truth and a basic commitment to democratic and liberal frameworks. It sees these minimal connections as limiting in their failure to provide a politics that moves beyond an exclusive concern with liberty and democracy to more substantive political issues of equality and justice. However, it also sees them as reassuring in showing how acceptance of Rorty's humanistic account of truth in no way necessitates adopting his own ethnocentric political stance.

Keywords

Bernard Williams, epistemology, freedom, humanism, George Orwell, pragmatism, Richard Rorty, truth

Does political liberalism require epistemological truth?

And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. (John 8: 32)

Freedom is more important than truth.¹ (Rorty)

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Orwell painted a well-known and disturbing vision of a possible future in which the Party was able to determine truth and falsity at a whim through authoritarian means of control. The main protagonist of the novel, Winston Smith, whose job it is to generate misinformation through changing the official record of historical

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events, eventually rebels against the dictatorial system of Big Brother. In the early stages of this rebellion, Orwell describes a scene in which Winston begins to commit 'thought-crime' (acts of thinking deviating from the Party line), fatefully writing down some of what occurs to him:

The obvious, the silly and the true has got to be defended. Truisms are true, hold on to that! The solid world exists, its laws do not change. Stones are hard, water is wet, objects unsupported fall towards the earth's centre. With the feeling that he was speaking to O'Brien, and also that he was setting forth an important axiom, he wrote: *Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted, all else follows.*²

Later in the novel, after Winston has been arrested, O'Brien – a character whose job is to track down potential thought-criminals by posing to be part of the resistance – tortures Winston into accepting that there exists no reality independent of that defined by the Party, and, having read Winston's diary and therefore aware of his particular characterization of self-evident reality, tortures him into accepting that two plus two makes five. O'Brien is not concerned that Winston should merely pronounce that two plus two is equal to five, and early in the torture when Winston declares this to be the case simply to stop the pain. O'Brien is unsatisfied with his lack of sincerity. O'Brien wants Winston to *really believe* it to be the case, and he continues torturing him until the point at which he is mentally rearranged into truly believing that 'two plus two is five'. This episode is of interest here because Orwell appears to be connecting epistemological matters of truth and falsity with broader political issues of liberty and autonomous choice.

While Orwell's moral commitment to the virtue of truth in a normative sense is in no way controversial,³ interpretation of his epistemological position has been more so. One common reading of this aspect of the novel is that a solid and objective sense of truth is essential to the maintenance of liberty; if a society loses truth it has lost its ability to function as a free society. As Rorty puts it, 'Orwell has, in short, been read as a realist philosopher, a defender of common sense against its cultured, ironist despisers'.⁴ This is the interpretation that Bernard Williams favours, claiming that we cannot distinguish between 'acceptable and unacceptable ways of inducing belief... without mentioning *the truth*',⁵ and therefore that O'Brien's actions are wrong because they functioned to 'subvert true belief so as to destroy his [Winston's] relation to the world altogether, undoing the distinctions between reality and fantasy' (*TAT*, p. 148). The destruction of Winston's capacity to hold an adequate truth/falsity distinction, according to Williams, is therefore at the heart of Orwell's moral, and indeed political, warning.

Rorty, however, claims that it is not so much that Winston is made to believe *something that is untrue* that is problematic, but that he is *made to believe* something he does not wish to. He argues that if Winston had been tortured into accepting a truth against his will by the Party, the moral of the tale would still hold. *Torture* and the denial of freedom, in other words, not *truth*, are seen by Rorty to be at the core of what is morally wrong with O'Brien's actions and politically wrong with the broader landscape of power that defines Oceania in the year 1984. He argues that it is more productive to read this episode as saying something about *torture*, and that 'the question about "the possibility of truth" is a red herring' (*CIS*, p. 182); the wickedness of O'Brien's acts does not come

from his distorting Winston's relationship to the 'truth' but from his violent imposition of one belief, *irrelevant of its truthfulness*, in place of another.

Rorty sees O'Brien not as a figure who arose through political culture's abandonment of its grasp of truth (and therefore to be avoided by vigilantly defending truth), but rather one that came about as a consequence and expression of a regime specifically designed to suppress the exercise of *freedom*, and recall that for Winston, freedom '*is the freedom to say that two plus two make four*'. On Rorty's interpretation, O'Brien's torture was not primarily intended therefore to distort the truth itself, but simply to get Winston to believe something for no reason, and therefore to break him; as O'Brien himself says in the novel, the 'object of persecution is persecution. The object of torture is torture. The object of power is power' (*NEF*, p. 276). Torture becomes effective in this case because it exercises absolute and pure power, since 'getting someone to deny a belief for no reason is a first step toward making her incapable of having a self because she becomes incapable of weaving a coherent web of belief and desire' (*CIS*, p. 178). By the end of the novel Winston has entirely lost this ability to weave a coherent web, and this – the successful denial of his freedom to be who he felt himself to be – is the ultimate tragedy of the tale. The maxim that Rorty draws from this, is therefore that 'if we take care of freedom, truth can take care of itself' (*ibid.*, p. 176).

Rorty's interpretation has, however, received much criticism. Conant, for instance, claims that the most obvious reading of Orwell is '*inaudible* to Rorty' due to his own overriding philosophical concerns (*RHC*, p. 280). This criticism is vindicated in Orwell's writing elsewhere that 'Nazi theory . . . denies that such a thing as "the truth" exists . . . If the Leader says of such and such an event, "It never happened" – well, it never happened. If he says that two and two are five – well, two and two are five. This prospect frightens me much more than bombs.'⁶ Rorty responds to Conant's criticism by asserting that his reading of Orwell 'was not intended to claim him as a fellow pragmatist, but to explain why one could be a non-Realist and still have one's moral horizon expanded by *1984*. . . the idea was to see how the book looks when seen through non-realist eyes . . . Had Orwell taken an interest in such arguments,' Rorty comments, 'I imagine, he would have sided with the Realists.'⁷ Rorty's reading might therefore be taken as an example of his own understanding of the value and purpose of human culture more broadly, which he sees as, at its best, not so much aspiring to remain faithful to deep underlying truths but rather as the cumulative stock and ongoing endeavour to offer edifying and elucidating redescriptions of the world around us.⁸

Williams, however, takes issue with just this point by arguing that some reference to the actual truth or falsity of the imposed belief is necessary to make any moral sense out of the scenario Orwell describes, since without it we are unable to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate forms of inducing belief. 'We need, for instance,' he writes, 'to be able to describe those authoritative forms of persuasion that are legitimated under the title of "education," and we have no reason to think that we can do this without using the notions of truth and falsity' (*TAT*, p. 147). Unfortunately, not only does this point to Williams' own revealingly narrow, and – for a teacher of the humanities – worryingly anti-Socratic understanding of a liberal education, but further misses what Rorty argues is no doubt precisely (at least one necessary part of) Orwell's message. That is that torture is wrong *per se*, and while it may well be Orwell's intention to present us with a

particularly disturbing image of torture in showing us a case of torture that reaches so deep as to distort the victim's sense of coherent thought and ultimately selfhood, the reality or falsity of this sense of self is hardly the principal ethical issue at hand. Torture directed towards a victim's will to truth, in other words, is a particularly abhorrent case of torture; it is, however, by no means torture's necessary and definitive characteristic. Though Williams elsewhere uses the dramatic image of the conclusion of Canetti's novel *Auto-da-Fé* to parody Rorty's position,⁹ this method of immolating heretics from which the novel takes its title could just as well be used in Rorty's defence in providing a clear example of precisely the kind of suppression of freedom that *liberalism, not realism*, helps us avoid. The methods of the Spanish Inquisition are not objectionable to us because Catholics were on the side of falsity, while Protestants, witches, Jews, or Muslims, were on the side of truth. The means of serving justice to the unfaithful were wrong because torture was carried out in order to preserve and expand a singular orthodox conception of truth; a truth that was authoritarian and, like in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, backed up by violence as soon as it felt itself to be put into question.

Rorty does not provide specific examples of his maxim that 'if we take care of freedom, truth can take care of itself' (*CIS*, p. 176), but perhaps the case of the Soviet biologist Trofim Lysenko might serve as an illustration. In the context of Stalin's attempt to reverse the decline in crop yields brought about by collectivization, Lysenko's almost entirely unsupported adoption of a theory of the genetic inheritance of acquired characteristics became official dogma; a dogma supported by the state to the point at which more justified theories of genetic inheritance were aggressively outlawed.¹⁰ Geneticists who were brave enough to question Lysenko's pseudo-science often found themselves in prison or simply shot. The theory famously led to various large-scale catastrophes in Soviet agriculture, and some argue that it may even have precipitated the fall of the Soviet Union itself by undermining its agricultural base and eventually forcing it (at least before Carter's embargo) to import grain from its great cold war rival, the United States. Truth became mixed up with political power to such an extent that stepping outside of orthodox truth immediately put one's life at risk. Eventually, with successive regime changes and the slow restoration of political liberty in the USSR, truth – in the particular pragmatic and humanistic sense that Rorty defends¹¹ – found space to emerge, and Lysenko was ultimately publicly discredited. This might therefore be used to demonstrate a situation in which because freedom was suppressed, more justified accounts of truth were prevented from bubbling to the surface. Once freedom was taken care of, truth took care of itself.

This example also suggests that in spite of Rorty's insistence that *truth* and *politics* have no link whatsoever,¹² and while they may not be linked in the *positive* sense that political systems cannot be defended in terms of being more in touch with certain truths than others, there may nevertheless be a *negative* relationship between the two, in the minimal sense that a determined effort towards protecting a political culture against affirmative, singular and incontestable conceptions of the True may help defend the political liberalism that falls in the face of authoritarian Truth. While Todorov is right therefore in writing that 'humanism does not define politics with any precision', and that 'diverse, indeed contradictory choices, can be compatible with humanist principles',¹³ a humanistic account of the purposes of knowledge *does* at least seem to defend against the

dangers of dogma that are embedded in unquestionable assertions of the truth; and a necessary questioning of both asserted truth and 'common-sense' received wisdom does indeed appear to animate most healthy liberal societies. Bronowski even suggests that the appeal to, and forcible imposition of, absolute truth is a defining characteristic of totalitarian societies and the crimes that have so often grown out of them. He writes, in reference to the crematoria at Auschwitz, that 'when people believe that they have absolute knowledge, with no test in reality, this is how they behave. This is what men do when they aspire to the knowledge of Gods.'¹⁴ Bronowski's diagnosis of the fundamental danger of totalitarianism is more precise here than (the conventional reading of) Orwell's in its comprehension that it was not so much the inherent *falsity* of Nazism that made it so deadly, but rather its indomitable *singularity*; its aspiration to eliminate all difference, critique and dissent, and therefore its failure to bring its own murderous premises into question.

This section has suggested that contrary both to Rorty's claim that understandings of truth and politics have no connection whatsoever and also to Williams' belief that liberalism must be defended through the defence of realist truth, a healthy political (and indeed epistemological) culture may in fact be one in which a continual questioning, rather than perpetual defence, of established truth is cultivated. The remainder of this article examines the interface between truth and politics as it applies not to politics generally, but to Rorty's specific political convictions, and asks whether if a humanistic understanding of truth connects the notion of truth with beliefs and values (appears to connect it, in other words, to one's *ethnos*) does this mean that such an account of truth necessitates an ethnocentric politics? After offering a critique of Rorty's ethnocentrism, it argues that while adopting his humanistic account of knowledge implies some broad minimal commitment to models of liberalism and democracy, it in no way necessitates the particular nationalistic defence of liberal democracy Rorty himself endorses.

Does a humanistic account of truth necessitate an ethnocentric politics?

Rorty is clear and unapologetic about the fact that he values his own culture and the ways of life of his own people, whom he provokingly terms 'postmodern bourgeois liberals', above those of others. He explicitly identifies these people with the United States, a country which he presents as 'a good example of the best kind of society so far invented' (*PSH*, p. 4) even if he recognizes that it has failed to live up to the aspirations of many of its greatest patriots and reformists.¹⁵ In distinction to the standard epistemological scaremongering over Rorty's apparently pernicious 'cultural relativism'¹⁶ – much of which stems from an unfounded fear of a drift into ethical nihilism¹⁷ – Putnam instead notes that in effect this renders Rorty's position 'a form of cultural imperialism rather than cultural relativism'.¹⁸ Cultural imperialism is indeed a more worrying outgrowth of Rorty's philosophy, and, predictably, this aspect of his thought has received a barrage of criticism.¹⁹ Baert, for instance, has questioned Rorty's sincerity, asking whether he 'wholeheartedly believes it is possible to develop a truly progressive agenda for the 21st century that remains embedded in an overtly nationalistic outlook'?²⁰ In a similar reaction of disbelief, Critchley writes that 'it would perhaps be too easy, but none the less justified, to

point towards the evidence of imperialism, racism, and colonialism that has always accompanied – or perhaps has always been behind the cynical veneer of a legitimating discourse – the expansion of western liberal democracy'.²¹ Likewise, Turner shows how Rorty's defence of American liberalism 'optimistically ignores the possibility of an American Empire and the emergence of a predatory democracy'²² stressing how easily his ethnocentrism lends itself to America's programme of *enforced* democratic 'enlightenment' abroad, in the process clearly undermining its own purported liberalism.

Rorty's understanding of western liberalism is further limited by a narrowly circumscribed conception of what liberty entails.²³ Liberty is here understood, as Mill earlier understood it,²⁴ to involve the freedom to be left alone in order to pursue one's interests up to the point at which such a pursuit can be seen to limit others' similar pursuits, and therefore the promotion of those institutions that serve primarily to protect individuals and groups from external interference. This minimal affinity between pragmatism and liberalism goes back to the former's origins and James dedicates his introductory lectures on pragmatism to Mill, 'from whom', he writes, 'I first learned the pragmatic openness of mind and whom my fancy likes to picture as our leader were he alive today' (*P*, p. 2). In a typical statement on the matter Rorty talks about 'the practical advantages of liberal institutions in allowing individuals and cultures to get along together without intruding on each other's privacy, without meddling in each other's conceptions of the good'.²⁵ This exclusive concern with what Berlin termed 'negative liberty'²⁶ ignores forms of 'positive liberty' involved in providing individuals and groups with the resources and capacities they need in order to realize their freedoms.²⁷ Although Berlin was extremely wary of the historical abuses that stemmed from the top-down enforcement of 'positive liberties', others, such as Taylor,²⁸ have demonstrated the equal problems with ignoring the demands of 'positive liberty'. More recently, authors such as Brown and Žižek have also been particularly incisive at exposing the problems with complacent forms of 'tolerance' – a peculiarly modern form of negative liberty – stressing the ways in which halting politics at the goal of 'toleration' (e.g. of minority interests) offers a convenient and frequently patronizing mechanism for avoiding the demands of *justice*,²⁹ and Rorty's neglect of justice is a point upon which the dividing line separating him from Orwell can indeed be most clearly and confidently drawn.

Rorty's ethnocentric particularism also sits uneasily with the universalizing tendencies of his purportedly humanistic outlook (*PSH*, pp. 127–30). This is surprising considering that, as Bernstein writes, 'pragmatism, at its very core, has a *universalistic* thrust. The central idea of a community of enquirers is incompatible with nationalistic or cultural limitations on such a community.'³⁰ Said also writes that 'there can be no true humanism whose scope is limited to extolling patriotically the virtues of our culture, our language, our monuments. Humanism is the exertion of one's faculties in language in order to understand, reinterpret and grapple with the products of language in history, other languages, and other histories.'³¹ While Rorty's humanism therefore offers a useful account of truth and the value of humanistic learning, it belies its name as humanism insofar as it is caught up with a condescending defence of the moral superiority of the West, which, as Nash recognizes, 'seems to be closely tied to the colonialist stance'.³²

In response to a debate initiated by Geertz,³³ Rorty attempts to defend his ethnocentrism (or what he prefers to call his 'anti-anti-ethnocentrism') by arguing that opposing *all*

forms of ethnocentrism halts our ability to hold indignation against acts that from our positioned and limited standpoints we have reason to find unjust or cruel, leading to a dangerously naïve state in which we have ‘become so open-minded that our brains have fallen out’ (OE, p. 526). Geertz, however, reminds Rorty that the radical alternative to this is a form of arrogant cultural self-assuredness that forestalls understanding and learning processes between and within cultures, effectively creating ‘windowless’ human communities, constructed as what he describes as ‘semantic monads’ (UOD, p. 262). Writing from an elite position within the pre-eminent global superpower, it is easy to see why Rorty may have been particularly vulnerable to the seductions of cultural superiority, but he claims that while the possibility of creating communities as ‘semantic monads’ is a risk for certain cultures, it is not a risk for the culture of ‘bourgeois liberalism’ because (demonstrating again his exclusive liberal concern with ‘negative liberty’) this culture is characterized by ‘its *tolerance* of diversity’ and by an ever-expanding openness to others (OE, p. 526, my emphasis). Unfortunately, while this may perhaps be true of some floating ideal of liberalism, it is not difficult to see that it is utterly contradicted by liberalism’s palpable history, and certainly by its present American manifestation, and to understand this we need simply to turn to the populations who have been on the receiving end of America’s outward economic, cultural and political expansion across the globe.

Not only is the way Rorty views the USA in stark contradiction to the way it is actually experienced *externally* by other areas of the world, but it is also contradicted by the way in which it is experienced *internally* by many of its less powerful minorities. As Turner recognizes, Rorty’s ‘constant references to a community of like-minded liberal, bourgeois individuals’ are problematic because they indicate ‘a failure to confront the postmodern criticism that a community is made up from different voices, all of whom are competing for recognition in the public arena and who claim that their heterogeneous voices are not being recognized’ (DOC, p. 284). It is not just this ‘postmodern criticism’ of cultural diversity that it ignores, however, but, as C. Wright Mills recognized, to claim that we’re ““all in this together, the butcher and the general and the ditch digger and the secretary of the treasury and the cook and the president of the United States”” also ignores the very *modern* criticism of ‘the facts of power’,³⁴ and therefore neglects the enduring realities of class in America.³⁵

Rorty’s nationalism is most transparently expressed as an effort towards ‘achieving’ a country that he clearly felt had not yet achieved itself,³⁶ and therefore, though he frequently conflates the two, one might interpret him more generously as addressing the *promise* of American liberalism, rather than its actual *expression*. Additionally, in the years preceding his death, he became increasingly critical of American unilateralism, and allied himself with Derrida and Habermas in countering America’s overseas intimidations.³⁷ Further, Réé has pointed out that Rorty’s earnest leftist critics too frequently miss the undeniably funny side of his writing; too often taking the bait of his knowingly provocative remarks, which, he suggests, ‘are pretty effective as needles for puncturing pompous conceits: comic devices for winding up those of us who cannot bring ourselves to admit that our political righteousness may not be quite so self-evident when seen in its broad practical context, or when measured in terms of its long-range historical effects’.³⁸ However, even when all this is taken into account, politics remains an issue that demands some level of seriousness, and it is often only the politically dominant who can afford the

luxury of a joke. The distastefulness of Rorty's ethnocentrism is made no more palatable by its blasé humour, and ultimately it is difficult to see how his position could be squared with a sincere political humanism. It is therefore important to look further into whether Rorty's politics is in fact a logical outcome of his humanistic theory of truth.

John Dewey spent some effort trying to demonstrate the consistency between pragmatic philosophy and democratic political organization, arguing that the former more or less implied the latter.³⁹ Rorty, on the other hand, insists that no strong connection exists between critiquing correspondence theories of truth, and promoting liberal democracy. Quoting Posner, he concurs that the 'bridge [Dewey] tried to build between epistemic and political democracy is too flimsy to carry heavy traffic',⁴⁰ and his central argument in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* is premised upon this separation between public and private spheres, in which 'solidarity' – the project for a more equal and just society in which we might live collectively with a minimum of humanly inflicted suffering – is appropriate to the former, while 'irony' – the doubting of our own and others' 'final vocabularies' and conceptions of the true – is the proper stance within the latter.

This firm analytical divide between the public and private has long been critiqued by feminists who have drawn attention to its historical role in removing private gender oppression from public scrutiny and therefore political challenge.⁴¹ Criticism has also been directed towards the apparent aloofness associated with Rorty's use of the term 'irony', and how far a stance of irony can realistically be stretched. Critchley, for instance, asks whether cruelty is 'something about which liberals can be ironic' (*DAP*, p. 26)? Nevertheless, Rorty insists that we ought to strive to become 'liberal ironists', people committed to removing cruelty from the world and promoting social justice, but privately and ironically aware that there are no neutral metaphysical truths upon which we might ground these commitments. His argument can therefore be read as addressing two separate groups.

On the one hand he addresses liberal realists: liberals who base their political ideals on apparently neutral principles such as reason or truth. Rorty wishes to persuade this group of the contingency of its own vocabularies and therefore the necessity of adopting an ironic stance towards them. Habermas is a good example of this type of non-ironic liberal in that his theory of communicative action in effect argues that democratic politics is a more *rational* system than its alternatives.⁴² For Habermas, the very act of entering into rational communication with others in order to elaborate forms of knowledge or reach agreement relies upon certain 'validity claims' that assume the potential of truth as a goal. From Rorty's perspective, however, 'rationality' or 'truth' should be irrelevant to Habermas' defence of democratic politics because the communicative practices he describes 'do not transcend social convention. Rather, they are regulated by certain *particular* social conventions: those of a society, even more democratic, tolerant, leisured, wealthy and diverse than our own – one in which inclusivism is built into everyone's sense of moral identity [and in which] everybody welcomes strange opinions on all sorts of topics' (*RHC*, p. 7). Others, such as Levine, have also pointed out that Habermas' insistence on arguing for an objective conception of truth and 'rational consensus' as a *telos* of political deliberation, contradicts his broader pragmatic commitment to anti-foundationalism.⁴³ As Bernstein notes, such an 'appeal to something like a rational consensus has always been used to block, stifle, or rule out revolutionary turns in the conversation'⁴⁴

therefore attempting to secure a zone of non-contingency for liberal politics, where no such zone in fact exists.

On the other hand, however, Rorty addresses private ironists who refuse public solidarity; to this group he wishes to argue that recognition of the contingency of one's private vocabulary must be divorced from political questions; that 'ideals may be local and culture-bound, and nevertheless be the best hope of the species'. Liberals should, he argues, 'take with full seriousness the fact that the ideals of procedural justice and human equality are parochial, recent, eccentric, cultural developments, and then . . . recognize that this does not mean they are any the less worth fighting for' (OE, p. 208).

Rorty's doubt 'that philosophy (even pragmatist philosophy) is ever going to be very useful for politics' (*DAP*, p. 73) is supported by evidence beyond his own claims. Laclau, for example, shows how a Gramscian politics built around the concept of 'hegemony' 'is a politics very different from Rorty's, but perfectly compatible with pragmatic premises'⁴⁵ and the politics of West, Unger, Bernstein and the younger Hook offer additional examples of more radical political approaches being shaped from very similar underlying humanistic theories of truth. Though they may well reject his terminology, all these figures have been both committed to public solidarity yet equally faithful to rejecting an anchoring of that commitment in some ultimate metaphysical grounding.

Occasionally Rorty does allow that there may be some loose connection between his humanistic account of truth and his political convictions, writing that 'both are expressions of, and reinforce, the same suspicion of religion and metaphysics. Both can be traced back to the same historical causes (religious tolerance, constitutional democracy, Darwin)' (*DAP*, pp. 73–4). In addition to these links, the humanistic element in Rorty's understanding of truth – the idea that truths are contingent historical products, produced locally, by and for human beings – seems necessarily to imply, as a minimum, some form of Deweyian democratic engagement by which humans have the freedom to converse in unrestricted and equal debate to reach the principles they find useful to hold.⁴⁶ This link has also been acknowledged by a variety of other pragmatist thinkers. Bernstein, for instance, points out that '[b]ecause our affirmations do not rest upon fixed foundations, and are not gratuitous "decisions," it becomes vital that they become articulated, debated, and publicly discussed' (ROP, pp. 839–40). Similarly, Holmwood emphasizes that dialogue is a necessary element of the pragmatic orientation towards problem-solving 'precisely because it is a creative activity' and 'problems do not call forth their own solutions'.⁴⁷ Turner also notes that 'democracies are pragmatically justified because they allow for an open and critical debate between its [*sic*] citizens' (DOC, p. 280). Hints of this can also be found within Rorty's own writings, particularly in his description of the ironist as someone who naturally gravitates towards conversation; 'the person who has doubts about his [*sic*] own final vocabulary, his own moral identity, and perhaps his own sanity – desperately needs to *talk* to other people', he writes, 'because only conversation enables him to handle these doubts, to keep himself together, to keep his web of beliefs and desires coherent enough to enable him to act' (*CIS*, p. 186). The ironist needs democratic engagement to maintain a sense of his or her sanity and feel that the principles he or she acts upon can at least be justified to other humans, even if they are unable to find ultimate justification from the non-human world. For the ironist, the democratic task becomes 'how to persuade people to broaden the size of the audience they take to be

competent, to increase the size of the relevant community of justification', and, as he lets slip, the 'latter project is not only relevant to democratic politics, it pretty much *is* democratic politics' (*RHC*, p. 9).

As well as this minimal positive affinity between a democratic impulse and a humanistic account of truth, and even though Rorty repeatedly contests the suggestion that 'pragmatism entails a commitment to liberalism' (*PSH*, p. 271), the above discussion of Orwell tried to emphasize the fact that a humanistic approach to knowledge must, as a minimum, be concerned with fighting against the imposition of unquestionable assertions of truth. Truth, as Foucault noted in his Nietzschean investigations into power/knowledge, creates its own hidden structures of power, and a healthy political culture is one in which alternative accounts of the true are given space to develop and in which current truths are held forever open to future critique and the possibility of novel paradigmatic reassessment. While, therefore, the quest to ground liberalism or democracy once and for all in the apparently immutable non-human worlds of reason or truth may forever be in vain, we may nevertheless acknowledge that unassailable assertions of truth threaten any free political organization of society, and that Rorty is right therefore in arguing that 'muddle, compromise, and blurry syntheses are usually less perilous, politically, than Cartesian clarity'.⁴⁸

Conclusion

This article has argued that – in partial agreement with Rorty's own claims – political liberalism does not rely upon a realist account of truth. It has suggested, however, that certain *minimal* links do exist between a humanistic understanding of truth and democratic and liberal political culture, in that the former lends itself well to defending against authoritarian impositions of absolute and unimpeachable truth, and that the surfacing of truth (humanistically conceived) may well be abetted by the freedoms that political liberalism and democratic exchange provide. In this sense therefore, it finds itself in agreement with Baggini's statement that whatever their usefulness philosophically, Rorty's views on truth in practice 'leave the world [or, he might more accurately have put it, the *liberal democratic* world] more or less as it is'.⁴⁹ Although, therefore, a humanistic account of truth does not provide any particularly well-defined approach to politics – and in particular, has very few implications for matters of justice or equality – this article nevertheless sees it as welcome that Rorty's epistemological considerations need not necessitate (and in fact appear largely to contradict) his own nationalistic ethnocentrism; the implication being therefore, that 'to criticize Rorty's politics, does not signify that we should renounce pragmatism'.⁵⁰

Notes

1. In Robert Brandom (ed.) *Rorty and His Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 188; hereafter cited as *RHC*.
2. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Harmondsworth, Mx: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 84; hereafter cited as *NEF*.
3. Lionel Trilling, 'George Orwell and the Politics of Truth', in L. Trilling, *The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2000).

4. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 172; hereafter cited as *CIS*.
5. Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Woodstock, Oxon: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 147; hereafter cited as *TAT*.
6. George Orwell, *Collected Essays* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1964), p. 213.
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8. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).
9. Bernard Williams, "'Auto-da-Fé": Review of Richard Rorty's *Consequences of Pragmatism*', *New York Review of Books* (28 April 1983); hereafter cited as *ADF*; accessed 21 November 2013 @: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1983/apr/28/auto-da-fe>
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