

The Issue of the Pragmatist Sources of Post-Truth, Considered in the Light of William James’ Definition of Truth

Marek Wójtowicz

ABSTRACT “The post-truth era” is one of the terms characteristic of modern times. It describes the widespread acceptance of deception and manipulation in public life, especially in the mass media. The investigation presented here first seeks to clarify the phenomenon of post-truth, on the basis of an analysis of those authors who have proposed and popularized the concept, such as Steve Tesich, Ralph Keyes and Matthew d’Ancona. Next, it explores the thesis put forward by Dariusz Juruś regarding the influence of the philosophy of pragmatism on the development of post-truth. In order to evaluate that thesis, William James’ conception is examined, including his definition of truth, his radical empiricism, and the idea of a genuine option. It turns out that the American philosopher’s pragmatism can undoubtedly not be counted among the sources of post-truth.

KEYWORDS genuine option; James, William; post-truth; pragmatism; radical empiricism

The concept of post-truth was first used in 1992 by Steve Tesich in his essay *A Government of Lies*, to be subsequently introduced into academic discourse in 2004 by American columnist Ralph Keyes, the author of *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life*. The diagnosis of modernity made therein proved so accurate that the concept soon began to be widely used to explain numerous topical socio-political phenomena. Seven years ago, *Oxford Dictionaries* declared “post-truth” the word of the year.

An analysis of many dimensions of social life, especially in the world of Western culture, indicates a gradual distancing from such an essential human value as truth. This disturbing phenomenon undoubtedly calls for in-depth reflection to both formulate an accurate description of the situation and to find remedies to it, since the further expansion of post-truth may—it seems—undermine the very foundations of our civilization. The research presented here aims to evaluate the thesis that the philosophy of pragmatism exerted a significant influence on this process we are seeing happening today.

1. POST-TRUTH: DEFINITION AND CONDITIONS

It is difficult to produce a precise definition of the concept of post-truth. In his analysis, Tesich pointed to the reluctance of modern people to seek the truth—especially when that truth could prove uncomfortable to them. That is why they approve of the half-truths and deceptions provided to them by the media (Tesich 1992, 12–13). Keyes, on the other hand, emphasized the fundamental transformation of moral attitudes toward lying that has taken place in recent decades:

Even though there have always been liars, lies have usually been told with hesitation, a dash of anxiety, a bit of guilt, a little shame, at least some sheepishness. Now, clever people that we are, we have come up with rationales for tampering with truth so we can dissemble guilt-free. I call it *post-truth*. (Keyes 2004, 12–13)

In turn, Matthew d’Ancona—a journalist who has contributed greatly to popularizing the idea of post-truth—attempted to grasp its essence using the following words: “the triumph of the visceral over the rational, the deceptively simple over the honestly complex” (d’Ancona 2017, 20), and declared: “Specifically, I explore the declining value of truth as society’s reserve currency, and the infectious spread of pernicious relativism disguised as legitimate scepticism” (d’Ancona 2017, 2).

Producing a more accurate definition of the concept of post-truth will become possible after we have invoked some typical situations that it is used to describe. It is worth focusing on the examples by means of which the abovementioned authors illustrated their theses. As such, Tesich refers to three political scandals that directly involved the highest seat of political power—that of the President of the United States. After the Watergate scandal came to light, Richard Nixon was forced to resign, which, according to Tesich, was a triumph for democracy and the American commitment to truth. The public, however, was not willing to let any more such situations that were so discomforting for citizens arise: “We looked to our government to protect us from the truth” (Tesich 1992, 12). The subsequent fraud scandals involving US presidents—the Iran-Contra Affair under President Ronald Reagan, and the circumstances surrounding the start of the Gulf War under President George H.W. Bush—no longer provoked such strong public reactions. It appeared that allegiance to truth had given way to the acceptance of post-truth.

Many more examples of the spread of post-truth are presented by Keyes. First of all, he refers to the results of numerous studies indicating that modern times are far more saturated with lies than had previously been the case. Keyes summarizes his analysis as follows:

This book’s premise is that we may be no more prone to making things up than our ancestors were, but we are better able to get away with deceiving others, more likely to be let off the hook if exposed, and in the process convince ourselves that no harm’s been done. (Keyes 2004, 10–11)

Among the phenomena taken to illustrate this thesis, Keyes includes the popularity of euphemistic terms for lying, the prevalence of minor and major deceptions in autobiographical narratives, and the provision of false data about one’s education (Keyes 2004, 15–80).

For d’Ancona, on the other hand, proof of the victory of post-truth over truth has been provided by two important events—which he called rebellions—which took place in 2016: the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president and Brexit. “Most conspicuously, both insurgencies reflected a new and alarming collapse in the power of truth as an engine of electoral conduct” (d’Ancona 2017, 10). Thus, d’Ancona argues that an important transformation has taken place in the sphere of social communication: the imperative to convey objective truth has been replaced by the requirement of sincerity, and the reporting of facts by appeals to emotions.

How to explicate the reasons for the current spread of post-truth? Tesich blames the ethos of success and self-fulfillment dominant in American

society, which contributes to raising the younger generation in a climate of relativism and produces an inclination to divest oneself of “moral encumbrances,” leading to a loss of the “human spirit.” The educational sources of post-truth are also noted by Keyes. In the 21st century, psychotherapists on the one hand, and lawyers and politicians on the other, have taken over the role of teachers of morality. To make matters worse, they have become role models, even though the former help their patients create and reinforce “useful myths” about themselves, while the latter, instead of striving to establish the truth (facts), act primarily in favor of the interests of their clients and often directly obstruct the way to the truth, with many demonstrating a quite unheard-of propensity for confabulation and prevarication.¹

Keyes discerns another reason for the spread of post-truth, this time in the transformation of academia. Dishonesty is becoming prevalent there, not only with students resorting to classroom cheating, but also with professors stooping so low as to put a misleading spin on their own biographies, provide false information during lectures, and even falsify research results: “Many who teach there consider tolerance for deception a sign of intellectual dexterity” (Keyes 2004, 130). According to Keyes, the development of academic post-truth is largely due to the popularity of postmodernist ideas that treat truth as a social construct and replace it with a multitude of “narratives,” which inevitably leads to relativism. This is what d’Ancona agrees with, noting that postmodernists, in their search for an accurate description of the diversity characterizing contemporary social life, have transformed reality into a Baudrillardian hyper-reality, thus blurring the distinction between truth and fiction (d’Ancona 2017, 96–109).

However, Keyes regards the transformation that has taken place in the mass media in recent decades as perhaps the most significant source of post-truth. Deception by writers, journalists and show-business representatives, especially those associated with the movie and television industry, has become standard behavior (Keyes 2004, 149–83). More than a dozen years later, this thesis must be supplemented by a statement about the current dominance of online media, which are undoubtedly at the forefront of creating and disseminating various types of post-truth.

The analyses and conclusions so far referred to can be considered “classical” when it comes to the issue of post-truth. They have been commented on and modified in various ways by subsequent thinkers addressing the issue (Vacura 2020, 10–13). The Polish philosopher Dariusz Juruś (2021, 51)

1. Here, Keyes (2004, 113–29) mentions Al Gore, Bill Clinton, Ronald Reagan, Joe Biden and Arnold Schwarzenegger, among others.

has recognized the philosophy of activism as one of the sources of post-truth: “Contemporary man must be active and stimulated. While truth is the object of contemplation, post-truth is meant to be an incentive for action.” Moreover, in a footnote, he has laid out the bold thesis that “pragmatism also had a significant impact on the concept of truth resp. post-truth. . . Truth is action; . . . The subject is no longer an observer, but becomes a participant in the knowledge-forming process” (Juruś 2021, 51). The lack of reference to other publications leads us to assume that this is Juruś’ original thesis. Although he does not offer any real reasoning to this effect in his text, he has nevertheless raised an issue that is certainly worth conducting a comprehensive analysis of. The research presented in subsequent parts of this article is precisely an attempt to evaluate the thesis asserting the influence of pragmatism on the spread of post-truth. The starting point here will be the idea of truth as formulated by the American philosopher William James.

2. WILLIAM JAMES’ PRAGMATIC DEFINITION OF TRUTH

Pragmatism is undoubtedly one of the most important, and at the same time most diverse, currents in modern philosophy, and James’ views are usually taken as its representative formulation, along with the position espoused by Charles Sanders Peirce. The pragmatic idea of truth plays a special role in this regard. The issue was elaborated on by James with exceptional scrupulousness, as he considered it fundamental to gaining a proper understanding of pragmatism.

The American philosopher presents his views on truth against the background of its classical definition. There are two main reasons for this. First, that understanding of truth, as *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, is so widely affirmed that all definitions of it are usually categorized as either classical or non-classical. Second, it was the proponents of the classical definition who launched a frontal attack on the pragmatic perspective on truth. James was convinced that—leaving aside the actual differences between the two positions—the vehemence of that attack, and the accompanying argumentation, testified to a fundamental misunderstanding of the pragmatic definition of it. This is not to say that the author of *Pragmatism* succeeded—even in the course of numerous debates with his adversaries and the formulation of additional explanations and exemplifications—in unequivocally formulating his own position. On the contrary, the undoubted vivacity and vividness of the style of James’ works unfortunately did not go hand-in-hand with any corresponding precision in respect of the arguments presented in them (Stepnik 2010, 155).

The American philosopher was inclined to approve of the classical definition of truth as a correspondence of mental ideas with cognized elements of reality. This is obvious with regard to sensory cognition: it involves creating a faithful copy of the perceived object (James 1912b, 199). What is problematic, however, is the relation of fit supposedly obtaining between an idea and a more complex object. James defined it as follows:

To “agree” in the widest sense with a reality, can only mean to be guided either straight up to it or into its surroundings, or to be put into such working touch with it as to handle either it or something connected with it better than if we disagreed. Better either intellectually or practically! (James 1912b, 212–13)

The touchstone for identifying compatibility between ideas and the world is thus utility. If a person arrives at the truth, they can then make use of it in their actions, in transforming reality in one way or another. Accurate cognition of a given element or aspect of the latter, in the sense of grasping the rules governing the object under study, allows for effective action: “Our obligation to seek truth is part of our general obligation to do what pays. The payments true ideas bring are the sole why of our duty to follow them” (James 1912b, 230).

The rightness of ideas is therefore closely related to their practical consequences: “True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify” (James 1912b, 201). The search for truth always begins with a person’s experience, in which they encounter a certain problem. Then, they adopt a cognitive, theoretical attitude, which means distancing themselves from specific conditions. The individual then tries to conceptualize the problem and find hypothetical solutions to it. Their verification necessarily involves a return to the realm of experience: “Truths emerge from facts; but they dip forward into facts again” (James 1912b, 225). If some proposed idea allows us to face the initial situation more effectively, then we ascribe the value of being true to that idea. Confrontation with the facts is an unavoidable test for the compatibility of *rei et intellectus* “under penalty of endless inconsistency and frustration.”

At this point, it is worth noting that James’ idea of truth is, in terms of its nature, a piece of epistemic theorizing. This means that it focuses on the issue of recognizing ideas as true, while leaving aside the possible metaphysical and logical issues involved (Stępnik 2010, 155–60). Failure to take this perspective into account has led in the past to numerous misguided charges against the pragmatist definition of truth. For just one example of this, we may point to James’ epistolary dispute with the proponent of the classical definition,

John Edward Russell. Among other things, they were engaged in considering the history of the discovery of Neptune. After observing certain perturbations in the motion of Uranus, Urbain Le Verrier, the French astronomer, predicted the existence of a previously unknown planet. Russell claimed that the thesis of Neptune's existence would have become true, on the pragmatist account, only after Le Verrier's calculations had been empirically verified—which sounds absurd. James retorted that it was the very pragmatist understanding of the truth of Le Verrier's thesis that made the subsequent discovery of the planet possible (James and Russell 1907, 290–94).

In the context of this sort of epistemic treatment of truth, the various theses then developed by the American philosopher become understandable. He argued that however human cognition strives for absolute truth, for the most part it deals with relative truths: "The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth happens to an idea" (James 1912b, 201). We recognize an idea as true just as long as it leads to actions that bring us satisfactory results. However, new facts that occur in our experience can, as it were, falsify the idea and make us renew our search for truth—that is, for an idea more in line with reality.

James notes that truth relatively infrequently imposes itself on the cognizing subject. Instead, an individual is usually forced to make a decision in the face of various possible views of reality:

We must find a theory that will work; and that means something extremely difficult; for our theory must mediate between all previous truths and certain new experiences. (James 1912b, 216)

When faced with a choice between competing ideas, we lean toward the one that best suits our "personal reasons," while sometimes "poor scientific taste" is the only decisive factor.

3. PRAGMATISM AS THE SOURCE OF POST-TRUTH?

Outlining the understanding of truth according to James' conception in the way that we have just done allows us to analyze the thesis of Juruś quoted earlier, about the influence of pragmatism on the spread of post-truth, in more detail. Before doing so, it is necessary to reiterate two lines of argumentation signaled by the Polish philosopher. The first is that one not so much discovers the truth about the world, but rather actively creates it. If, as James believes, the *sine qua non* for establishing the truth of an idea is to assimilate it and verify it in action, then truth loses its objective foundation. It is the individual subject who both formulates theses and

recognizes them as consistent with reality once they prove useful. The subjective basis of truth-oriented cognition results in relativism, which to some extent validates post-truth.

Juruś' second argument accentuates the notion of the primacy of action over thought that is contained in pragmatism. This is an attitude alien to classical philosophy, which valued truth as an autotelic value, acquired for its own sake. For James, speculative reflection, when completely detached from human experience, was worthless. Such a view posed the threat of abandoning the intellectual path to truth in favor of exclusively seeking effective activity:

The contemporary world is a world of activists, people who are active, not contemplating. The life of a philosopher compared with the life of a traveller, leader or celebrity is considered boring and uninteresting. (Juruś 2021, 51)

Within James' conception of truth, one can undoubtedly also identify many other elements that—if properly interpreted—lend support to the idea of a relationship between pragmatism and post-truth. Thus, if the truth of ideas is always relative in nature, and closely linked to the current evaluation of both past and present experiences, this means that we have no reliable criterion of truth. This, in turn, leaves room for potential manipulation and deception of the kind that is so typical of post-truth.

Finally, we arrive at an argument that is perhaps the most compelling, and that touches on an issue highly characteristic of James' psychological and philosophical views. He repeatedly emphasized the importance of individual differences (in intelligence, personality, temperament and ability) for the choices an individual makes. This applies not only—as a matter of course—to practical life decisions, which relate to the shape of one's professional and family sphere or the profile of one's interests, but also to worldviews and scientific preferences. James closely correlated the two types of mental make-up he distinguished with philosophical views. The tender-minded are rationalistic, idealistic and religious, and opt for the existence of free will and optimism, whereas the tough-minded are empiricist, materialistic, irreligious, fatalistic and pessimistic (James 1912b, 12).

Since "personal reasons" have such a significant impact on the beliefs one holds, the importance of indisputable facts or infallible rules of entailment diminishes within the framework of the individual's quest for truth. Knowledge then loses its quality of objectivity and even—by weakening the criteria for the truthfulness of a theory—of intersubjectivity. It should be noted that the American philosopher was fully aware of the possible

consequences of his position. He repeatedly referred to the evidentialist statements of William Kingdon Clifford, who warned against taking any views on trust:

It is desecrated when given to unproved and unquestioned statements, for the solace and private pleasure of the believer; . . . it is wrong always, everywhere, and for any one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence. (Clifford 1877, 292–95)

In defiance of such evidentialism, James advocated the validity of the “will to believe.” An individual has the right to choose the beliefs to which they are inclined by subjective, non-rational factors: “Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions” (James 1919, 11). Thus, it seems justifiable to make assertions solely on the basis of one’s own point of view, and acting in accordance with them can be accused of neither deception nor even ill will.

To recapitulate: it is not difficult to discern some connections between James’ pragmatism thus presented and the contemporary phenomenon of post-truth. If, indeed, we accentuate the ideas of subjectivism, activism, relativity of truth, personal reasons, or the will to believe as they figure in the views of the American philosopher—and they are undoubtedly present there—it can even be argued that the post-truth era embodies his epistemological position. However, this conclusion is fundamentally incorrect. The goal of the next stage of the present line of argument will therefore be to establish the falsity of the thesis of the influence of James’ pragmatism on the development of post-truth, and of the argumentation supporting that thesis.

4. DEFENDING WILLIAM JAMES’ PRAGMATISM

As we shall shortly see, a more in-depth analysis of the views of the American philosopher takes us to a point from where the hypothesis of their connections with post-truth becomes questionable, to say the least. Our subsequent reasoning in this regard will be limited to just two arguments: the first relates to radical empiricism, meaning a version of pragmatism that James formulated (largely under the influence of criticism of his position) toward the end of his life, while the second relates to the specific issue of the will to believe.

James repeatedly referred to the debate between rationalism and empiricism, which was one of the most important debates in the modern history of philosophy. One may get the impression that by calling his view “radical

empiricism” he was unequivocally taking sides in that epistemological dispute. However, the view of the American pragmatist definitely goes beyond the simple opposition between rationalism and empiricism. James certainly emphasized the inseparability of cognition and experience:

To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced (James 1912a, 42).

At the same time, he understood experience in a much broader sense than a typical empiricist would, and the radical nature of empiricism in this case had nothing in common with its extreme form as represented by George Berkeley or David Hume. According to James (1912a, 42–61), what we cognize based on sources is not limited to the sphere of sensory perception alone, but also includes all kinds of relations, as well as the very subject of cognition. It is worth adding that the American philosopher studied religious experiences comprehensively, and took a serious interest in paranormal phenomena.

For James, though, the absolute priority was the search for truth and its experimental verification: “we must go on experiencing and thinking over our experience, for only thus can our opinions grow more true” (James 1919, 14). Reliable scientific research should absolutely be based on the results of objective methods, thus making it possible to formulate theorems and laws that increasingly better describe and explain reality, as well as predicting future events. In doing so, the standard qualities of a scientist are patience and caution:

We can throw the chance of *gaining truth* away, and at any rate save ourselves from any chance of *believing falsehood*, by not making up our minds at all till objective evidence has come. In scientific questions, this is almost always the case. (James 1919, 20)

Moreover, the inevitable subjectivity of human cognition does not result in any arbitrariness in determining what truth is:

We saw that, for James, the psychological factors that participate in the truth-processes (e.g., satisfaction) are not sufficient to make an idea true. The fact that truth is made does not mean, for him, that you can make it as you wish. (Araujo 2022, 485)

If we revisit typical examples of post-truth—the approval of public figures’ deceptions, the avoidance of discomfort resulting from truth, and appealing to emotions in defiance of facts—it is difficult to find any connection between post-truth and the idea of radical empiricism. James’ view supports truth and rejects all its opposites, no less than the systems created by Plato or Immanuel Kant.

Refuting the charge concerning the right to accept beliefs despite a lack of adequate justification for them also requires a more detailed description of the American philosopher’s position. He believed that the scientific ideal of a cautious and patient attitude towards cognized reality is not universal. This is because the ideal in question does not work in situations that involve significant existential choices—when one’s decision has the character of a genuine option, and is therefore “forced, living, and momentous” (James 1919, 3). The coerciveness of such a choice lies in the fact that the individual cannot refrain from making it, since the absence of any action (toward which the intellectual insolubility of the problem inclines one) is also a choice, while often being the worst possible one of all.

James illustrated the issue of the genuine option with two examples. The first involved moral issues:

Science can tell us what exists; but to compare the *worths*, both of what exists and of what does not exist, we must consult not science, but what Pascal calls our heart. . . . The question of having moral beliefs at all or not having them is decided by our will. (James 1919, 22–23)

In doing so, James points to some analogies with Kant’s system, under which moral issues—in view of their non-empirical nature—must be resolved by practical reason: i.e., the will.

The second example concerned religious beliefs. In the title of his famous essay, James defended the permissibility of the will to believe. Religious claims are, in his view, scientifically unverifiable, and so any arguments in that area—for or against the existence of God, for example—are unreliable (again, this position is reminiscent of Kant’s view). However, one’s attitude toward religion is a genuine option: one must make a choice between theism and atheism. James argued, as Blaise Pascal had done as early as the 17th century, that a skeptical/agnostic stance does not mean merely suspending one’s judgment on religious matters. From a pragmatic point of view, the skeptic is making a choice—a choice of atheism—because they are pursuing actions much like those of non-believers:

He is actively playing his stake as much as the believer is; he is backing the field against the religious hypothesis, just as the believer is backing the religious hypothesis against the field. (James 1919, 26)

Again, it is difficult to connect James' formulation of the right to make distinct moral or religious decisions with post-truth. The fact that the American philosopher approved of making subjective choices in the absence of reliable knowledge of the object of choice has nothing in common with deliberate misrepresentation in a situation of having such knowledge. Genuine option-based resolutions have nothing to do with the deception so characteristic of post-truth.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The foregoing investigation allows us to present an unambiguous conclusion: the pragmatism of James cannot be considered a view that has contributed to the modern development of post-truth. Since the position of the American philosopher, and especially his idea of truth, is considered to be perhaps the most representative of the entire pragmatist current, the more general thesis of Juruś regarding the influence of pragmatism on the spread of post-truth should also therefore be deemed to have been falsified.

Does that mean that pragmatism has nothing in common with post-truth? Well, not necessarily. Modern pragmatism is a current broad enough to accommodate views quite far removed from the original ideas of Peirce or James. Arguably, within this wide-ranging spectrum of approaches certain tendencies can be identified that have inspired the modern "producers" of post-truth. An example of this is furnished by Joshua Forstenzer's analysis of Richard Rorty's views as they relate to this issue. It turns out that the American neo-pragmatist's idea of liberal ironism has—contrary to its author's intentions—contributed to the legitimization of current post-truth politics (Forstenzer 2018, 27–28). However, it is worth noting that this influence arose from the postmodernist rather than the pragmatist elements of Rorty's thought. Still, it would certainly be worth exploring the thesis of the lack of influence of pragmatism on the development of post-truth with reference to the views of eminent pragmatists other than James.

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