

Tyranny, Tribalism, and Post-Truth Politics

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Abstract

To describe our political climate as ‘post-truth’ is both compelling and poisonous. It is compelling, I argue, because it captures the lack of confidence between groups with divergent political outlooks. To illustrate, I portray two groups with different political outlooks: the *heartlanders*, whose concern for truthfulness is anchored in personal and relational integrity, and the *metropolitans*, whose concern for truthfulness is anchored in impartiality and cosmopolitanism. In this tale of two tribes, each group exhibits qualities of truthfulness – sincerity and accuracy -- in ways that the other group does not recognize. The result is that each group interprets the other group's political participation as an abandonment of truth for the sake of power, thereby undermining political legitimacy. Building on the work of Bernard Williams and John Stuart Mill, I argue that finding common ground is necessary if truth is to play a role in the resistance of tyranny. I critically examine several ways to restore a common concern for truth between the two tribes, offering reasons to doubt that they will succeed. Instead, I propose a rethinking of the widespread acceptance of a strict dichotomy between facts and values. Since public deliberation is characterized by a complex interplay between facts and values, I suggest that a better way forward is to openly explore this interplay, instead of impugning each other's commitment to truthfulness. I conclude that, in the absence of a widely shared political outlook, it is politically poisonous to describe our age in ‘post-truth’ terms.

I. Introduction

It has become common to describe our political climate as "post-truth." Post-truth dynamics are evident, according to the Oxford Dictionary, whenever "objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Flood 2016). The description is treated as a way of accounting for a social phenomenon by making it more intelligible. Much ink has been spilled about whether the description is true. Here, instead, I offer a diagnosis of why it is compelling to describe our politics in these terms.

In developing my analysis, I will critically examine and build upon the work of Bernard Williams. Although Williams did not use the term "post-truth", his view accounts for its emergence. Williams thinks that allegiance to the idea of truth is more important in politics than the correct standard of truth. He grants that some truth-telling is needed in order to enable minimal cooperation (Williams 2002: 85), but he thinks that effective methods for truth-seeking "will vary with the kinds of truth in question" (Williams 2005: 155). So Williams redirects our attention: "The most significant question is not about the truth-status of political or moral outlooks themselves. It is about the importance that those outlooks attach to other kinds of truth, and to truthfulness" (4). Williams thinks that there must be a durable commitment to the idea that truth and truthfulness matter for their own sake. He says, "What is essential for this to be so is that the agent has some materials in terms of which he can understand this value in relation to other values that he holds...", such as friendship and fairness (92). Williams notes that these connections will vary with culture and history, although there are some general patterns (93). In

particular, he notes, truthfulness is exhibited through the qualities of sincerity and accuracy.

In what follows I evaluate the implications of this account for a post-truth political climate. Throughout, I rely on a thought experiment in which two different social tribes, the metropolitans and the heartlanders, exhibit sincerity and accuracy in ways that are not recognized by the other side (Section II). If the two tribes must share one government, I argue, then each tribe comes to think the other is sacrificing truth for the sake of gaining power (Section III). The lack of a shared political outlook, then, makes it difficult to resist tyranny and the erosion of political order (Section IV). Therefore, I conclude that focusing on post-truth dynamics undermines political legitimacy, while suggesting that a better way forward is to challenge the strict dichotomy between facts and values (Sections V and VI).

II. A Tale of Two Tribes

Here is a story about two kinds of political outlooks: metropolitans and heartlanders.¹ Heartlanders, on the one hand, are a tribe that values relational integrity. They care that their relationships -- with those in their families, neighborhoods, and workplaces -- be based on shared values. This outlook leads them to appreciate friendship, family, and loyalty. The heartlander views social cooperation as association on the basis of shared values, and this model allows them to make sense of authority. Since the heartlander regards social cooperation in light of upholding and enhancing relationships, they understand the virtues of truth -- sincerity and accuracy -- in terms of maintaining community and loyalty. For heartlanders, all reasoning about what is to be done is personal and connected to values, and they trust and follow leaders that can be seen to deliberate accordingly. They find sincerity in those political leaders who exercise judgment in a way that foregrounds personal values.

Metropolitans, on the other hand, are a tribe that values inward integrity, as it is manifest through individualism and the ideal of self-development. They value their freedom to be a self-authoring person, and they care that their relationships with others be consistent with that freedom. For the metropolitan, social cooperation is about overcoming value differences so that each individual can maintain their integrity. This outlook leads them to appreciate impartiality, diversity, and cosmopolitanism. They care that political coercion does not demand that individuals abandon or betray their sincerely held values. They understand the virtues of truth -- sincerity and accuracy -- in terms of deliberation that avoids or abstracts away from individual values. For metropolitans, reasoning about what is to be done should be impersonal and value-neutral.

When these two tribes form part of the same political community, instances of truthfulness for one group appear to the other group as deliberate neglect and even disavowal of truthfulness.² On the one hand, the heartlanders' expectation that the group will coordinate joint action on the basis of shared values leads them to invoke communal identity. In looking for an "us" in contrast to a "them", they often allude to a shared political history that is tied to an ethnicity or religion. They focus on the fidelity and sacrifices of prior generations, in order to fortify the group's sense of itself and inspire further sacrifice. Metropolitans, however, are

¹ I do not claim that the tribes exist either now or in the past. Rather, they are what Weber called "ideal types" whose artificial simplicity equips us to better understand a complex phenomenon (Weber 1978). Similar ideas have been explored in the UK by (Goodhart 2017) and in the US by (Chua 2018; Haidt 2012).

² It is important to distinguish the dynamics I am describing from political relativism. Even if the impasse were to be seen as deep (rationally irreconcilable) disagreement, it is not clear that "there is any plausible path of argument from deep political disagreement to relativism about contested political claims" (Carter 2021: xx)

suspicious of any claims about ethnic or religious identity in political deliberation and justification. In fact, they tend to reject these claims as irrelevant. Metropolitans fear and resent the power that can be unleashed by invoking communal identity, noting that how destructive these forces can be. Since metropolitans view these factors as irrelevant and threatening, their invocation by heartlanders seems inaccurate - indeed, recklessly so.

Metropolitans, on the other hand, often invoke cosmopolitan rationales or utilitarian arguments in the quest to respect impartiality. Metropolitans consider natural science and economics to be supremely relevant for answering political questions, concluding that experts in these areas deserve our deference. Treating science and economics as revealing what should be done, politically speaking, ends up depersonalizing these judgments in a way that is alien to the heartlander. Moreover, there are several ways in which this seems insincere. For one thing, metropolitans rarely admit that claims to know scientifically what ought to be done in matters of public policy emerge only from institutions that are populated by metropolitans, such as universities, the civil service, and the financial sector. Furthermore, metropolitans resist the free market some of the time, but seek its expansion at other times, which seems selective and disingenuous. And finally, metropolitans invoke the intrinsic value of diversity to expand bureaucratic oversight, which can appear to be cover for advancing the interests of the professional classes.³

The result is that each tribe sees the other side as engaging in practices that are insincere and inaccurate. Consider debates about immigration. Heartlanders are willing to accept outsiders as long as they can affirm and uphold the mores of the community, and so heartlanders seek an admission policy that privileges this criterion. Metropolitans, on the other hand, think that the community ought to admit applicants on the basis of need or merit, making sure to avoid any differential consideration on the basis of religion, culture, or nationality. Thus each side sees the other as pushing for admission criteria that are inappropriate. The tale of two tribes illustrates how political opinions, viewed as sincere and accurate from within the tribe, can seem politically dangerous to those outside the tribe.

III. Social Shaping of Beliefs

To better understand this dynamic, Williams explains how truthfulness emerges from shared practices. First Williams refers us to Diderot's portrait of a man whose declarations are entirely authentic (Diderot 2001). However, the character's declarations are so inconstant that they cannot be taken as expressions of belief by a hearer, since it raises "a question of what kind of thing is in his mind" (Williams 2002: 191). If someone's utterances are noticeably "affected by the weather of the mind", then their statements will be something more like moods than beliefs. In order for us to manage this, Williams argues, we need some assurance of the validity of their utterances over time. Normally, he thinks, we "have [this assurance] in a form that is socially shaped and supported... a practice which socializes people" (192). Engaging with these social practices stabilizes our beliefs, thereby making us steady in the eyes of others.

This stabilizing dynamic, Williams thinks, exhibits two forms of social dependence. One

³ Williams observes that the demand to diversify needs some rationale other than undoing ideological forces: "One [problem] is that it leaves the critics [of the academic canon, for instance] themselves with no authority, since they need to tell a tale (a lot of detailed tales, in fact) to justify *that* tale: this is the point that, for instance, the denunciation of history needs history. They also need a tale to explain why they are in a position to tell it. Even if they fall back, rather pitifully, on a claim to authority just from minority status, a tale is needed to explain the relevance of that. But if no authority, then only power" (Williams 2002: 8).

is that sometimes "it can be unclear to us even at the instant what we think we believe," so the mere interaction with another person prompts the crystallization of a belief (193). The second is that often we are "speaking in a 'trustful' context in which others rely on us" (193). We may hesitate to commit or present ourselves a certain way, and this awareness of another's reliance on us can affect what we ourselves think. Thus Williams rejects a simple model on which we each discover what is true and then announce it to others. Instead, "At a more basic level, we are all together in the social activity of mutually stabilizing our declarations and moods and impulses into becoming such things as beliefs and relatively steady attitudes" (193). Williams comes to the striking conclusion that "it is the presence and needs of others that help us to construct even our factual beliefs" (194).

Drawing on Diderot, then, Williams argues that there is necessarily a social dimension in the construction of beliefs (200). While the stabilization that social practices provide can have costs, it is nevertheless vital to "human interaction and a manageable life" (200). Thus, Williams concludes, every society needs practices that stabilize the self enough to enable mutual reliance and basic co-operation. These practices, in turn, shape what counts as sincerity and accuracy.⁴

Williams ties the social construction of opinions to the threat of tyranny since the allegiance to truth cannot play its anti-tyranny role, he thinks, if the community is fragmented (more on this below). J.S. Mill comes to the same conclusion while considering a single society with multiple political groupings:

The influences which form opinions and decide political acts, are different in the different sections... An altogether different set of leaders have the confidence of one part... and of another. The same books, newspapers, pamphlets, speeches, do not reach them. One section does not know what opinions, or what instigations, are circulating in another. The same incidents, the same acts, the same system of government, affect them in different ways; and each fears more injury to itself from the other [groups], than from the common arbiter, the state ...the united public opinion, necessary to the working of representative government, cannot exist. (Mill 1977: 187)

Here Mill describes how the same events will be received differently by different groups.⁵ The natural result, Mill thinks, is that each group comes to see government power as a weapon to be used against their rivals.

Their mutual antipathies... are generally much stronger than jealousy [dislike] of the government. That any one of them feels aggrieved by the policy of the common ruler, is sufficient to determine another to support that policy. Even if all are aggrieved, none feel that they can rely on the others for fidelity in a joint resistance; the strength of none is sufficient to resist alone, and each may reasonably think that it consults its own advantage most by bidding for the favour of the government against the rest. (187)

⁴ The need for social practices that support sincerity does not mean that *every* communicative act reflects a norm of sincerity, a fallacy he attributes to Habermas (Williams 2002: 225). Individuals as well as institutions face tradeoffs between sincerity and other conditions for deliberative cooperation, such as trust (Greene 2019).

⁵ Relatedly, Regina Rini argues that higher confidence in the testimony of our fellows can be epistemically reasonable, owing to our greater trust in the judgments of importance made by those who share our values (Rini 2017).

Reasoning in this way, Mill concludes that avoiding group fragmentation is necessary in order to maintain healthy representative government. Otherwise, there will not be enough popular resistance to government overreach, including tyranny.

To see why this is the natural result, consider the two tribes again. Suppose the heartlanders value truthfulness because of how it relates to honor. Then they will insist on accuracy and sincerity in politics by punishing leaders whose dishonesty exhibits disregard for honor – for instance, leaders who lie about infidelity. Likewise, suppose that metropolitans value truthfulness because of how it relates to civil liberties. Then they will insist on accuracy and sincerity in politics by punishing leaders whose dishonesty exhibits disregard for civil liberties -- for instance, leaders who lie about surveillance programs. Both groups are resisting tyranny by upholding standards of truthfulness. But the perceived significance of being untruthful is anchored in their political outlook. If the two tribes share one government, then together they will lack a shared sense of which political actions count as insincere and inaccurate enough to be worth punishing through concerted political action. Unless the government's untruthfulness triggers a reckoning that is politically costly for leaders -- as opposed to the untruthfulness being accepted by many as part of the inter-group competition for power -- the public's allegiance to truth cannot play its anti-tyranny role.⁶

IV. Truthfulness and Tribalism

Both Mill and Williams think that truthfulness plays an important role in the avoidance of tyranny. However, they think, truthfulness can play this role only when there is some common ground. Is there any way forward in a case where the two tribes, metropolitans and heartlanders, are under a single government? Perhaps the two tribes could agree on a suitable *method* for seeking the truth. After all, some method must be adopted by the society as a whole in order to deliberate and make decisions. However, each tribe favors a method that reflects their views about the point of cooperation. As we have seen, these views are non-overlapping. Therefore, the two tribes lack a sufficiently common basis from which to derive a single method for seeking truth together.

A second option is to combine multiple methods of truth-seeking. However, combining the methods advocated by each tribe may be worse than using either alone. As Williams observes, "Multiple methods which are severally effective... cannot necessarily be combined or superimposed, without loss of effectiveness... The joint attempts of A and B to possess, or to express, truth may well mean that both or one has less of it" (Williams 2002: 155).

A third option is to renew trust across tribal lines by taking credible steps to mitigate threats to truthfulness. As Williams observes, two clear threats are wishful thinking and self-deception (Williams 2002: 156). According to Williams, the boundaries between coming to have a desire and coming to have a belief are blurry. He says, "Since all practical thinking is full of wishes, in the most general sense of the term in which wishes can occur on the route both to belief and desire, [...an agent] may easily find himself committed to the content in the wrong mode" (197-198). Thus Williams argues that all practical deliberation can nudge our beliefs in the direction of our wishes (194). This tendency is likely to be more pronounced for successful leaders.

To address these threats to sound deliberation, leaders might publicly commit themselves

⁶ It is important that leaders not self-validate that they are honorable or liberty-respecting by redefining what these qualities mean. The value system must remain larger than them, so that leaders can be seen as answering to it without dissolving it (Weber 1978; Arendt 1993; Thucydides 1989; Woodruff 2019).

to safeguarding against wishful thinking and self-deception. However, I doubt that there is any common ground on what counts as safeguarding. Consider the 2016 Brexit referendum. The metropolitans who opposed Brexit appeared too ready to rely on the opinion of experts when it suited them. Heartlanders suspected that the economic case was not conclusive, and that the metropolitans favored opening the borders regardless.⁷ The heartlanders who favored Brexit appeared too ready to rely on the opinion of trusted friends and associates. Metropolitans suspected that interaction with people who were different would expand their circle of concern, and so heartlanders were being insular. Each tribe appeared to outsiders to be engaged in wishful thinking about whether the grounds for their opinions were adequate, thereby deceiving themselves into thinking the correctness of their judgment was obvious.⁸ Metropolitans expected heartlanders to safeguard by deferring to experts, while heartlanders thought deferring to experts was a failure of safeguarding. Therefore, one side's safeguarding looks, to the other side, like wishful thinking. As a result, each tribe's subsequent attempts to enact their preferred policy were perceived as as a power-grab by the other tribe.

In such circumstances, each side will defend what seems essential by using the means at their disposal. Heartlanders might resort to demographic coercion, utilizing their majority to manipulate the rules of districting and voting. Metropolitans might resort to lawsuits and gatekeeping of elite institutions. These methods of holding onto power are presented as victories for truth, which only enhances mutual suspicion. Moreover, leaders who come to power by exploiting their tribe's suspicions are seen as utterly corrupt by the other tribe. Hence, both sides resonate with a description of this stalemate as a post-truth dystopia.

Now I want to go beyond Williams and suggest that the problem runs deeper. As I understand them, each tribe feels that their values, when presented in the best light, cannot be explicitly rejected by the other side. Who can deny that impartiality matters? Who can deny that community matters? In my opinion, this situation is notably different from other times in history when groups sought to explain to themselves why their political opponents were intransigent. The Protestants thought that the Catholics were blinded by idolatry, and the Marxists thought the bourgeoisie were blinded by ideology. In both cases, their opponents' mode of seeking truth could be seen as mistaken because they had the wrong values. But today, neither tribe can completely reject the values of the other tribe.

On this point, it is useful to consider the analysis of tribalism in terms of universally-recognized values proposed by Jonathan Haidt (Haidt 2012). He claims that partisans draw on six moral taste buds that emerged through evolution. While all of us have all the taste buds, Haidt argues, some grow to be more sensitive according to group affiliation. Haidt intends to characterize these six moral tastes in such a way that they resonate with everyone -- aiming, thereby, to promote mutual understanding.⁹ However, Haidt's analysis does not offer a viable way forward. He posits a plurality of moral factors that influence political decisions, where the chief evidence is their explanatory prowess with respect to behavior. However, identifying a set

⁷ I owe this observation to Daniel Elstein.

⁸ I do not mean to suggest symmetry across the board. As Barba-Kay observes, on any given question one side can be more susceptible to spates of wishful thinking than the other (Economist 2020).

⁹ In my opinion, Haidt's authority and sanctity dimensions do not achieve as much resonance as the other four (fairness, harm, loyalty, and liberty). From the inside, one does not value authority so much as the social ordering principles that are upheld by the system of authority. Likewise, it is only from the outside that one appears to be valuing sanctity as such; in many religions, ritual observance arises from love of and devotion to a divine creator. Haidt admits that he relates less well to these dimensions, thereby implying that political values are not easy to integrate for individuals, much less for entire polities.

of values that are shared but differentially emphasized can leave us more frustrated: we must share a government with another tribe whose orienting values we oppose but cannot categorically dismiss. Haidt is reluctant to acknowledge that the conflict between values is about more than perceived salience. Thus I believe there is a limit to relying on a plurality of political values.

I have canvassed several possible solutions: finding a common method of truth-seeking, combining multiple methods of truth-seeking, renewing trust through safeguarding, and accepting a plurality of political values. In each case, I argue, there are reasons to be pessimistic. A more promising way forward, I suggest, is to rethink the fact-value distinction.

V. Facts and Values

The distinction between facts and values is currently embedded deeply in our culture and media environment (McBrayer 2015). For instance, newspapers strictly separate their reporting from opinion pieces they happen to publish. In response to Trump, the *New York Times* doubled-down on its ownership of truth by adopting such slogans as "Truth. It has no alternative." Such a tagline claims neutral status for the value-laden worldview of their writers and readers. As David Bromwich observed soon after, "All the mainstream outlets, with CNN and the *Times* at their head, have now re-emerged as anti-government centres of news, opinion, and news perceptibly mingled with opinion" (Bromwich 2017).

Journalism has been openly political in the past, such as the pamphleteers of the French and American revolutions. In Germany a century ago, Max Weber remarks that a person with a calling for politics would do well to start their career as a journalist (Weber 1958). It should not surprise us that public presentation of 'facts', by journalists as well as other public figures, is inflected with political views about what matters. While deliberation always involves values, the values are not always suitable for discussion. Consider Socrates's deliberation in the *Crito* on whether to flee his execution. Having affirmed that one should never repay a wrong with a wrong, he says that there can be no common deliberation between people who disagree about this; rather, they despise each other's views.¹⁰ Of course, the verdict on what Socrates should do also turns on whether Socrates would be wronging Athens, a matter that *is* suitable for co-deliberation between those who disagree. The exchange suggests that there are some value clashes too deep for co-deliberation. To see whether this applies to the two tribes, their orienting values must be surfaced and examined through co-deliberation on particular actions, just as Socrates does with *Crito*.¹¹

I suggest that we question the simple dichotomy between facts and values in politics.¹² In order to do this, we may need to entertain new language. In 2016, the phrase "alternative facts" was introduced by Kellyanne Conway, Donald Trump's campaign manager at the time. In a later interview she said the following: "Two plus two is four. Three plus one is four. Partly cloudy, partly sunny. Glass half full, glass half empty. Those are alternative facts" (Nuzzi 2017). If we read Conway charitably, she suggests that different ways of describing the same situation can lead to different postures of deliberation. When we say "glass half full," we mean that we are opting to view the glass from a certain perspective. This perspective frames our deliberation and

¹⁰ At *Crito* 49c-d, Socrates articulates this precept: "One should never do wrong in return, nor do any man harm, no matter what he may have done to you" {Plato, 2005, 44}.

¹¹ I take this activity to be compatible with another prescription for overcoming political polarization: participating "in cooperative social engagements that are fundamentally non-political in nature" (Talisie 2019: 131).

¹² I owe this suggestion to Antón Barba-Kay.

inclines us towards considering different possibilities and arriving at different conclusions.¹³

Political rhetoric deploys a mixture of facts and values, and it is no surprise that this combination can encode and transmit ideologies. Indeed, this observation often prompts political cynicism (Norris 2012). One might think that giving this ancient problem a novel name such as "post-truth politics" ignores the fact that this dynamic has always been present. For instance, much of the systemic violence against oppressed groups, both tolerated and practiced by the state, has been rationalized on the basis of "alternative facts". Consequently, it is reasonable for members of oppressed groups to think that a lack of concern for truth in politics is nothing new.¹⁴ This is yet another reason to question the sharp dichotomy between facts and values in public deliberation.

VI. Truth and Political Legitimacy

I believe that challenging the fact-value distinction is one way forward for a society consisting of these two tribes. However, taking this route may, in turn, disrupt the political order. To see why, I now return now to Williams's claim that allegiance to truth can play an anti-tyranny role. He says, "Political, particularly governmental, truthfulness is valuable against tyranny, but you will get it only as associated with other values and expressed in a set of institutions and practices that as a whole stand against tyranny" (Williams 2002: 208). Williams's understanding of tyranny correlates with his account of political legitimacy. A political system is legitimate, according to Williams, only insofar as it makes sense to its subjects as intelligible order -- where this order is distinguishable from tyranny (Williams 2005: 10-11).

Whereas I illustrate the threat to political legitimacy with the tale of two tribes, Williams focuses on the "internal economy" of liberalism's political values (Williams 2002: 209). On the one hand, liberalism offers us the "luxury [of discussing] the precise value of truthfulness in politics" (208). On the other hand, we can question whether free speech promotes the spread of truth, as J.S. Mill argues (Mill 1978; Williams 2002: 212). Williams concludes that "the demand for truthfulness, though it should be an ally of other aspects of liberalism, can nevertheless run into conflict with them" (209).

Despite these tensions, Williams thinks that liberalism's approach to truth is superior overall:

Liberal societies are more successful in the modern world than others in helping people... to avoid what is universally feared: torture, violence, arbitrary power, and humiliation ...The value of the whole enterprise [of liberalism], political truthfulness included, is to be measured against the evils that it resists. (208-209)

In other words, liberal practices and institutions work better than others in checking tyranny, at least in modern conditions. This is an important claim, since Williams calls the anti-tyranny argument "one of the strongest" arguments in favor of truthfulness in politics. It is strong, he thinks, because everyone can see and affirm that tyranny is bad.

However, Williams resists the idea that we can get an argument *for* liberalism *in terms of truth*. For one thing, Williams admits that stating an opposition to tyranny -- a "truism" -- hardly counts as an argument. Williams supplements his theory of political legitimacy with a proviso

¹³ For further discussion of the epistemic significance of Conway's terminology, see (Barba-Kay 2019).

¹⁴ Some argue, for instance, that terms like 'fake news' and 'post-truth' are ideological (Habgood-Coote 2019) and complicit in problematic racial politics (Mejia, Beckermann, and Sullivan 2018).

that allows for the critique of power: provided that the acceptance of political order is not produced by power, then subjects' acceptance can satisfy the basic legitimation demand. The proviso excludes cases in which leaders propagate a legitimation story that would not be believed otherwise. If subjects come to see that the legitimation story is to the advantage of those in power, then their power can no longer be seen as valid (Williams 2002: 227–31). In this way, liberalism forges a robust connection between truthfulness, the debunking of authority claims, and political legitimacy.¹⁵ This connection, according to Williams, shows how truthfulness counteracts tyranny *within* the outlook of liberalism. And this shows, in turn, why liberalism's approach to truth is well-suited for opposing tyranny.¹⁶

However, a problem remains. This proviso on legitimation is supposed to enable critique of power without presupposing liberalism. But applying the test requires us to make assumptions about what individuals *would* accept if they were suitably reflective about their society. When considering non-liberal societies, we must project onto the individuals some capacity for, and interest in, coming to reject their worldview. Privileging the results of individual reflection over received wisdom, however, is already an implicit rejection of the non-liberal outlook. For this reason, it seems that one must already accept liberal values in order to engage the critical proviso and, by extension, make the anti-tyranny argument count in favor of liberalism. Therefore, it would be circular to claim that the anti-tyranny argument uniquely supports liberalism.¹⁷

The risk of circularity requires us to be careful in drawing out the implications. When Williams argues that resistance to tyranny is better realized by liberalism's approach to truth, he might appear on the surface to abstract away from the frame of liberalism in order to highlight the value of truth in politics, whether or not it is liberal politics. But this is not what Williams argues. While the avoidance of tyranny is universally appreciated, the role of truthfulness in avoiding tyranny is not similarly universal. Instead it must be mediated through a particular political outlook; a view of what counts as truthfulness must be shared in order for truth to check tyranny in practice.

Stepping back, it becomes clear that Williams believes that liberalism cannot be defended entirely in terms of the truth of its tenets. In fact, Williams thinks that it would be reasonable to doubt liberalism (232). Rather, it can only be appreciated in terms of the evils that it prevents, namely tyranny. For these reasons, truthfulness in politics is a value that is internal to liberalism, not an external, justifying foundation of liberalism. In a sense, therefore, to defend truth against a background of liberalism is to defend liberalism. It is to defend one's political outlook, one's tribe. Perhaps the same holds true for other political outlooks such as socialism or democracy.

And yet, it is no accident that the problem of post-truth politics arose under liberal regimes. Insofar as we are liberals in the sense that Williams has in mind, we will regard the value systems of our political opponents as non-rejectable whenever they are reasonable. In these circumstances, we lack a basis for seeing the other side as a political enemy, even though we feel strongly that their political judgments are wrong and dangerous. So we denounce their indifference to facts, saying that is why they must be opposed. In this way, the denouncing of

¹⁵ Liberalism focuses on the kind of "power over" that is sustained by invalid authority claims (Williams 2002: 231–32). As Steven Lukes argues, a definition of power makes morally substantive assumptions about which effects on others are significant due to the impact on their real interests (Lukes 2005: 30–31).

¹⁶ For a fuller discussion of Williams's reliance on the critical proviso in theorizing legitimacy, see (Cozzaglio and Greene 2019).

¹⁷ Ben Cross defends Williams's anti-tyranny argument by adding a political analysis that helps citizens decide which deceptive acts to denounce as tyrannical (Cross 2019). While his analysis usefully elaborates the anti-tyranny argument, in my opinion it does not provide an anti-tyranny argument that transcends liberalism.

post-truth politics serves to poison our common discourse, rather than elevating it.

VII. Conclusion

I have argued that describing our political climate as post-truth is both compelling and poisonous. On the one hand, it is compelling because it captures the special diffidence between groups with divergent political outlooks. As we see in the tale of two tribes, heartlanders and metropolitans exhibit the qualities of accuracy and sincerity in ways the other group does not recognize, leading to a loss of confidence that the other side's contributions to public deliberation are made in good faith. The result is that each group interprets the other group's political participation as insincere at best, and at worst domination. I concluded, along with Mill and Williams, that we must have a shared political outlook if truth is to play any role in the resistance of tyranny.

On the other hand, I argued that it is politically poisonous to announce that we live in a post-truth world. Since post-truth politics is a diagnosis that makes sense only within the frame of a shared political outlook, the description expresses and even contributes to an erosion of political legitimacy. I cast doubt on several possible solutions to restoring a common allegiance to truthfulness: agreeing on truth-seeking methods, safeguarding against wishful thinking, and relying on a plurality of non-rejectable political values. I suggested that a more promising way forward was to acknowledge and openly explore the complex relationship between facts and values, rather than impugning each other's commitment to truthfulness. While the strict dichotomy between facts and values seems characteristic of liberalism's appeal, nevertheless it limits us to an appreciation of truthfulness whose anti-tyranny utility presupposes a liberal outlook. In the absence of a widely shared political outlook, I concluded that those of us who care about truth should stop talking about post-truth politics.

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