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# Humanising Sociological Knowledge

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This paper elaborates on the value of a humanistic approach to the production and judgement of sociological knowledge by defending this approach against some common criticisms. It argues that humanising sociological knowledge not only lends an appropriate epistemological humility to the discipline, but also encourages productive knowledge development by suggesting that a certain irreverence to what is considered known is far more important for generating useful new perspectives on social phenomena than defensive vindications of existing knowledge. It also suggests that the threat of what is called “relativism” evoked by critics of humanised conceptions of knowledge is largely illusory, and that in fact a far graver danger comes from dogmatic assertions of social truth that claim to have somehow secured access to non-contingent arenas of knowing, forestalling ongoing conversation, and tying future discovery to the limits of current perspectives.

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## **Humanistic Knowledge**

*To confuse our own constructions and inventions with eternal laws or divine decrees is one of the most fatal delusions of men*

- Isiah Berlin, 1980: 303.

*Concepts are, as Wittgenstein taught us, uses of words. Philosophers have long wanted to understand concepts, but the point is to change them so as to make them serve our purposes better*

- Richard Rorty, 2000a: 25.

After Comte, Durkheim was perhaps the most concerned of the classical sociologists with establishing the discipline on a scientific footing. As part of achieving this objective, he advanced a critique of William James's pragmatic account of truth, widely—and this paper suggests, quite fittingly—known at the time under the name “humanism” (e.g. Schiller 1907). Since James never responded to Durkheim's critique, this paper begins with a long-overdue defence of the value of his theory of knowledge to the discipline of sociology.

In 1914 Durkheim delivered a course of lectures at the Sorbonne intended to educate his students, including his son André', in a then relatively new form of philosophy hailing from across the Atlantic. Though by no means unsympathetic to pragmatism, and in fact willing to identify certain affinities between James's position and his own, Durkheim still saw pragmatism as presenting a threat to the sociological positivism he endorsed by mischievously undermining our intuitive understanding of the objective solidity of truth. Though he was careful not to treat the kinds of truth that might be acquired by disciplines such as sociology as “something absolute and extra-human”, he nevertheless believed that social truth was “something that in a certain respect imposes itself on us”, claiming that pragmatism left us with a misleading picture of truth as failing to “correspond to something real” (Durkheim 1983, 68). Whilst he accepted pragmatism's claims that truth is developed and enlarged within social contexts, he believed that this understanding, by itself, failed to make sense of the intuition that our arrival at the truth helped “satisfy” our goal of getting in touch with reality (ibid., 56). He

saw pragmatism's claim that truth was ultimately a "utilitarian" concept—an accolade we simply accord to knowledge that works—as dangerous in its robbing truth of its "hard", necessary, and constraining qualities. Such an account contradicted his own claims in *The Rules of Sociological Method* ([1895] 1982) that sociology's task was to establish so-called "social facts", such as the patterning of suicide or crime rates, which compelled and constrained actors within society and existed objectively on a social plane, beyond their isolated manifestations. Sociology was properly a science aimed at gathering such "social facts" and demonstrating the structured relationships that existed between them.

There are, however, serious problems not only with Durkheim's positivistic conception of sociology, but also with his reifying "social facts" as things existing independently of their own construction. As Baert and de Silva, put it, "any reference to 'social reality' begs the question: social reality under which interpretative framework? Any allusion to observational social 'facts' begs the question: facts under which interpretative scheme?" (2010, 291; Becker 2007, 12). Observation and description is inescapably "theory-laden" (Hanson 1970) and in positing objective "social facts" Durkheim commits the fallacy of mistaking his own particular linguistic and conceptual sorting-frame for the social world for that world's own inherent vocabulary. In other words, he falls into a type of concept fetishism that treats analytical constructions as independent objects whose actual genesis and manufacture is in effect concealed.

Moreover, Durkheim's critique implicitly rested upon carving out an impossibly dislocated and impartial vantage-point from which the sociologist might discern "social facts", therefore providing an example of what Dewey dubbed the "spectator theory of knowledge". Dewey believed that this "spectator theory of knowledge" had plagued epistemological accounts of truth throughout philosophy's history and was problematic not only in its deceptive reliance on what Nagel (1986) has more recently called a "view from nowhere", but more importantly (in terms of advancing his own argument) in its cutting "truth" off from the human needs and purposes it invariably serves. Neglecting these needs and purposes of human knowledge allows for a slippage into a reified

conception of truth as an objective *thing* existing “out there”, as opposed to the pragmatic conception of it as a *process* that, as James put it, “happens to an idea” (James [1907] 1981, 92). James’s discussion of truth proposed that what we understood to be true was inseparable from the utility that our designation of its truth entailed. If an idea is said to be true, James suggested, we must ask “what experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth’s” cash-value in experiential terms?” ([1907] 1981, 92). Adopting this humanistic account of truth within sociology entails understanding the aspiration of sociological research not as an attempt at convergence on a singular underlying reality, but rather—like in all other forms of human culture—as a set of particular, historically-contingent attempts by human beings to deal effectively with their environment and the problems it poses. “True” sociological knowledge therefore obtains its “cash-value” not from some timeless epistemological validity, but from its ability to deal well with the problems we humans ask it to in the particular historical contexts in which we do so. Though most contemporary sociological epistemology has moved beyond Durkheim’s positivistic conception, the “spectator theory of knowledge” often remains implicit in the still-very-present methodological drive to secure “valid” forms of social data. In order to explain more fully this paper’s argument for the utility of substituting this “spectator theory of knowledge” with a humanistic one, two important elements of the latter must first be explained.

### **Coherence & Justification as the Actual Goals of Truth-seeking Social Knowledge**

*Traditions are the context of any truth*

Weeks 1991, 162.

As we have seen, Durkheim’s critique of pragmatism appealed to the intuition that truth is something that “imposes itself on us” (1983, 75). From the perspective of a humanised account of knowledge, this claim ignores the obvious fact that all knowledge, and perhaps *especially* that gleaned within the disciplines of the “hard sciences”

(particularly during periods of what Kuhn calls “normal science”), is interpreted in light of its *coherence* with existing knowledge. Another way of putting this is that “what counts as a truth is a function of the rest of your beliefs” (Rorty 1989, 172). New evidence does *not* simply “impose itself on us”, but is instead made sense of on the basis of what has been learnt by the accretion of old knowledge. To be considered true, new knowledge needs to “hang-together” with other things considered true in the past, and when compelling new truths arise that fail to cohere with our past beliefs, not only are they often at first ridiculed through a defence of orthodoxy (such as occurred with Darwin’s evolutionary theory), but their capacity to “impose themselves on us” is only successful as a function of their ability to cohere better than our past beliefs did with other aspects of our current beliefs and experiences. As James put it, “*ideas ... become true just insofar as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience,*” truth inheres in ideas that are able to “carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part” (James [1907] 1981, 30, his emphasis). “New truth”, he continues, “is always a go-between, a smoother-over of transitions, it marries old opinion to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity” (ibid., 31). Durkheim’s account not only fails to do justice to this requirement of coherence for truth-seeking knowledge however, but also inadequately addresses another essential requirement: its ability to be *justified*.

Whilst the appeal to evidence itself is a definite and scientifically systematised form of justification, the criterion of inter-subjective justification (or “warrant”, as Dewey expressed it) is especially important in humanistic terms since justification is a process that demands a human audience: we always justify *to* some *other*. As Becker puts it, “facts are facts only when they are accepted as such by the people to whom facts are relevant” (2007, 12). Further, we justify differently to different audiences so there can be no perfect singular justification fit for all possible audiences, because audiences and the justifications they require, change from one place to another and from one point in time to another; a matter that holds as much for scientific truth as

it does for any other (e.g. Shapin 1994). In terms of sociology, as Becker writes, “when we make a report about society, we make it to somebody. And who those somebodies are affects how we present what we know and how users react to what we present to them” (2007, 13). Importantly, in disciplines such as sociology, such justification need not only rely upon or address the disembodied resources of abstract reason. Justification also concerns the embodied, emotive, and normative means through which human beings reach conviction concerning knowledge and is therefore not simply synonymous with “logic”, “rationality”, or “pure consciousness”, singularly and abstractly defined.<sup>1</sup>

From this perspective, the claim that there is some ultimate decontextualised use to which we might put truth is the equivalent of suggesting that there are two distinct ends of enquiry: one end that attempts to justify one’s beliefs to a particular human audience, and another which aims to justify these beliefs to all possible audiences (or to the world itself, whatever that might mean). The problem with this, as Rorty points out, is that “pragmatists do not know how to imagine or how to discover the bounds of possibility” (2000, 11). The notion of “whether we are understanding a justification as a ‘justification for us’ or as a ‘justification, *period*’” is equivalent to “trying to tell whether I think of my scalpel or my computer as ‘a good tool for this task’ or as a ‘good tool, *period*’” (ibid., 13). A computer may be a perfect tool for the sociologist wishing to write up the findings of her latest piece of research, but quite useless for the surgeon engaged in removing a tumour. Uses are specific to ends, and no human concept, not even “truth”, can be said to be useful *per se*, for all possible ends. The consequence of this for sociology is that, as Becker puts it, we should see “every way of representing social reality as *perfect*—for something” (2007, 17).

Acquiring justification and acquiring true beliefs are therefore, in practice, indistinguishable from one another. Or rather, whereas we can recognise when a belief has been adequately justified to a given audience, we have no comparable way of recognising when a belief has been proven to be definitively and eternally true: we have no way of knowing when we have reached the ultimate end of a given enquiry. We might

therefore say that in practice “truth” is used as imprecise shorthand for what is always in fact contingent justification. When this shorthand function goes unacknowledged, “truth” has a tendency to become reified as a fixed *entity* (rather than a grounded human *process*) that “logic”, “reason”, “method” or some other apparently neutral technique might reveal to us. Because knowing whether we have arrived at truth is always ultimately *unrecognisable*, whereas knowing whether our knowledge claims have been shown to be coherent with the rest of our beliefs, and adequately justified to a relevant community on the basis of that community’s criteria for justification *is* recognisable, pragmatists therefore suggest we give up the search for the illusive former, and instead focus our energy on the latter. In other words, focus on justifying our beliefs to (or testing them against) concrete audiences, the breadth and diversity of which we might forever endeavour to expand; a process which may, or may not, involve the marshalling of empirical evidence.

### **The Human Being as the Missing Element**

From what has been said, we might now recognise that the element missing from Durkheim’s account of sociological truth is the same element that has more recently been self-consciously excised from many sociological epistemologies—the human being. Whilst, for example, on the one hand many post-structuralist accounts of truth have criticised realist epistemology by revealing the ways in which truth is tied to power (e.g. Foucault 1977, 1978), they have, like the realists they oppose, refused to stabilise truth with the only creatures for whom the concept might itself hold meaning, significance, or utility: human beings themselves.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand however, critical realists and neo-positivists have rejected the anti-realist presentation of truth as a function of power but have tended to do so by appealing to a form of objectivity that can itself only be arrived at through a deliberate attempt at eliminating the subjective, *human* point of view. What separates the humanistic alternative from these accounts is the insistence on truth as being necessarily dependent upon—in terms of serving a purpose exclusively for—the

*human*, rather than the non-human world.

On this point, Brandom, a former student of Rorty's, has claimed that Rorty's "biggest idea is that the next progressive step in the development of understanding of things and of ourselves is to do for epistemology what the first phase of the Enlightenment did for religion" (2000, xi; McDowell, 2000, 109). Rorty understood the Enlightenment to have left us with only an immature and partial form of humanism, a humanism that had merely replaced theological absolutes with meta-physical absolutes, such as "truth" and "reason". Just as the pre-Enlightenment world had been mistaken in gazing to the heavens for meaning, Rorty believed that the post-Enlightenment world was equally mistaken in understanding itself as aimed towards intrinsic reality; a culture directed towards gaining eternal knowledge of things. Rorty tried to persuade his readers that human culture was better seen as a form of "edification" aimed at redescribing the world in more useful, constructive, or in James's ([1907] 1981, 100) terminology, "expedient", ways. He therefore understood the dispute over realism as boiling down to "the question of whether, in our pursuit of the truth, we must answer only to our fellow human beings, or also to something non-human, such as the Way Things Really Are In Themselves" (Rorty 2002, 13).

This position has received plenty of criticism, both from pragmatists intent on recuperating some of the apparent security of realism (e.g. Bernstein 2010; Habermas 2003; Putnam 1990), as well as from non-pragmatists who see it as a form of irresponsible irrationalism (e.g. Benson and Stangroom 2006; Bhaskar 1989; Blackburn 2006; Williams 2002). The most common charge shared between the various critiques has been that a fully humanised account of truth invites a reckless and pernicious *relativism* into our understanding of knowledge. The following section defends against this accusation as it is found in one of its most comprehensive expressions: Bernard Williams's (2002) book *Truth and Truthfulness*.

### **The Illusory Threat of "Relativism"**



*We philosophers who are accused of not having sufficient respect for objective truth—the ones whom the materialist metaphysicians like to call “postmodern relativists”—think of objectivity as intersubjectivity.*

Rorty 2004, 21

In comparison to other critics who charge Rorty with relativism—Putnam, for example, describes Rorty’s position as “industrial strength cultural relativism” (2004, 121)—Williams’s critique is interesting in its claim to itself be in some sense humanistic, describing his own genealogy of the term “truth” as “an exercise in human self-understanding ... into human concerns with the truth” (2002, 60–61). Williams divides the range of opinion into those he calls the “deniers”, which includes both pragmatists and post-structuralists, and “the party of common sense”, which includes, amongst others, unsurprisingly, himself. The main charge made against the former camp is “relativism”, and that endorsing relativism is logically paradoxical because it *ipso facto* relativises the relativists’ own claims. He argues, for example, that Rorty “naively treats his own self-discourse as standing outside the general philosophical situation he is describing” (Williams 1983, 12), and therefore joins the rest of the deniers in “pecking into the dust the only tree that will support them” (Williams 2002, 19).

The problem with this criticism is that it relies upon the mistaken assumption that Rorty’s pragmatism presents another philosophical theory of truth; another attempt at *epistemology*. Rorty himself, however, understood his approach as a resolutely anti-epistemological form of *practice* rather than *theory*, to be judged on its own terms by assessing its utility in helping us resolve, or more commonly (along-side the mature Wittgenstein) *dissolve*, the problems it addresses. He wrote that “epistemology as a philosophical discipline has been a complete flop”, and that he “would hesitate to recommend a further dose of it” (Rorty 2000a, 112). On his own understanding, Rorty remains consistent with his own loose suggestions; uninterested in providing an account of the “truth” of his approach to settling philosophical problems, merely its *utility*, or

“expediency”; proposing something equivalent to “try it, it works”.

If we accept this, the threat of “relativism”, as conceived by Williams, itself becomes “largely an imaginary bugbear” (Rorty 2002, 17) around which a collection of insecurities and fears have arisen. It is a “bugbear” because nobody actually holds what Williams and the rest of the accusers consider to be relativist views; that is, nobody actually holds the opinion “that every belief on a certain topic, or perhaps about any topic, is as good as every other ... that two incompatible opinions on an important topic are equally good” (Rorty 1982, 166).<sup>3</sup> As Edward Said puts it, although “we are right to bewail the disappearance of a consensus on what constitutes objectivity, we are not by the same token completely adrift in self-indulgent subjectivity” (Said 1994, 98). As applied to social scientific research, the point is that we don’t need to resort to absolute conceptions of validity in order to be able to assert that one way of interpreting research findings may be *better* than others (e.g. Flyvbjerg 2001). “Relativism”, in this way of thinking, then becomes cast as a sensationalist and pejorative term deployed by realists in order to discredit what has for far longer in the history of philosophy been more respectfully referred to as “scepticism”.<sup>4</sup> A sceptical, as opposed to a “relativist” approach to notions of truth, doesn’t hold the maddening view that any belief is equally as good as any other, but simply advises moderation in the confidence with which we project our current beliefs, which have served us for a finite period of time, into an unknown and infinite future.

Rorty suggests that the “philosophers who get called ‘relativists’” are not those who have no means of distinguishing between more or less justified opinions, but “those who say that the grounds for choosing between such opinions are less algorithmic than had been thought” (1982, 166). Williams, in contrast, claims that “some methods of inquiry are *truth-acquiring*” (2002, 127) but that the problem with specifying particular “truth-acquiring” methods can only be answered, for each specific set of propositions, through metaphysics and epistemology. In sociology this might be the equivalent of claiming that observing proper *method* paves the golden path to truth. This, however,

again proves inadequate as a critique of pragmatism because it is precisely the notion that the truth-acquiring methods of epistemology and metaphysics can somehow sit outside of history whilst the rest of human culture is trapped within it that pragmatists wish to reject. Metaphysicians and epistemologists form their own human communities, and sub-communities, just as sociological methodologists do, and it is clear from all the disputes within and between such communities that easy consensus is far from the norm. Bernstein writes that “standards of argument and justification have changed in ways that no scientist or philosopher might have anticipated” (2010, 114) so that what are considered ideal epistemic conditions on closer examination usually turn out to be a universalisation of those conditions considered ideal locally, and at present. Not only this, but, if “theory” is taken to be a dominant means through which we assess knowledge, as Abend (2008) has demonstrated, different conceptions of the meaning and usage of “theory” coexist simultaneously within sociological research. What’s more, “the procedures we use for justifying beliefs to one another are among the things we try to justify to one another” (Rorty 2002, 15), so no ultimate and eternal procedure for evaluating our different forms of justification can therefore be expected, and the beliefs we currently take to be true might therefore better be seen as those that prove most useful in meeting the needs we currently ask of knowledge to meet.<sup>5</sup>

Whilst the conventional interpretation of Nietzsche’s perspectivism, his discussion of “humble truths”, and his having written such things as “there are *no eternal facts*, nor are there any absolute truths” ([1878] 1984, 15) would have him placed as a “denier” in Williams’s schema, Williams himself marshals Nietzsche in support of his own account of truth. He does so in two particular ways. Firstly, he claims that “although Nietzsche was keenly alive to what concerns the deniers” (2002, 18), ultimately he cannot be counted among their ranks for he recognised that “various beliefs may be necessary for our life, but that [this did] not show them to be true” (ibid., 15). The problem with employing Nietzsche in this first manner however, is that it treats beliefs as if they were

isolated, but in actual contexts of knowledge-production, this is never the case. In actual historical contexts, truth-seeking beliefs have to compete with one another for justification, and it is the *most* justified belief that wins the prize of truth-ascription, *even if* other beliefs may be considered justified when examined in isolation. Trapped as we are in the parochialism of our finite human condition, one can never know if one has included all possible beliefs (or pieces of evidence), and therefore truth-ascription can only ever be considered provisional, never eternal. From this perspective, Nietzsche's insight that the justification and necessity of holding a belief is not equivalent to that belief's ultimate truth appears compatible, not contrary, to a pragmatic account. Further, pragmatists accept a practical and "cautionary" use of the word "truth", which applies to those cases in which we wish to "contrast less informed with better informed audiences, past audiences with future audiences" (Rorty 2000b, 4). In these particular cases, Rorty contends, the word "truth" can be useful, but the need for a philosophical theory of the nature of "truth" employed in this cautionary manner is as lacking as the need for a *philosophical theory* of the nature of the word "Danger!" employed in an everyday context.

Secondly, Williams makes use of Nietzsche in adopting his genealogical method to trace back both real and imagined histories of truth and truthfulness. Problematically though, he claims that his "genealogical story aims to give a decent pedigree to truth and truthfulness" (Williams 2002, 19) even though there is no *a priori* reason to expect from the outset a genealogical investigation to legitimate one's research object. Williams in fact acknowledges this problem elsewhere in writing that though philosophy "must concern itself with the history of our conceptions", it "must overcome the need to think that this history should ideally be vindicatory" (Williams 2006, 182). Nevertheless, his genealogy traces back what he argues are the twin "virtues" of truth; "accuracy" and "sincerity", which arose from the need to regulate the relating of knowledge between different individuals. Accuracy became a virtue because the "positional advantage" of a speaker meant that they could "tell someone else about a situation because he is or was in

it, while his hearer is not or was not” (2002, 42), and

because reflective creatures will have the opportunity within this structure for deceit and concealment, they will also have the motives for them, as when a hunter has found prey which he would rather keep for himself and his immediate family. (ibid., 44)

Sincerity, on the other hand, involves guarding against the temptation to lie and is likewise understood as a virtue because to acquire it one must struggle to overcome both “inner” and “outer” obstacles to achieving truth and because it also “operates in a space that is structured by motivations to conceal and dissimulate” (ibid., 124).

In tracing back these genealogies, Williams claims he is demonstrating not merely the *usefulness*, but rather the “*intrinsic value*” of truth and truthfulness (2002, 90–95). However, on closer examination, as the pragmatists suggest, it proves impossible to unpick the one from the other, and it is indeed difficult to see how this would not be the case considering that a genealogical method presupposes the disruption of essential qualities. Take for example the following quotes:

promises and assertions could become *worthless* if the respective institutions were overwhelmed with defaulting behaviour. (86, emphasis added)

The power of imaginary genealogies lies in introducing the idea of *function* where you would not expect to find it, and explaining in more primitive terms what that *function* is. (32, emphasis added)

[accuracy and sincerity] are *useful*, indeed essential, to such objectives as the pooling of information, and those objectives are important to almost every human purpose. (57, emphasis added)

The real and imagined genealogies Williams traces seem to go no further than demonstrating, alongside the pragmatists he critiques, the *use* of truth and truthfulness. Where he claims to be taking the further step of demonstrating their “intrinsic value” this always seems to be through either forceful assertion or rhetorical appeal to common sense, rather than through genealogy itself. An example of the former technique:

The concept of truth itself—that is to say the quite basic role that truth plays in relation to language, meaning, and belief—is not culturally various, but always and everywhere the same. (ibid., 61)

and an example of the latter:

most people do think, in some way or other, that these qualities [truth and truthfulness] have a more than instrumental value (the pragmatists do, out of school). (ibid., 60)

If we ignore the assertions and rhetorical appeals to common sense (a matter dealt with in greater detail below), Williams's genealogy seems surprisingly compatible with a pragmatic view upon truth, and indeed, as Putnam notes, expresses "views surprisingly similar in certain respects to Rorty's" (2004, 122). This is not only in the sense that it goes no further than arguing for the *usefulness* of truth and truthfulness but also in the sense that in almost all of Williams's passages, the terms "accurate" or "sincere" could easily be substituted with the term "justified" without substantially harming their meaning or insight.

For example, when Williams asks the rhetorical question "if you do not really believe in truth, what is the passion for truthfulness for? Or—as we might also put it—in pursuing truthfulness, what are you supposedly being true to?" (2002, 2), there seems no logical barrier in Williams's argument to simply answering, "justification" and "coherence". When he (again, rhetorically) suggests that *truth* distinguishes between "the force which is argument, and the force which is not—differences such as that between listening and being hit, a contrast that may vanish in the seminar but which reappears sharply when you are hit" (ibid, 9), his point of distinguishing between coercion and conviction would lose none of its power or perception if he had instead written that "an argument has more *justification* than a punch", not more truth. No substantial difference can be found if we compare for example Williams's statement that "the assessment of beliefs and assertions as true is a favourable one" (ibid., 84) with Rorty's claim that assessing truth is the equivalent of giving a "pat on the back" to assertions that "pay their way" (Rorty 1982, xxi, xxv).

Williams claims that

it seems not to occur to them that even if the ideal of discovering and telling the truth were in themselves illusions, if the idea of "the truth" were itself empty, those illusions

might well play a vital part in our identifying and pursuing those objectives. (2002, 59)

This is a perplexing charge though, considering that the notion of truth-as-a-motivator *is precisely* a pragmatic conception of truth. By extension Williams also seems mistaken in suggesting that scientific advance would screech to a dramatic halt if scientists were themselves to adopt a pragmatic account of truth, hence, so he argues, falsifying pragmatism on its own terms. In response, we might ask why anyone would cease any useful practice that was allowing them to achieve what they wished? Almost all of the Metaphysical Club (the cradle of American pragmatism), including of course Peirce and James, were themselves accomplished scientists attempting to bring the practical, empirical-experimental approach of science into what they saw as (at the time) the overly idealist discipline of philosophy.<sup>6</sup> As Bernstein puts it, “Peirce, Dewey and even James ... sought to imbue philosophy with what they took to be the openness of the scientific experimental spirit” (1983, 205). The revolutions of Copernicus, Darwin, and Einstein only serve as the most dramatic examples of why most sophisticated scientists resist the temptation of claiming that current scientific theories will hold eternally. Most would instead claim that such theories *work*; that they fit the current evidence, successfully cohere with everything else we currently know about the world, and therefore require no modification until they can be shown to fail to cohere with some other justified and coherent theory, or fail to fit some newfound piece of evidence and therefore lose their prior ability to be justified. Contrary to Williams’s critique, experimental scientific practice seems to be an inherently pragmatic practice, one that gets by perfectly well without the help of metaphysical notions of “truth” shoring it up.

### **Epistemological Scaremongering**

Perhaps the most misleading aspect of the critique of a humanised approach to knowledge production however, is the claim that it presents a deep cultural and political *danger* that threatens to undermine Enlightenment common sense with a malignant form of sophistry. Williams again subscribes to this position, seeing Rorty’s questioning of correspondence theories of truth as “unsettling”, and as presenting a threat that not only

“has consequences for real politics,” but also “signals the danger that our intellectual activities, particularly in the humanities, may tear themselves to pieces” (2002, 2). He adds that “to the extent that we lose a sense of the value of truth, we shall certainly lose something and may well lose everything” (ibid., 7). Such remarks echo both Durkheim’s earlier warnings that the “problem raised by pragmatism is indeed of a very serious nature” (Durkheim, 1983, 1), and from a very different perspective, Horkheimer’s similar characterisation of pragmatism as a prime exemplar of the “eclipse of reason” ([1947] 2004, 29–39).

The cultural conservatism evinced here massively overestimates the risk, whilst simultaneously ignoring the gains, that open philosophical debate over the nature of truth poses (Morgan, 2015). Not only are these critiques based upon a misunderstanding of pragmatism (*pace* Williams, of all the philosophies, pragmatism in fact *reveals*, rather than “loses” the “*value* of truth”), but also, as was mentioned above, they neglect the fact that in practical everyday life, in sociology as elsewhere, the use of the word “truth” usually functions perfectly well in achieving what it needs to, without the need for philosophical epistemologies, or analytic accounts of its meaning as a predicate we ascribe to certain statements we make.<sup>7</sup> The irony of this kind of epistemological scaremongering is that it ignores the far more realistic danger that affirmative assertions of timeless truth play in human affairs. In other words, it ignores the authoritarianism inherent in any drive towards eradicating a healthy questioning of received wisdom, a questioning that in fact celebrates, through practice, the virtue of critique. This questioning is an activity to which sociology contributes a crucial role, and which ought in liberal societies to be protected and applauded as a method of renovating our ideas and perspectives so as to defend against their fossilising into dogma. Dogmatic pronouncements of truth (or the method of arriving at it) can function to put an end to critique through claiming that the last word has been said on a particular matter, and as Bernstein writes, “any good pragmatist knows, nobody has the final word” (2010, 124). If questioning the utility of the vocabularies we currently use to make sense of the world



were to stop, then so too would intellectual progress, and this would present a much greater danger to human culture and the advance of ideas than the meek suggestion of adopting a more modest position than the reverence that realists presently pay to the notion of “truth”. Jacob Bronowski—hardly someone to rail against the scientific approach of the Enlightenment—even suggested that the appeal to, and forcible imposition of “absolute knowledge” is a defining characteristic of totalitarian societies; that societies that promote singular, indomitable versions of the truth characteristically fail to bring their own—all-too-frequently murderous—premises into question (Bronowski 1973, 374). In certain passages Williams in fact senses this danger himself, writing that during “the twentieth century we were much reminded of the destructive capacities that the Enlightenment has deployed, with its aspiration to social management as applied scientific truth” (2002, 231), but sadly fails to extend this acknowledgement into the need for a more open, criticisable, and in fact far *less* dangerous humanistic account of knowledge.

The following section draws upon Wittgenstein to defend against a final common criticism of a humanised account of truth: the charge that it denies self-evident everyday truths.

### **Against the Charge of Denying “Everyday Truths”**

*I am sitting with a philosopher in the garden; he says again and again “I know that that’s a tree”, pointing to a tree that is near us. Someone else arrives and hears this, and I tell him: “This fellow isn’t insane. We are only doing philosophy”.*

Wittgenstein 1975, 61.

Though Wittgenstein is not conventionally identified with pragmatism, his shared fascination with human experience, religion, and the elevation of practice over theory has not gone unnoticed (e.g. Goodman 2002; Haack 1982; Rorty 1961). Further, Wittgenstein was, throughout his life, a strong admirer of William James, often citing *The Varieties of*

*Religious Experience* and *Principles of Psychology* as amongst his favourite books, the latter being “for some time, the only philosophical work to be found on his bookshelves” (Haack 1982, 163). Following Rorty’s suggestion that “the closer one brings pragmatism to the writings of the later Wittgenstein ... the more light they shed on each other” (1961, 198–199), this section examines how the mature Wittgenstein’s understanding of truth shared a deep affinity with the pragmatic one and can therefore be used to defend against the criticism that pragmatism leads one to a denial of unquestionable “everyday truths”.

Wittgenstein discussed matters of truth most explicitly nearer the end of his life in the collection of notes that were posthumously published as *On Certainty* (1975), and in which he makes the remark that he is “trying to say something that sounds like pragmatism” (1975, 106). These notes were mainly written in response to G. E. Moore’s criticisms of scepticism, and deal with the kind of “everyday truths” (such as “here is a hand” said holding one’s hand up) that are often given as examples of why sceptical (let alone so-called “relativist”) approaches to truth must be flawed. Though Wittgenstein’s actual interlocutor was Moore, in his assertion that “everyday truths can readily and reasonably be counted as facts” (Williams 2002, 11), Williams could easily stand in as a more contemporary defender of Moore’s position.

It is important to recognise that neither the later Wittgenstein nor the pragmatists argued against the notion that everyday truths ought to be treated any differently than we currently treat them in everyday life; both thought that language was generally used very effectively in practical lived life, and were instead interested in how philosophers became misled by ignoring language’s use by instead looking for the essences to which language was assumed to correspond. Rejecting this search for essences, Wittgenstein suggested that in looking for the meaning of words such as “truth”, we should instead examine the ways in which such words are *used* within “forms of life”, and avoid confusing what he called “grammatical” uses of words for the world’s *material* being. For example, he argued that Moore’s claim that “I know that that is a tree”, said whilst standing in front of the tree, was not a meaningful statement about the way in which the world materially is, but instead a “grammatical” statement which serves to explain how the word “tree” is

conventionally used within our language (i.e. “the word tree refers to this object before me”). When a sceptic challenges the claim “I know that that is a tree” said whilst standing in front of the tree, Wittgenstein argues she cannot be bringing the existence of the tree into question, but is instead making a nonsensical use of language. The claim should not, in other words, be treated as an invalid empirical hypothesis about the material world, but rather as a misuse of the conventions of language, and therefore the debate between sceptics and realists over everyday truths misses the point as long as it is conceived as a matter of arguing over empirical hypotheses.<sup>8</sup> As he put it, when a statement about everyday reality begins with “I know ...”,

If “I know etc.”, is conceived as a grammatical proposition, of course the “I” cannot be important. And it properly means “There is no such thing as a doubt in this case” or “The expression ‘I do not know’ makes no sense in this case”. (Wittgenstein 1975, 18).

Wittgenstein’s stress upon language as a human creation allowing us to deal with the world as we find it, not a creation of that undivided and unlabelled world itself, is very similar to that of the pragmatists. The pragmatist-inspired philosopher of social science, Patrick Baert, for instance, points out that although Darwinian naturalism allows us to understand how language evolved as a sophisticated means of dealing with our environment and hence surviving in it long enough to pass on our genetic information, “it is difficult to see how human beings would have acquired the capacity to represent the universe as it actually is. It would,” he writes, “in light of biological evolution, be an extraordinary coincidence if people’s cognitive functions were so radically transformed as to allow for adequate representation” (2005, 129). In Habermas’s eulogy to Rorty he likewise reiterates that we “cannot describe nature in a language we assume to be nature’s own language” (Habermas 2008). However, where Wittgenstein takes us further than the pragmatists is in his demonstration of language as the framework within which truth or falsity can be made sense of. This framework can be neither justified (by the realist) nor put into question (by the sceptic) without making nonsensical uses of the language we use to do so, because the linguistic framework forms the limit within which justification or

questioning of such statements is able to take place. As he put it, “we never arrive at fundamental propositions in the course of our investigations; we get to the boundary of language which stops us from asking further questions” (Wittgenstein, 1980, 35).

Wittgenstein’s insights suggest that the reason epistemologists continually make the mistake of understanding words such as “truth” as representing something unconditional and sublime is because they have been artificially abstracted from the worldly contexts in which they are used. Within these contexts, pragmatists argue that “truth” is usually used to refer to justified and coherent knowledge. The therapeutic element of Wittgenstein’s work consists in alleviating the psychological unease surrounding philosophical disputes over particular conceptual ideas by returning the words involved to their practical contexts and in the process dissolving the misguided philosophical problems surrounding them.<sup>9</sup>

This paper has issued a warning against adopting a metaphysics of realism in disciplines like sociology and defended the value of a humanised account of knowledge against some of its most common complaints. It has argued that whilst sociologists might assess matters of coherence and justification, they have no equivalent way of knowing whether they hold some eternal knowledge about the world. “Truth”, it has therefore argued, ought to be seen as an appreciative term we award to knowledge that meets our subjective need to deal with the world that surrounds us; in Baert’s tidy formulation, it is about “coping with”, not “copying”, reality (2005, 104). Against the charge that this understanding leads to a pernicious relativism, it has argued that a greater threat to the advance of knowledge in fact comes from dogmatic assertions of social truth understood in absolute and eternal terms.

One implication of this paper is that adopting a humanistic account of sociological knowledge may allow the discipline to recognise an element of its value in its capacity to question, disrupt, and critique on the one hand, the scientific pretence to offering ultimate truths about social life, and on the other, those uncritical “common

sense” truths—“common to a particular period and a particular common environment” (Gramsci 1971, 330f)—that make no claim to science yet nevertheless silently and powerfully sway social opinion. To the extent to which its approach to knowledge is humanised therefore, this paper implies that part of sociology’s value lies in its ability to contribute to the project of moulding forms of critical “good sense” out of the uncritical forms of “common sense” that circulate throughout society. It also suggests a move away from debates over whether sociological descriptions accurately reflect social reality towards asking whether the modifications that such accounts make to our current vocabularies of description or explanation prove *useful*, and because *use* is always relative to ends elsewhere defined, this in turn places a greater emphasis on understanding what sociology’s ends might be.

- . [1] Ihde (2009) offers one way of combining the phenomenological features that stem from our embodied experience of being-in-the-world with pragmatism’s concern for knowledge as an interaction between ourselves and our environment. Whilst this paper agrees with Ihde that embodiment moulds our experience and knowledge in particular and often shared directions, and in addition that technological developments are altering these interactions between ourselves and our environments in interesting new ways, it does not see this as necessarily requiring the replacement of more classically conceived notions of “subjectivity”.
- . [2] This is of course a consequence of their suspicion towards humanism more generally, summed up in their concern with “displacing the subject”.
- . [3] Margolis (1988) offers an alternative defence of so-called “relativism”.
- . [4] The obvious difference between Cartesian and pragmatic scepticism is that Descartes was interested in how universal doubt might uncover, rather than unsettle, ultimate truths.
- . [5] Whitley (1984) demonstrates how justification of the procedures used to arrive at knowledge varies not only over time, but of course also across specific areas of scientific knowledge, organised as much on a social, as on an intellectual basis.
- . [6] Peirce, it should however be noted, would no doubt have raised his own strong objections

to the arguments put forward here.

- . [7] It is for this reason that this paper has ignored ongoing debates in analytic philosophy, stemming from the work of philosophers such as Tarski and Carnap, over the definition of truth in “formal” or “artificial” languages.
- . [8] As was noted above, this could be similarly applicable to the charge of relativism—one cannot sensibly hold such views: no (sane) relativist in fact exists.
- . [9] Marcuse ([1964] 2002, 174–205) critiques this apparent therapeutic function of Wittgenstein’s philosophy by arguing that it reinforces conventional understandings of the use of language, therefore disregarding possibilities of “transcendence” or “negativity”, dis- solving contradictions rather than allowing their opposing elements to collide and explode into *something new*.

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