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On the Relationship between Truth and Liberal Politics

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ABSTRACT This paper examines the relationship between truth and liberal politics via the work of Bernard Williams and Richard Rorty. I argue that Williams is right to think that there are positive relations between truth, specifically a realist understanding of truth, and liberal politics that Rorty’s abandonment of the realist vocabulary of truth undermines. At the heart of this concern is the worry that abandoning the realist vocabulary opens up the possibility that the standards of justification for our true beliefs can be manipulated by those with the power to do so in order to further their own political ends. The political benefit of realism is that it fixes the standards of justification and makes them immune to manipulation by the use of power. However, I suggest that there is a form of realism available that Rorty can accept which would deliver the political benefits of the realist vocabulary without requiring him to accept the thick realist metaphysics that he wants to avoid. My conclusion is that there is a positive and important relationship between truth and liberal politics, a relationship that can be sustained without any necessary commitment to realist metaphysics.

In his book Truth and Truthfulness, Bernard Williams explores what he sees as a paradox of modern thought and culture. On the one hand, “there is an intense commitment to truthfulness – or, at any rate, a pervasive suspiciousness, a readiness against being fooled, an eagerness to see through appearances to the real structure and motives that lie behind them”. Yet on the other “there is an equally persuasive suspicion about truth itself: whether there is such a thing; if there is, whether it can be more than relative or subjective or something of that kind; altogether, whether we should bother about it, in carrying on our activities or in giving an account of them”. This is not a paradox that Williams thinks should only worry those
spectral beings whose mordent presence haunts the cold and lonely corridors of philosophy departments. Williams believes this paradox has far reaching cultural and, of most interest to us here, political consequences. He asks:

If you do not really believe in the existence of truth, what is the passion for truthfulness a passion for? Or – as we might also put it – in pursuing truthfulness, what are you supposedly being true to? This is not an abstract difficulty or just a paradox. It has consequences for real politics.²

One of the aims of Truth and Truthfulness is to convince us that there is an important and valuable relationship between truth, specifically what Williams calls ‘the realist idea of truth’, and liberal politics. A concern for truth fosters what Williams calls the two ‘virtues of truth’ – ‘accuracy’ and ‘sincerity’ – which have important, maybe vital, positive relations to liberal politics. As Williams says, “to the extent that we lose a sense of the value of truth, we shall certainly lose something and may well lose everything”.³ As the book progresses, it becomes clear that the ‘everything’ we run the risk of losing means, not least, the historical achievement that is a liberal politics.

Williams wants to defend this position against those he calls the ‘deniers’, those who deny the sort of things about truth I quoted from Williams above. Williams believes that the cries of these mostly post-modern and pragmatist sirens will tempt us onto the rocks of political disaster. Of these deniers, the one that appears most often in Truth and Truthfulness is the American pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty. Rorty is infamous for his many attacks on our traditional philosophical understandings of concepts such as truth, knowledge, mind, reality and justification. Over the past three decades Rorty has produced a sustained attack on what he calls at various times ‘representationalism’, ‘foundationalism’, or ‘realism’. Rorty takes all of these ‘ism’s’ to suppose that what makes propositions, sentences, vocabularies or beliefs true is that they accurately describe a reality independent of us, what is usually called a correspondence theory of truth. This prevalent understanding of truth Rorty believes is a “legacy of an age in which the world was seen as the creation of a being who had a language of his own” such that reality has a preferred way of being described and we get reality ‘right’ when we use that vocabulary (usually taken to be the language of modern science).⁴ For Rorty, this sort of understanding of truth can only make sense if we assume a thick set of realist metaphysics in which there is such a thing as the ‘real essence’ of reality, hence his tendency to talk about truth as correspondence to dramatically capitalised concepts such as ‘Reality as It Is in Itself’⁵ or the ‘Intrinsic Nature of Reality’.⁶ But Rorty thinks that realist metaphysics, insofar as they are a leftover from a religious worldview, are something that we can now do without.
Of the many reasons that Rorty has proposed for why we should abandon what I shall call this ‘realist vocabulary of truth’, the one that is of most interest to us here is his belief that it has outlived its usefulness to liberal politics, indeed that it is detrimental to liberal politics. What Rorty tries to persuade us of is that a liberal society that abandoned the realist vocabulary of truth would be a better liberal society for it. Our liberal institutions, practices, values and beliefs would benefit if we abandoned that vocabulary of truth as it relates to all areas of life, including science, morality, and politics. It would help make “the world’s inhabitants more pragmatic, more tolerant, more liberal, more receptive to the appeal of instrumental rationality”.

Controversially, Rorty’s utopian liberal society would be populated by ‘liberal ironists’, people who are unconcerned whether their beliefs correspond to reality or not, who “replace the desire for objectivity – the desire to be in touch with a reality which is more than some community with which we identify ourselves – with the desire for solidarity with that community” and who are “content to call ‘true’ (or ‘right’ or ‘just’) whatever the outcome of undistorted communication happens to be, whatever view wins in a free and open encounter”.

So, whereas Williams believes that a concern for a ‘realist idea of truth’ has important beneficial relations to liberal politics, Rorty has advocated that we should abandon the ‘realist vocabulary of truth’ because it has detrimental relations to liberal politics (how far Williams and Rorty are defending or attacking different ideas of truth will be something that we shall address in the course of this paper). In this paper I want to examine the relationship between truth, specifically the realist vocabulary of truth, and liberal politics via the different positions of Williams and Rorty. I shall begin by setting out Williams’ argument that there is a positive and significant relationship between a realist idea of truth and liberal politics in the sense that a concern for truth fosters the two virtues of accuracy and sincerity. Though I shall try to show that there is no reason to think that Rorty’s abandonment of the realist vocabulary means that he cannot possess the virtue of sincerity, there is good reason to think that it renders him unable to possess the virtue of accuracy. Insofar as I agree with Williams that the virtue of accuracy does have important positive relations to liberal politics (and in the third section of this article I will elaborate upon the political problems of abandoning the realist vocabulary) I shall argue that Rorty best embrace rather than abandon the realist vocabulary. In the final section, therefore, I shall suggest a form of realism that Rorty can accept which delivers the political benefits of the realist vocabulary but does not require him to commit to realist metaphysics. The conclusion of the article will be that there is an important relationship between truth, particularly the realist vocabulary of truth, and liberal politics though it is
one that can be sustained without necessarily requiring us to accept realist metaphysics.

I. The virtues of truth: sincerity

What understanding of truth does Williams defend as important to liberal politics? The section of *Truth and Truthfulness* entitled ‘Truth Itself’, which begins by asking ‘What about truth itself?’, continues “We should say something, but not very much. In particular, we should resist any demand for a definition of truth”.14 The section only lasts for another two pages in which Williams accepts the Davidson/Tarski point that truth is an indefinable concept – though we can say something interesting about it in relation to other concepts such as beliefs and assertions – and that “there can be no interesting correspondence theory of truth”.15 This serves at once to deflate claims that take off from independent definition and to prepare the reader for the argument that follows about how truth relates to beliefs and assertions. In *Truth and Truthfulness*, that is to say, Williams is concerned less with truth as a philosophical than as a politically salient idea. His aim is not to show us that deniers such as Rorty have misunderstood truth as a philosophical concept but to make the political case for the importance of truth to liberal politics.

That said, Williams seeks to defend a “specifically realist idea of truth, in the sense of an independent order of things to which our thought is answerable”.16 Williams subscribes to a realism that he defines as “the idea of an order of things that is independent of us, where that means, in particular, independent of our will”.17 We cannot believe what we like about the world, for the world is one way and, no matter how much we would wish it so, not any other. In this sense, reality acts as a “radical resistance to the will”.18 Despite our desire that the world reconfigure itself in a way that might be more in line with our purposes or goals, we have to accept that our beliefs about the world are “answerable to an order of things that lies beyond our own determination”.19

This ‘order of things’, the way the world really is whether we like it or not, delivers us what Williams calls ‘everyday’ truths and he allies himself with what he calls the ‘commonsense’ party who believe “that there are many everyday truths”.20 As he says, “everyone knows that there are everyday truths, and what many of them are”.21 He cites Hume, Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell as philosophers who “recall us to the everyday from the personal alienation of a fantastic philosophical scepticism which claims to doubt that there is an external world, or past time, or other minds”.22 Williams is keen to point out that by “everyday truths I do not mean … that they are picked out by being certain or incontestable” but says that “What is incontestable is that on very many occasions propositions of these kinds are true and can be known to be true”.23 The thought here, I take it, is that what
makes these ‘everyday’ truths true is not their philosophical incontestability but their place and role within our everyday lives, and it is their centrality and indispensability to the practice and understanding of our lives that allows us to ‘readily and reasonably’ take them as facts. As the book proceeds, Williams gives various examples of these ‘everyday truths’: for example, two plus two equals four, scientific truths, ‘It is Tuesday night’, ‘I am in the United States’.

This commitment to realism and the defence of everyday or commonsense truths of the world forms the background for Williams’ promotion of what he calls the two virtues of truth, accuracy and sincerity. Accuracy means “you do the best you can to acquire true beliefs” about reality.24 Sincerity means making sure that “what you say reveals what you believe”.25 A sincere assertion is one that aims to communicate to, rather than to misinform, the hearer about the asserter’s beliefs. Sincerity is the disposition to honestly convey your beliefs to others.

What is it about the two virtues that make them so politically desirable and so important for Williams? Williams understands ‘truthfulness’ as the combination of both accuracy and sincerity and thus “A truthful person both says (with numerous familiar qualifications) what he or she believes, and takes some trouble that his or her beliefs should be true”.26 He conceives of the importance of truthfulness negatively, inasmuch as its worth comes from what it resists rather than what it itself offers: “the value of the whole enterprise, political truthfulness included, is to be measured against the evils that it resists”.27 The particular evil Williams has in mind is political tyranny: he calls the anti-tyranny argument “an obvious argument for truthfulness”, adding elsewhere that “truthfulness is usually necessary or helpful in the restraint of tyrants”.28 Truthfulness is an obstacle to tyranny because “an individual’s commitment to the virtues of truth may stand opposed to a political culture which destroys and pollutes the truth”.29 It is because the virtues of truth stand in opposition to tyranny that Williams fears that losing them risks ‘losing everything’.

Focusing on the virtue of sincerity, which is the disposition to convey honestly to others what it is that you believe, Williams analyses the relationship between truth, assertion and beliefs in order to determine how sincerity is related to truth. He says, “a sincere assertion will be one made by someone who himself believes that P”.30 So to make a sincere assertion is to say something that you believe where beliefs are taken to “aim at truth” or to be “subject to a norm of truth”.31 However, not all assertions need be sincere, indeed, “An account of assertion must leave room for insincere assertions”.32 There are many cases that we can imagine in which we assert something that does not convey what we actually believe. In extreme cases, an insincere assertion may be a downright lie, an attempt by the speaker to mislead the hearer as to what it is he actually believes. There may be good reasons for lying (which Williams addresses in chapter five) but these need
not concern us here. To make an insincere assertion is to try and misinform a hearer of your belief about what is true. On the other hand, to make a sincere assertion is to tell the hearer what it is you believe. Therefore, “Sincerity at the most basic level is simply openness and a lack of inhibition”.33

Williams would not deny that governing is a morally complex exercise in which a certain degree of flexibility is required when it comes to such matters as telling the truth.34 There may be cases in which insincere assertions are justifiable. But liberalism requires a general commitment to the virtue of sincerity. And this virtue in turn supports liberalism: it promotes openness and ingenuity (which as Williams points out has important relations to the disposition of trust);35 it enables people to understand what their government is really up to (transparency); and it protects against deceit and manipulation while discouraging secrecy, and is therefore an indispensable ally in the fight against tyranny.

What reason might we have to think that the deniers, specifically Rorty, might be thought to undermine the possibility of sincerity? As Williams’ argument runs, there is a relationship between sincerity and truth for sincerity is the virtue of being open about what you believe to be true (“in the case of sincere assertion, a speaker’s intention to inform the hearer about the truth, and to inform him about the speaker’s beliefs, fit naturally together – they are two sides of the same intention”).36 Insofar as Rorty denies that ‘our beliefs are answerable to an order of things that lies beyond our own determination’ does this undermine his ability to possess the virtue of sincerity as Williams understands it?

I do not think so and there are two good reasons to think not. The first is that, if we assume that there is a relationship between truth and sincerity, though Rorty has expended much energy arguing specifically against the realist vocabulary of truth, he is not suggesting that we do away with the thought that our beliefs can be true or that there is such a thing as truth. It is a misreading to think that Rorty’s abandonment of the realist vocabulary of truth equates to a lack of concern for truth or the denial of the existence of truth. Rather, Rorty has argued that we should adopt a different understanding of what justifies our beliefs as true (which we shall come to shortly). His argument is not that we should eliminate the word ‘truth’ from our vocabulary but that we should reconceptualise it in a way that is different from the realist understanding of truth, especially realist understandings which, like Williams’, take truth to be a relationship (however fleshed out) between our sentences, propositions or beliefs and reality or, in Williams words, the ‘order of things’. As Rorty says, “since most people think that truth is correspondence to the way reality ‘really is’, they think of us [those who deny this] as denying the existence of truth”.37 We should not equate Rorty’s wish that we abandon the realist vocabulary of truth with the wish that we lose a concern for truth per se nor with the thought that truth
does not exist. It would be much more accurate to say that Rorty, in wanting to abandon the realist vocabulary of truth, lacks a concern for whether our beliefs answer to the realist criteria of truth.

However, this might offer us another way in which we can re-construe the argument that Rorty cannot be sincere by placing the burden of the argument on whether his understanding of truth is adequate or not: Rorty cannot be sincere, that is to say assert the things he takes to be true, because his idea of what justifies a belief as true is inadequate. Because the Rortian pragmatist does not have and is not interested in having true beliefs, because he has the wrong idea about what justifies his beliefs as true, he cannot assert what he believes to be true. Rortian pragmatists do not aim at possessing true beliefs and thus have no true beliefs to disclose to others.

However, even if we restructure the argument in this way it nevertheless misses the important point that at the level of sincerity we need not be committed to one theory of truth or another. The relevant criterion for sincerity is only that we express beliefs that we take to be true and avoid misleading others as to what we believe is true. There is no commitment, at this point, to a particular position on what makes a belief true. As such it seems to me, and this is my second reason for thinking that we should not take Rorty’s abandonment of the realist vocabulary to undermine the virtue of sincerity, that we need to make a clear distinction between the moral debate about sincerity (and connected issues about lying, assertions, etc) and the realist debate about accuracy (what it is that justifies our beliefs as true). On the one hand, Williams implies that the standpoint you adopt in the realist debate does affect what you can say in the moral debate (“If you do not really believe in the existence of truth, what is the passion for truthfulness a passion for?”). But he also seems to accept that, at the level of sincerity, we need not commit ourselves to any position about what justifies our beliefs as true (though we do still want to say that our beliefs are true) and that it is only at the level of accuracy that this begins to matter:

...merely in defining Accuracy we have to mention the truth, whereas with Sincerity the reference to truth comes one stage later. We can define Sincerity merely by mentioning people’s beliefs – it directly implies only that a speaker says what he believes. Truth comes into it because beliefs ‘aim at’ the truth. Accuracy is directly related to that aim of beliefs.

So, the accusation that Rorty’s position on truth results in him being unable to possess the virtue of sincerity can only make sense if we re-construe it as a product of him lacking the virtue of accuracy: Rorty’s account of what it is to have true beliefs undermines the relation between accuracy and truth. Sincerity and accuracy link up because to aim at true beliefs is to aim at acquiring true beliefs about reality. If the Rortian pragmatist does not aim
at getting reality right then he cannot have true beliefs and thus cannot disclose them to others rendering him unable to possess the virtue of sincerity.39 Making the argument this way around makes the virtue of accuracy and the issue of the criteria of justification for our beliefs pivotal, and thus it is to this that we should now turn.

II. The virtues of truth: accuracy

Williams understands the virtue of accuracy as “the desire for truth ‘for its own sake’ – the passion for getting it right”.40 There are two aspects of accuracy that make it an enemy of tyranny. First, it is the will to discover the truth (“if P, to believe P, and if not P, to believe that not P”)41, and second, it is the desire to hold on to it. There are obstacles, both internal and external to the inquirer, which need to be overcome if truth is to be discovered. As such, and crucially, “Accuracy ... implies care, reliability, and so on, in discovering and coming to believe the truth”.42 Two points follow from this. Firstly, and taking into account Williams’ definition of realism as ‘the idea of an order of things that is independent of us, where that means, in particular, independent of our will’ and which acts as a ‘radical resistance to the will’, the inquirer must avoid wishful thinking, self-deception, and fantasy. The world does not reconfigure itself according to our will and thus the inquirer must do her best to avoid the trap of supposing that the world is other than it actually is. The virtue of accuracy includes “dispositions and strategies for combating wishful thinking, and generally sustaining the defences of belief against wish”43. The second point is that we need to be methodical. Given that Williams believes “that we should accept the everyday idea that inquiry, and the virtue of Accuracy, are directed to the truth”44 we should be sensitive to the fact that some methods acquire truth and others do not, that “some methods of inquiry are truth-acquiring”.45 Because truth is the goal of inquiry, a concern for the appropriate method is critical.

This concern with acquiring the truth is what makes the striving for accuracy a politically desirable virtue. It is anti-tyrannical in its bearings – a concern for accuracy makes the individual scrutinise and criticise political practice: he looks past the spin, so to speak, to the reality of the situation. He will strive to avoid being deceived, even by himself, and take care (by adopting the appropriate method) to find out the truth about a state of affairs. Accuracy is a politically relevant virtue because it leads the inquirer to desire truth and therefore take care to avoid being misled or misinformed by tyrannical political agents and spin-doctors.

However, and Williams draws our attention to this in chapter six of Truth and Truthfulness, Rorty has argued that it makes no sense to say that truth is the aim of inquiry. Rorty’s ‘indistinguishability argument’, as Williams calls it, proposes that we replace truth with justification as the end of inquiry
because we cannot distinguish between a belief being justified and it being true. Williams takes Rorty’s argument to be this: When we are in a position to say that ‘P is true’, what we mean is that we are in some social state which we may call ‘being justified in believing that P’, where to be justified means that we agree that P passes the relevant standards of justification. We are unable to distinguish between that which we agree is justified by our current standards of justification, those standards that we take to be the best measure for arriving at true statements or beliefs about a certain topic or subject, and truth itself. Therefore, we cannot distinguish between justification and truth, between a statement that is justified and a statement that is true: “We cannot tell the difference between snow’s being white and our (completely, etc.) agreeing that snow is white”. Given our inability to distinguish truth and justification, a true belief and a justified one, Rorty conceives the end of inquiry as the social state of agreement that belief P meets our current standards of justification.

That Rorty aims at justification rather than truth results in him being unable to possess the virtue of accuracy because accuracy, so we saw, is linked to the idea that there is ‘an independent order of things to which our thought is answerable’. Whereas Williams thinks that our beliefs are “answerable to the world”, Rorty thinks that our beliefs are answerable only to our standards of justification. Though Williams is right to say that this is the understanding of truth that Rorty wants to replace the realist understanding, he wrongly prioritises just one of the many reasons that Rorty has employed in favour of this. Part of Rorty’s strategy in his crusade against the realist vocabulary of truth has been to run many different arguments (only some of which can usefully be understood as philosophical) in parallel with one another, rather than to rely upon and continually press one argument that he believes will finally convince us of his cause. Many of Rorty’s arguments against the realist vocabulary of truth are distinctly non-philosophical in the sense that they do not rest upon the claim that that vocabulary gets something wrong about the nature of truth. Rorty describes the nature of his claim to ‘drop the idea of truth’ in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, for example, thus:

*To say that we should drop the idea of truth as out there waiting to be discovered is not to say that we have discovered that, out there, there is no truth. It is to say that our purposes would be served best by ceasing to see truth as a deep matter, as a topic of philosophical interest, or ‘true’ as a term which repays ‘analysis’. ‘The nature of truth’ is an unprofitable topic, resembling in this respect ‘the nature of man’ and ‘the nature of God’, and differing from ‘the nature of the positron’ and ‘the nature of Oedipal fixation’. But this claim about relative profitability, in turn, is just the recommendation that we in fact say little about these topics, and see how we get on.*
An example of one of these ‘purposes’ that Rorty certainly believes would be best served by abandoning the realist vocabulary is politics, specifically liberal politics. The way in which I introduced Rorty at the beginning of this article was as someone who believes that we should abandon the realist vocabulary of truth because it is detrimental to liberal politics. When making this case, Rorty’s reason for abandoning the realist vocabulary is not that it is, in some sense, philosophically erroneous but that liberal politics would benefit if we were to do so. In these instances, the political reasons that Rorty offers for abandoning the realist vocabulary of truth are both independent of and have priority over philosophical reasons for wanting to do so.

Even though Williams prioritises the indistinguishability argument as Rorty’s main argument against the realist vocabulary, it would be wrong to think that it is open to Rorty to simply switch tactic and rely on this political argument instead in order to deflect Williams’ central criticism. For what Williams is trying to press Rorty on is the fact that lacking a concern for the realist idea of truth as a matter of accurately describing reality makes a detrimental difference to liberal politics. Because Rorty lacks a concern for a specifically realist account of truth he has no regard for the way ‘things are’ and therefore no interest in ‘getting things right’ according to the criteria of that realist vocabulary. As such, Rorty’s position cannot sustain the virtue of accuracy and the political benefits that come with it. Whereas Rorty thinks that we have good reason to think that liberal politics would benefit from abandoning the realist vocabulary of truth, Williams thinks we have good reason to think the opposite, because if the truth is not the point towards which we orientate ourselves we lose the virtue of accuracy and the anti-tyrannical benefits that come with that.

At this point the Rortian pragmatist can make one of two responses, the first of which I take to be Rorty’s own position and the second at least Rortian in spirit: On the one hand they could disagree with Williams that accuracy is a politically beneficial virtue at all and argue that therefore their abandoning the realist vocabulary does not have detrimental effects on liberal politics. Or they could try and show how they can sustain the virtue of accuracy, and therefore have access to its political benefits, in a way that is compatible with their Rortian pragmatism. In the next section I want to argue that we should accept Williams’ point that the idea of realism is important to liberal politics. Then in the section that follows I will suggest that there is a form of realism available to us which allows for the virtue of accuracy yet does not require us to accept realist metaphysics, a form of realism that the Rortian pragmatist would be able to accept.

III. Truth, liberalism, and power

I want to suggest that at the heart of political criticisms of Rorty’s abandonment of the realist vocabulary of truth offered by critics such as
Williams is the worry that it results in the standards of justification for our beliefs becoming flexible and open to alteration for reasons other than that they do not deliver accurate beliefs about the way the world is. Having turned his back on the notion that reality, in some sense, determines which of our beliefs are true or not, Rorty openly embraces the idea that our standards of justification are themselves human creations and, therefore, open to change and amendment in the future. Yet if this is the case then it opens the possibility that those standards, and therefore our beliefs themselves, can be controlled or manipulated by those with power in order to suit their own purposes or goals. As such, Rorty cannot distinguish between standards of justification that have been affected by the use of power or influence by those who would benefit from us holding certain beliefs and not others and those that have not. By making the standards of justification contingent human creations, Rorty opens the door to those standards being pressed upon and influenced by the use of power in order that our beliefs are more complimentary and favourable to the goals and purposes of those wielding that power.

An advantage of the realist vocabulary is that it provides a way of saying that reality justifies our beliefs, a reality or ‘order of things’ that acts as a standard against which we can decide which of our beliefs are true that is beyond the control of everyone regardless of the power they wield or the fact that some might wish reality was other than it is in order to further their own political ends. The political benefit of the realist vocabulary of truth is that it tells us that the justificatory standards of our beliefs are such that they cannot be altered by the use of power. Without this sort of static and unassailable model of justification we invite the possibility that power can bear upon which of our beliefs are true or not. Without reality as the determinate of our beliefs, we invite the possibility that power and the will of others becomes the thing that determines them.

So whereas the Rortian pragmatist asks ‘Your beliefs are justified – why do you want more than that?’ the response that those who share Williams’ political worries about the abandonment of the realist vocabulary will give is that ‘I want my beliefs to be justified by the way the world is so that I know that those beliefs have not been distorted or manipulated by political power in order to further the ends of others’. At the nub of the political objections to Rorty’s wholesale rejection of the realist vocabulary of truth, I want to suggest, is this inability to distinguish between beliefs that have been influenced or manipulated by the use of political power and those that have not.

Undoubtedly the most poignant and distressing reminder of the possible consequences of abandoning the realist vocabulary of truth is George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In that book the Party has altered the justificatory standards of the people of Oceania so that what counts as true is what the Party wants them to believe is true. Yet we need not go to the
apocalyptic extremes of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to understand this concern about abandoning the realist vocabulary. Many commentators, both philosophical and political, have tried to draw our attention to the ways in which our beliefs are structured or determined by external forces in order to further the agendas of others. The Marxist traditions emphasise the hegemony of capitalism and the ways in which it structures our beliefs, legitimating its own discourse through convincing us that it is ‘natural’ or ‘inevitable’. A central theme of post-modernism is the criticism of the dominance of a discourse or a meta-narrative that structures our beliefs in exactly the same way that the Party uses Newspeak to control what its people can actually think and so say (as Symes says “the Revolution will be complete when the language is perfect”).49 Similar criticisms are made at the less philosophical level, when we are reminded of the powerful role that the media plays in influencing our beliefs, a concern made more acute by the fact that most of the media is controlled by only a handful of people who each have their own political agenda. It is true that we speak of wanting to ‘know the truth’ behind the headlines and that, of the less cynical among us, many still believe in the commonsense scepticism of journalists as honest truth-tellers with no political motivations. But if Rorty is right, everything is up for grabs. Our beliefs about what is true, journalists’ beliefs about what is true, can readily be altered in order to maintain institutionalised falsehood.

I think that this is at the nub of Williams’ political criticism of Rorty’s abandonment of the realist vocabulary and that it is a valid political concern about the consequences of rejecting the realist vocabulary of truth. Importantly I think it illustrates that there is a positive and beneficial relationship between the realist vocabulary of truth and liberal politics. If this is right then it is something that Rorty needs to take seriously on his own terms, for, as we saw earlier, political reasons for wanting to abandon the realist vocabulary of truth are both independent of and prior to philosophical reasons for wanting to do so. Though Rorty thought that these reasons are to do with the detrimental effects that the realist vocabulary has on liberal politics, if, as I am suggesting here, the opposite is true and there is indeed an important positive relationship between them then the Rortian pragmatist is compelled by his own reasoning to accept that we must retain rather than abandon that vocabulary.

So what I have argued here is that the realist vocabulary of truth is indeed important and relevant to liberal politics insofar as it enables the virtue of accuracy and ensures that our standards of justification are unaffected by power. As such, and given that Rorty prioritises political over philosophical reasons for adopting or abandoning certain vocabularies, a Rortian pragmatist should want to maintain rather than abandon the realist vocabulary. But the question is whether the acceptance of the realist vocabulary of truth undermines Rorty’s pragmatism, and especially the pragmatist commitment to avoiding realist metaphysics. Is there a way in
which the acceptance of the realist vocabulary can be made compatible with Rorty’s pragmatism? In the next section I want to suggest that there is a form of realism available that will deliver the political benefits of realism without necessitating the acceptance of realist metaphysics. I propose not only that the Rortian pragmatist should accept this, but that they can do so in a way that is consistent with their pragmatism.

IV. Humdrum realism

In his book *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity*, Gary Gutting suggests that the Rortian pragmatist should subscribe to what he calls a ‘humdrum realism’ in order to bypass the criticisms of Rorty’s philosophical position on truth and realism made by people like Charles Taylor. I want to use this notion of ‘humdrum realism’ in a way that is different from Gutting’s own use of it, but I hope complementary.

Gutting develops humdrum realism via a discussion of a criticism of Rorty made by Charles Taylor. Unimpressed by Rorty’s ambivalence about the nature of reality (Rorty says at one time that “common-sense physical entities objectively exist independently of the mental” and at others that when we talk of ‘hard facts’ such as a piece of litmus paper turning blue, “The hardness of fact … is simply the hardness of previous agreements within a community about the consequences of a certain event”), Taylor suggests that we just do begin all inquiries from a realist standpoint. Taking from Heidegger the notion of ‘being-in-the-world’, Taylor believes that, as beings in this world, we are already in cognitive contact with objects independent of us. We know not only that there is a world independent of us but many things about it. There is no epistemological gap at this level of inquiry. Our cognitive contact with the world does not provide us with any thick theoretical account of our knowledge of it, but it does provide us with certain commonplaces. It provides us with humdrum truths. As Gutting says, endorsing Taylor, “We can and must subscribe to all the commonplaces: we know truths, many truths are about the world, such truths tell us the way the world is, and so on”.

This is humdrum realism and it is clearly very similar to the content and structure of the realist position that Williams adopts in *Truth and Truthfulness*. For not only would the sort of truths that we would accept on the basis of humdrum realism be the sort of ‘everyday’ truths that Williams defends (e.g. that there is an external world and that we know many things about it) but in both instances it is the world that justifies beliefs as true. According to humdrum realism, P is true because it is an accurate description of the world. It provides true propositions or beliefs about the world which everybody knows to be true and only the most fantastical philosophical scepticism could ever make us doubt that it is so. Being a form of realism, which makes the world, reality, or the ‘order of
things’ the standard of justification for our beliefs, humdrum realism has the potential to overcome the criticism that if our standards of justification are man-made then they can be manipulated by power to further political ends. While Rorty’s pragmatist theory of truth insists that ‘P is true because we agree that P meets our contemporary standards of justification’, which gives rise to the problems highlighted in the previous section, humdrum realism states that ‘P is true if P is an accurate description of the way the world is’. There is no room for the manipulation of humdrum realism’s standards of justification.

The interesting and important question is, of course, whether Rorty could consistently adopt humdrum realism while still rejecting realist metaphysics. The central benefit of humdrum realism, over any other form of realism in this sense, is that it is philosophically thin in neither presupposing nor requiring commitment to any realist metaphysics and it is this facet which makes it particularly suitable for Rorty’s purposes. As Gutting puts it,

We are, from the beginning, in cognitive contact with objects independent of us, not only knowing that there is such a world, but also knowing many specific things about it. However, this baseline knowledge of the world is simply a matter of knowing certain commonplaces, not of having any theoretical account of this knowledge – in terms, for example, of representations. 55

The ‘humdrum’ nature of this form of realism means that we, to reference Rawls, stay on the surface, philosophically speaking, and are not obliged to accept the sort of realist metaphysics that Rorty wants to avoid. We do not need to accept, for example, anything so metaphysically ‘thick’ as that the truths that humdrum realism provides represent ‘the intrinsic nature of reality’ or get to the ‘essence’ of reality. Humdrum realism requires us to accept no more than that there are commonsense truths about the world and that we unproblematically know many of them. Its appeal lies in the fact that it allows us to retain many commonsense truths without having to provide a philosophically sophisticated justification for them beyond saying ‘that is how the world is’.

Because humdrum realism can be both endorsed and defended without requiring the adoption of realist metaphysics, this makes it a form of realism that the Rortian pragmatist could accept. Rorty’s problem with realism has always been (and as I stated earlier in the article, the metaphysical beliefs which he upholds go hand in hand with it) beliefs which he takes to have detrimental political consequences. What I am suggesting in this article is that realism has political benefits and that those benefits can be realised without having to accept realist metaphysics. Humdrum realism alleviates the political concerns that Rorty’s abandonment of the realist vocabulary has given rise to by shoring up the realist standards of justification (i.e.
reality) without requiring the metaphysical commitments that have always been Rorty’s real concern.

However, the fact that humdrum realism delivers the political benefits of realism without requiring the commitment to realist metaphysics also suggests a broader conclusion: there is an important and positive relationship between truth – specifically the realist understanding of truth – and liberal politics, though it is one that can be sustained without us necessarily having to accept realist metaphysics. This is to say that there is nothing incompatible with a metaphysically thick realism of the sort that Rorty wishes to avoid and liberal politics, in the sense that it would also insulate our standards of justification for certain commonplace truths from the manipulation of power. If my suggestion that humdrum realism would do the same job is right, this tells us not that we need to accept humdrum realism in order to have the political benefits of the realist vocabulary but that we need not necessarily accept realist metaphysics in order to enjoy those benefits.

But humdrum realism only gets us so far and we should be aware of its limits. Importantly, we should be aware that humdrum realism does not purport to extend to moral, political or religious beliefs. Though our commitment to particular moral beliefs such as ‘Thou shalt not kill’ is unlikely to be undermined by philosophical scepticism, we cannot defend that belief on the basis that it is a commonsense truth of the world. For in order for this move to work we would have to say that moral values are, in some sense, part of the world and this is a much more controversial move about the nature of reality than humdrum realism would countenance. Though the rhetoric of this move is superficially similar – ‘we know that the dictate ‘Murder is wrong’ is true and it is only the philosophers who would question this’ – as soon as we penetrate this surface, it very quickly becomes problematic in a way that our humdrum realism does not. At the crudest level, if we were to respond to this sort of statement by pointing to a society, past or present, in which killing is not wrong, what is going to settle this dispute is not the world. If our interlocutor responded with ‘Well they are wrong’ we have already crept into murkier waters, for what exactly have they got wrong? It doesn’t look like they have got the world wrong. It is not clear that we can stay on the surface long enough to endorse any sort of humdrum realism about moral or political beliefs.

This limit to humdrum realism may look initially disappointing for if we were to extend it to certain moral beliefs that most of us take to be commonsensical, such as that all human beings are to be treated as free and equal regardless of their gender, race, ethnicity, etc. then humdrum realism might be able to underwrite fundamentally liberal political institutions. Limiting humdrum realism in this way surely empties it of any actual normative significance when it comes to justifying certain political institutions over others. That is no doubt true. But then again, Williams’
argument was not that realism could be used to justify liberal institutions and that Rorty’s anti-foundationalism is politically dangerous because it denies us access to that justification. His claim was rather that consequences for our liberal political institutions and practices follow from abandoning the realist idea of truth. I have elaborated upon that claim to argue that there are potential harmful consequences for liberal institutions if the standards for the justification of our beliefs can be the subject of manipulation by those with the power to do so to further their own political agendas. The claim was never that realism justifies liberalism but that there are some features of the realist idea of truth which provide important defences for liberal institutions and practices and which should make us think very hard before abandoning it. Insofar as humdrum realism is a form of realism that stabilises our justificatory norms (and fosters the virtue of accuracy), even if it only delivers us truths about the hardness of rocks or the wetness of water, the idea that the world justifies true beliefs is one with important political consequences.

V. Conclusion

What I have been examining in this article is the relationship between truth and liberal politics via the positions of Bernard Williams and Richard Rorty. What I have suggested is that Williams is right to think that there is a positive relationship between truth and liberal politics, specifically that a concern for truth fosters the virtue of accuracy, which cannot be sustained if we abandon the realist vocabulary of truth. At the nub of the worry about Rorty’s abandonment of the realist vocabulary of truth is that it allows for the possibility that the standards of justification for our beliefs can be pressed upon and manipulated by those with the power to do so in order to further their own ends or goals. The benefit of realism is that its standard of justification – reality, the world, or the ‘order of things’ – is beyond the reach of political power. Even those with a complete monopoly on power cannot change this, no matter how much they wish it were other than it is. However, I have suggested that humdrum realism offers us a form of realism that can sustain the political benefits of realism without requiring us to commit to realist metaphysics and, as such, is a form of realism that Rorty can accept without undermining his pragmatism. More generally, I have suggested that there is an important positive relationship between truth – specifically the realist vocabulary of truth – and liberal politics, though it is a relationship that can be maintained without having to accept realist metaphysics.

Notes

2. Ibid., p. 2.
I have chosen to use ‘the realist vocabulary of truth’ to describe what Rorty wants to abandon for a number of important reasons. First of all, to talk in terms of ‘vocabularies’ is consistent with much of Rorty’s work, especially Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity. Second, Rorty seems to think that realist metaphysics and the correspondence theory of truth are equivalent, or, at least, that they go hand in hand. This is a far from uncontroversial linkage, but nevertheless what is important about it is that Rorty’s problem with the correspondence theory stems from its relation to realist metaphysics (correspondence to ‘the way things really are’ or ‘the thing in itself’). Thus Rorty’s desire to abandon the correspondence theory of truth is, as he understands it, (and for the sake of this article I shall follow him) a consequence of the abandonment of realist metaphysics. It seems right, therefore, to emphasise the realist element of what Rorty wants to abandon. Finally, as we shall see, it will make more sense in examining Williams’ criticism of Rorty in terms of his abandonment of the realist vocabulary rather than the correspondence theory of truth or even realist metaphysics. The comparison between their respective positions will be easier if we try to understand those positions using terms that they use in common, even if they have different understandings of what realism is. I have tried to capture these considerations in the term ‘the realist vocabulary of truth’.


See especially, Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity.


Rorty R. Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity p. 67.

Williams, Truth and Truthfulness p. 63.

ibid., p. 65.

ibid., p. 136.

ibid., p. 140.

ibid., p. 136.

ibid., p. 125.

ibid., p. 9.

ibid., p. 10.

ibid., p. 10.

ibid., p. 10.

ibid., p. 11.

ibid., p. 11.

27. Williams, B. *Truth and Truthfulness* p. 127.
28. ibid., p. 207–208.
29. ibid., p. 127.
30. ibid., p. 71.
31. ibid., p. 80.
32. Ibid., p. 73.
33. Ibid., p. 75.
34. Ibid., p. 207. See also Williams, B. ‘Truth, Politics, and Self-Deception’ p. 157.
36. Ibid., p. 75.
39. Though if this were right it would mean that the pragmatist could also not possess the vice of insincerity because neither does he assert what he knows is false.
40. Williams, B. *Truth and Truthfulness* p. 125.
41. Ibid., p. 133.
42. Ibid., p. 127.
45. Ibid., p. 127.
46. Ibid., p. 128.
47. Ibid., p. 135.
51. The next paragraph is a summary of Gutting, op. cit., p. 31.
54. Gutting, p. 31.
55. Ibid., p. 31.