

“MAKING EDUCATION POSSIBLE AGAIN”: PRAGMATIST EXPERIMENTS FOR A TROUBLED AND DOWN-TO-EARTH PEDAGOGY

Bianca Thoilliez

Department of Pedagogy
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

ABSTRACT. In this article, Bianca Thoilliez draws on pragmatist notions of fallibilism and pluralism to develop proposals for possible educational interventions to address the problem of “post-truth” conditions. Post-truth, she contends, is not only a political danger for liberal democracies, but it also poses a serious threat of extinction for our educational practices. With the help of some of Bruno Latour’s and Danna Haraway’s categories, and with the narrative intervention of Gerald Durrell’s *My Family and Other Animals*, Thoilliez attempts to adapt both Charles Peirce’s and William James’s classic pragmatist ideas in order to experiment with new horizons of thought capable of overcoming the exhausted pedagogical divides of docility/indocility, conserve/discard, and optimism/pessimism that often seem woven into the definition of educational relationships, the establishment of curriculum content, and the orientation of pedagogical actions. As an alternative, she recommends building communitarian alliances of fallibilistic inquiry and promoting practices of pluralistic cultural provision as more useful educational ends-in-view that embody a down-to-earth pedagogy capable of reinstating trust, taking care of truths, looking for ways of keeping our lives together, and making education possible again. Thus, here Thoilliez proposes a pedagogy that neither fixes nor evades our troubles, but one that stays with them.

KEY WORDS. post-truth; education; pragmatism; fallibilism; pluralism

FROM EMOTIONAL POLITICS TO A POST-TRUTH WORLD

Bruno Latour’s essay *Down to Earth* pointed at Donald Trump’s election as president of the United States in 2016 as the peak of a steady move, starting from the 1980s, by which the ruling classes have been withdrawing from public leadership and the idea of a common good. Accompanied by globalized deregulation, soaring inequalities, and a strong denial of climate change, this move eloquently started with a realization “that the earth no longer had room enough for them and for everyone else.”¹ While many were shocked by the American people’s choice in 2016, some looked for those who saw it coming. As some critics recently explained,² one of those who did was Richard Rorty: “All the resentment which badly educated Americans feel about having their manners dictated to them by college graduates will find an outlet.”³ And apparently, they have. Emotions have replaced reasons in our public discussions about how we should live. In this context, social media algorithms (based on an individual’s connection and

1. Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2018), 1.

2. Wojciech Małecki and John Giordano, “Rorty and American Politics Today: Introduction,” *Pragmatism Today* 10, no. 1 (2019): 5–8.

3. Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 90.

engagement, or content interactions and social relevance) are heating up and intensifying people's engagements in/with the world. We have seen presidential advisers moving from whispering, "It's the economy, stupid!" to muttering "It's the (stupid) emotions!" Emotions can be highly variable, which may be useful for short-term, poll-based strategic political decisions, but very bad for other relevant social practices that bind us together and make it possible for us to get along. The possibilities of thinking with/in/about information dwindle as the loops of likes and dislikes, loves and unloves, follows and unfollows, shares and unshares grow. The multiplication of multisource available data has not brought with it the Deweyan promised land of a growing democracy filled with a well-informed public and freer citizens,⁴ but instead the progressive suspension of thinking practices⁵ so thoroughly characterized by Hannah Arendt.⁶ Confronted with the difficulty of determining the trustworthiness of information, many are left to reacting to information emotionally. This does not just pose a serious political danger for liberal democracies, but, as we shall see, a dangerous threat of extinction of our educational practices.

Post-truth can be defined as an assertion of ideological supremacy with which to convince someone about something without much regard for the available evidence.⁷ Knowing what the truth is may cause split opinions, but it should not stop mattering to us; we should both individually and collectively care about truths by taking care of their being sought. The rejection of scientifically founded facts such as the theory of evolution as a way of favoring a literal reading of the Book of Genesis to explain the origin of the world and its different species; the movement of families against vaccination under the guise of worldwide plots to enrich the

4. In a previous work I explored the role of "experts" and "expert knowledge" as a not-so-unproblematic solution for informing public debates, reading from the Dewey-Lippmann debate and the particular role international organizations are playing in the dictation of the present and the future of many educational systems around the world. See Bianca Thoilliez, "El papel de los organismos internacionales (y de sus expertos, asesores y consultores) en la des-democratización de las políticas educativas" [The Role of International Organizations (and Their Experts, Advisers and Consultants) in the De-Democratization of Educational Policies], in *Calidad de la Educación en Iberoamérica: Discursos, políticas y prácticas*, ed. Héctor Monarca (Madrid, Spain: Dykinson, 2018), translation by author.

5. Paul Standish and Bianca Thoilliez, "Critical Thinking in Crisis: A Pedagogical Reconsideration in Three Movements," *Teoría de la Educación. Revista Interuniversitaria* 30, no. 2 (2018): 7–22.

6. "Thinking is a dangerous practice, but a necessary one" (Richard J. Bernstein, *Ironic Life* [Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2016], 121–122). "Suspending thinking is dreadfully dangerous option, 'think we must'" (Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in Chthulucene* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press], 36).

7. See Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), and *On Truth* (New York: Random House, 2006). See as well Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).

BIANCA THOILLIEZ is Assistant Professor in the Department of Pedagogy at Universidad Autónoma de Madrid; e-mail <bianca.thoilliez@uam.es>. Her primary areas of scholarship are the study of traditions and vanguards of educational thought (with special focus on American philosophy), teaching and teacher education, and cross-national curriculum policies.

pharmaceutical lobby or unfounded fears about childhood autism; or the denial of a climate emergency by claiming that the planet warms up as part of normal geological cycles the Earth has already been through are a few examples of how widespread — and damaging — the post-truth culture is. The rise in both left- and right-wing populisms and their subsequent threats to democracies are very real, and to many are attributable to postmodern relativism: a variety of populisms are borrowing the idea that there are no objective facts, only interpretations, and thereby attacking scientific truths, well-functioning established institutions, or proven causes of social phenomena as means for advancing their political projects (which are very different from those that relativist philosophers were trying to put forward).⁸ An apparent dismissal of truth, which may be better portrayed as a corrosive decline in the credibility and status of institutions that undergird our faith in truth, that is, in human abilities to make sense of our world, of imagining different and better means for living together, or of taking care of our collective seeking of truths.

For years, Rorty tried to defend himself from accusations of relativism. When Rorty advocated a post-philosophic culture (with a small "p"), he was defending the role and value of narratives to move forward in a new way of developing politically edifying re-descriptions of our own selves and our shared life projects.⁹ Indeed, it is interesting that critical discussion about the determination of truths in political rivalry started in the professional environment of journalism.¹⁰ Communication theorists are finding new resources in the very much worldly philosophical vocabularies of Rorty and Donna Haraway to rethink truthfulness within the practices of journalism.¹¹ Making use of Rorty's ideas, some are finding ways to socially justify how useful it can be to write "detailed descriptions of particular varieties of pain and humiliation,"¹² and by approaching Haraway's works others are exploring how

8. Mauricio Ferraris explains the unexpected and paradoxical political effects of philosophical relativism in a highly ironical and passionate way in his *Manifesto of New Realism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014). Joan García del Muro points to Gianni Vattimo's *Addio alla verità*, as the seminal cause of the present post-truth era. See 'Good bye', *verdad. Una aproximación a la posverdad* ['Goodbye', Truth: An Approach to Post-Truth] (Lleida, Spain: Milenio, 2019).

9. See Bianca Thoilliez, "Hope and Education Beyond Critique: Towards Pedagogy with a Lower Case 'p'," *Ethics and Education* 14, no. 4 (2019): 453–466.

10. The archeology of the journalist discussion on the post-truth politics is brilliantly summarized and documented in great detail by García del Muro, 'Good bye', *verdad*, 17. The debate was inaugurated by Katharine Viner, "How Technology Disrupted the Truth," *The Guardian*, July 12, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/jul/12/how-technology-disrupted-the-truth>.

11. See David Bell, *Cyberculture Theorists: Manuel Castells and Donna Haraway* (London: Routledge, 2007); Candis Callison and Mary Lynn Young, *Reckoning: Journalism's Limits and Possibilities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); James E. Ettema, "The Moment of Truthiness: The Right Time to Consider the Meaning of Truthfulness," in *The Changing Faces of Journalism: Tabloidization, Technology, and Truthiness*, ed. Barbie Zelizer (New York: Routledge, 2009); and Steven Maras, *Objectivism in Journalism* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013).

12. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 92.

the journalist as a manly “modest witness” could be queered¹³ by SF storytelling practices of “science fiction” and “speculative fabulation.”¹⁴ I take these connections as promising tokens for the forthcoming pragmatist experiments this paper will try out.¹⁵

POST-TRUTH AS A UNIQUE PEDAGOGICAL CHALLENGE AND THE PRAGMATIST PILL

Post-truth does not only pose a challenge to liberal democracies and the work of journalism, but also to education, and in a unique way. The political dimension of the post-truth problem is widely acknowledged and is being hotly argued, but here I am mainly interested in its pedagogical dimension. Considerable thought needs to be given to the obstacles to teaching and education brought about by living in a world where the effects of post-truth spread everywhere. This is because some mutual trust is required for any form of education to happen, but what we are experiencing in this post-truth era is the expansion of distrusting attitudes that disengage people from the world.

Although post-truth populisms are a fundamental social, political, and educational challenge of our current time, their philosophical underpinnings¹⁶ can be traced back to the theses featured by Descartes in his *Discourse on Method* first, and then later in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*.¹⁷ The intellectual path Descartes himself says he took can also be read as an unusual process of self-educational transformation by means of a progressively totalizing mistrust. Descartes decided what he wanted to think, on his own, breaking away from everything inherited. He decided what things were certainties that were beyond doubt and what others were potentially deceptive falsehoods provoked by our highly unreliable senses. He rejected his legacy, shunned his masters, and distrusted all his senses, dividing the action of thinking and settling into a radical skepticism of hyperbolic doubt. Post-truth is also the offspring of this Cartesian original sin of mistrust. It is at this point that classical pragmatism becomes a promising ally in the questioning of the Cartesian

13. Donna J. Haraway, *Modest – Witness@Second – Millennium.FemaleMan – Meets – OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 23–24.

14. See, Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 2–3.

15. This paper shares its experimental nature with two previous articles where I tried to grow some Deweyan ideas out of Axel Honneth (Bianca Thoilliez, “Dewey in Transition: Towards a Pragmatist Ethics of Recognition in Schools,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 53, no. 4 [2019]: 453–466) and Richard Sennet (Bianca Thoilliez, “Vindication of the School as a Fostering Space for Democratic Experiences: Conceptual Approach to Moral Practices of Recognition and Respect,” *Educación XX1* 22, no. 1 [2019]: 295–314). However, this time, the experiments take place in quite different territory.

16. François-Xavier Bellamy, *Les déshérités ou l'urgence de transmettre* [The Dispossessed, or the Urgency to Transmit] (Paris, France: Plon, 2014).

17. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method; and, Meditations on First Philosophy* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1993).

tradition,¹⁸ since one of its main features is in fact its anti-Cartesianism, as we shall see.

The contemporary exacerbation of Cartesian theses (doubting our senses and inherited tales, trusting only to an isolated consciousness that decides among certainties of lies) poses problems of possibility in education. It is as if (taking Haraway's visual metaphor of string figures¹⁹) three string knots that have always been part of any pedagogical composition were being stretched until they snap; as if (using Latour's idea of poles of attraction²⁰) three poles of attraction that shaped the canonical schema of the pedagogue's orientation were intensifying their gravitational forces to the point of exclusive collapse. Those three endangered string knots/poles of attraction are the following: (1) docility/indocility within the educational relationship (there are neither teachers nor students); (2) conserving/discarding curriculum contents (minds are not cultured, information is searched for on internet); and (3) pedagogical optimism/pessimism (class time is therapeutic or for entertainment, we neither study anything together nor think anything together).

So, in this pedagogic and apocalyptic wasteland, what can be done? As Bruno Latour recently stated, "L'apocalypse, c'est enthousiasmant" because it is a situation that frees us from fake hopes, while pushing us to "se mettre au boulot!" ("get to work").²¹ So that is what I propose to do here, too: to make a very pragmatist move, one Richard Bernstein recently summarized nicely as follows: "I think the pragmatic response when things get bad has to be; 'Well, what's to be done?' and not think about giving up hope."²²

What is needed is to find new balances that could make education possible in a world shaken by a post-truth climate, by "out-of-this-world attractors."²³ This would require the concourse of new "down to earth attractors" that we

18. Bellamy (*Les déshérités ou l'urgence de transmettre*) provides a very insightful discussion of the pedagogical challenges derived from the Cartesian project of building an exact and certain knowledge, one that involves ridding oneself of the silt of tradition and replacing it with the ordered work of individual reason. These challenges can be summed up in the two following points: (1) investment is made in the role of teachers and their relationship with learners, their missing being to propose a method to help the learners preserve their natural reason, to teach them how doubt works as the utmost expression of critical spirit; and (2) culture is no longer a path to discovery or development but, rather, is a cause for not knowing oneself (culture turns people into vines instead of trees), an oppression to be shed, a legacy forced upon their conscience and to be gotten rid of as quickly as possible.

19. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 14 and 30–57.

20. Latour, *Down to Earth*.

21. Bruno Latour and Jean Birnbaum, "Bruno Latour: «L'apocalypse, c'est enthousiasmant»" [Bruno Latour: 'The Apocalypse Is Exciting'], *Le Monde*, May 31, 2019, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2019/05/31/bruno-latour-l-apocalypse-c-est-enthousiasmant_5469678_3232.html (translation by author).

22. Richard J. Bernstein and Pádraig Hogan, "Ironies, Virtues, and Educational Hopes: Richard J. Bernstein in Conversation with Pádraig Hogan," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 52, no. 1 (2018): 9.

23. Latour, *Down to Earth*, 38–40.

only make note of for now, but for which a set of pragmatist-based dispositions will be shown to be helpful. This insistence on the need of finding new balances comes from the realization that seeking the “restoration” of the pre-existing ones may not be the best way out. “Restoration” could have been a possible proposal, but as Bruno Latour rightly points out that: “There is nothing, in any case, that authorizes us to re-use the old markers such as ‘Right’ and ‘Left,’ ‘liberation,’ ‘emancipation,’ ‘market forces.’” He insists that everything should be “mapped out anew, at new costs,” this being “an urgent task that must be carried out before the sleepwalkers, in their blind headlong rush forward, have crushed what we care about.”²⁴ Although in the “old markers” I could identify myself as conservative, and although I believe there are arguments to uphold this position, I recognize that a simple conservative defense of the world and of education²⁵ is insufficient to save what I find valuable in a world that is surely and seriously under threat. Attentive observation of the world around us, of the increasingly polarized reactions provoked by the left/right and conservative/liberal divides (divides which we see in our classrooms as well) should make us suspicious of any proposal to reconstruct the playing field in which living and thinking cannot mean (because it would never happen otherwise) affirming some people’s vocabularies and negating those of the others. What is needed is to propose something made up of/by/with an alternative vocabulary. This was also suggested in one of Haraway’s brilliant earlier pieces:

Relativism is the perfect mirror twin of totalization in the ideologies of objectivity; both deny the stakes in location, embodiment, and partial perspective; both make it impossible to see well. Relativism and totalization are both “god tricks” promising vision from everywhere and nowhere equally and fully, common myths in rhetorics surrounding Science. But it is precisely in the politics and epistemology of partial perspectives that the possibility of sustained, rational, objective inquiry rests.²⁶

The pedagogical down-to-earth attractors I am thinking of as feasible for making education possible again, for rebalancing our educational practices of truth’s care-taking, and that I will be pushing forward in this paper are, first, alliances of inquiry, and second, cultural provisioning.

If we claim that there is a post-critical pedagogical space²⁷ that needs to be preserved from political aspirations, then we will also need to work on proposing

24. Ibid., 33.

25. See Gregorio Luri, *La imaginación conservadora. Una defensa apasionada de las ideas que han hecho del mundo un lugar mejor* [The Conservative Imagination: A Passionate Defense of the Ideas that Have Made the World a Better Place] (Barcelona, Spain: Ariel, 2019); and Roger Scruton, *Cómo ser conservador* [How to Be a Conservative] (Madrid, Spain: Homo Legens, 2020).

26. Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 544.

27. See Naomi Hodgson, Joris Vlieghe, and Piotr Zamojski, *Manifiesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy* (London: Punctum Books, 2017); “Education and the Love for the World: Articulating a Post-Critical Educational Philosophy,” *Foro de Educación* 16, no. 24 (2018): 7–20; and “Manifestations of the Post-Critical: From Shared Principles to New Pedagogical Paths,” *Teoría de la Educación. Revista Interuniversitaria* 32, no. 2 (2020): 13–23.

a space of distinctly educational reasons for addressing the nonpolitical dimension of the post-truth problem. From this perspective, a liberal account of the situation that stresses the role of social media and the discrediting of truth-guarantor institutions is insufficient to make the sort of pedagogical move this post-truth context demands. Thus, a more radical account is needed, one that sees post-truth as an issue of trust, of an expansive unwillingness to engage in conversations with others. We must think of answers to post-truth conditions that are educational rather than political. There is no need to create Ministries of Truth or to hire global fact-checking companies. There is no need to overthrow the Zuckerberg Galaxy in order to reinstate a traditional Gutenberg Galaxy, or to have state police against misinformation,²⁸ or to adopt any subjectivizing post-censorship practices.²⁹ Rather, there is a need to value truths over falsehoods, to share in the fallible quests for them; in the open, attentive, and plural study of problems; in the cultivation of a committed trust in the world; and in our efforts of learning to live and work with our troubles (or, in Haraway's wording, staying with the trouble³⁰) instead of using education to try to solve or fix our troubles. Staying and working with the trouble rather than resisting, transforming, or changing the trouble, is a "down-to-earth" post-truth pedagogy teachers would find possible to follow. It may be that other areas of social practice find it preferable to do something else, but as pedagogues, wherever we may be (in school rooms, at home, at the parks), we should concentrate on understanding the problem together and learning to live and think with it. Truth (with a capital 'T') may take care of itself, but truths (in the plural, as situated knowledges) require care and, most of all, trust. Pedagogically addressing the consequences of navigating post-truth times cannot only be a matter of epistemology (countering the false with the true), but also a practical challenge on how to take care of truths. Nothing proposed here aims to put an end to post-truth; my only encouragement is a vague social hope that, when up against communities that think, it will fade away. Therefore, from this pedagogical dimension, what counts are the words we think and use to propose to think: "It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories."³¹

28. I mean *bulos*, although there is no direct translation to English. "Bulo" means a falsehood being spread with some intention. The word "bulo" comes from the Caló word "bul," which means filth or dirt. Caló is a dialect spoken by the Spanish Romani communities in which an oral cultural practice of passing on has been historically dominant. Spreading rumors and gossiping are quite common methods to influence a community state of opinion toward anyone and anything. Nowadays the word "bulo" is used everywhere in Spain to indicate misinformation practices.

29. See Juan Soto Ivars, *Arden las redes: La postcensura y el nuevo mundo virtual* [Social Networks Burn Out: Post-Censorship and the New Virtual World] (Madrid, Spain: Debate, 2017), and "Por qué siguen ardiendo las redes" [Why Do Social Networks Keep Burning], *ETHIC*, October 23, 2019, <https://ethic.es/2021/04/por-que-siguen-ardiendo-las-redes/> (translation by author).

30. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

31. Donna Haraway, "SF: Science Fiction, Speculative Fabulation, String Figures, So Far," *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology* 3 (2013): <https://doi.org/10.7264/N3KH0K81>.

Fulfilling Rorty's invitation³² of developing a philosophy (and, as I already transposed elsewhere, a pedagogy³³) of detailed descriptions instead of a philosophy (and a pedagogy) of manuals and treatises,³⁴ I begin with a set of Haraway-inspired "speculative fabulations" based on Gerald Durrell's novel *My Family and Other Animals* with which to revisit some topics from the pragmatist tradition that I believe can help us make education possible again in times of post-truth. The two excerpts narrate different situations that may be qualified as educational (in an informally broad sense of the word) for illustrating where and how the pragmatist tradition can keep alive the crafting of hopeful futures which rely on ongoing dedicated careful acts of pedagogical string configurations.³⁵ These are narratives that may not reach the level of Latour's *Gaïa stories* or *Geostories*, but nevertheless reflect a relation with other species. I am unsure whether this attempt could be aligned as a readying act of living as Earthbound in the Anthropocene, though most probably not, since I must confess that for the most part I remain a reckless human living in the Holocene. This is, however, an attempt to practice educational speculations out of preexistent fabulations, the sort of storytelling that a pedagogue would mobilize to initiate others into practices of truth-caring and trust-reenactment. What follows is an invitation to displace us from the docility/indocility, conserve/discard, and optimism/pessimism divides, and move us toward practices of alliances of inquiry and cultural provisioning as valuable pedagogical tools for taking care of truths and creating new spaces for trust.

MAKING EDUCATION IN/THROUGH/WITH POST-TRUTH TIMES

FALLIBILISTIC PEDAGOGY: "I FEEL THAT IT'S MORE THAN PROBABLE THAT THAT IS WHAT THEY ARE. HOWEVER, I MAY BE MISTAKEN"

"Good evening," he greeted me. "From the joyful speed of your entry I take it that you have not come for a little extra tuition."

32. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*.

33. Thoilliez, "Hope and Education beyond Critique."

34. For a critical account of the limits of an "interweaving philosophical inquiry" based on literature, see Stefano Oliverio, "Dead-ending Philosophy? On Rorty's Literature Culture, Democratic Ethos and Political Education," *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (2020): <https://journals.openedition.org/ejpap/1897>.

35. This whole symposium issue shows the potential of the pragmatist tradition for imagining possible, alternative futures. The use I make of the pragmatist tradition in this article is closer to Lynda Stone's, Stefano Oliverio's, and Joris Vlieghe's contributions to this symposium. See Lynda Stone, "Pragmatisms' Generations: A Forewording of Philosophies for Democracy from One American Perspective," Stefano Oliverio, "Reconstructing Pragmatism in the New Climate Regime: Education after the Intrusion of Gaia," and Joris Vlieghe, "In the Lap of Collective Impotentiality: Reexamining a Pragmatic Account of Thinking through an Agambenian Lens," all in this issue. The articles by Oliverio and Vlieghe prove particularly well Dewey's timeliness; however, for the sake of the experimental ingredient of my own "pragmatist experiment," I have intentionally forced myself to rethink pragmatism by drawing on sources other than Dewey.

I apologized for the intrusion, and then told George about the curious nests I had found.

"Thank heavens you're here, Theodore," he said to his bearded companion. "I shall now be able to hand the problem over to expert hands."

"Hardly an expert ..." mumbled the man called Theodore, deprecatingly.

"Gerry, this is Doctor Theodore Stephanides," said George. "He is an expert on practically everything you care to mention. And what you don't mention, he does. He, like you, is an eccentric nature-lover. Theodore, this is Gerry Durrell."

I said how do you do, politely, but to my surprise the bearded man rose to his feet, stepped briskly across the room, and held out a large white hand.

"Very pleased to meet you," he said, apparently addressing his beard, and gave me a quick, shy glance from twinkling blue eyes. I shook his hand and said I was very pleased to meet him, too. Then we stood in awkward silence, while George watched us, grinning.

"Well, Theodore," he said at last, "and what d'you think produced these strange secret passages?"

Theodore clasped his hands behind his back, lifted himself on to his toes several times, his boots squeaking protestingly, and gravely considered the floor.

"Well ... er ..." he said, his words coming slowly and meticulously, "it sounds to me as though they might be the burrows of the trapdoor spider ... er ... it is a species which is quite common here in Corfu ... that is to say, when I say common, I suppose I have found some thirty or ... er ... forty specimens during the time I have been here."

"Ah," said George, "trapdoor spiders, eh?"

"Yes," said Theodore. "I feel that it's more than probable that that is what they are. However, I may be mistaken." He rose and fell on his toes, squeaking gently, and then he shot me a keen glance. "Perhaps, if they are not too far away, we could go and verify it," he suggested tentatively. "I mean to say, if you have nothing better to do, and it's not too far ..." ³⁶

Unable to answer Gerry's question, George invites Theodore to join in on the endeavor to discover what it is all about. Theodore shows himself to have a typically fallibilistic personality: a particular type of humbleness clothed as insecurity, precise knowledge but willing to put it to the test, and a generous disposition to sharing it. Gerry shows a committed interest in the world. George is an anti-authoritarian authority figure, sincerely equated with his young student by the question/problem he shares with him. It is a scene that expresses well what a Peircean fallibilistic pedagogy could consist of: an education that practices the principle that anything can be wrong and where procedures are trustfully shared to discover its veracity communally.

Fallibilism has been a methodological principle that has helped pragmatism develop a unique approach to philosophical problems. Among the classical pragmatists, Charles S. Peirce is probably the one who tried the hardest to explain what fallibilism is. Indeed, his work is one enormous fallibilistic exercise, making this the most suitable attitude with which to read his work. ³⁷ Of all his writings, those

36. Gerald Durrell, *My Family and Other Animals* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 58–59.

37. The characteristics of the philosophy profession are what lead philosophers to present us with deductive arguments and conceptual systems. For some, this is a mistake and can lead to incorrect interpretations; for others, it is merely the result of a life marked by a complicated personality

known as the “anti-Cartesian papers”³⁸ best define his position regarding fallibilism. As a whole they are “a sustained argument to show that the scientific way of making ideas clear and of fixing beliefs is quite different from the Cartesian way.”³⁹

Constructed by Peirce in opposition to the Cartesian tradition, this fallibilism is interpreted by some critics⁴⁰ as a fundamental element of continuity shared by the entire assorted pragmatist family. Peirce’s anti-Cartesianism is therefore made manifest in various arguments, two of which are of interest here: complete, radical doubt is not a good start for trying to elucidate the truth of things; and criteria of veracity must be established within parameters of intersubjective interaction. Beginning with the first argument, for Peirce, all knowledge starts on a basis of preconceived ideas, from which we can never completely free ourselves, and which at the same time constitute a starting point and offer a degree of orientation. Accordingly, the questioning of our own biases, the cognitive effort that leads us to preserve some and discard others, is not a starting point for certain knowledge as it is in the Cartesian project but, on the contrary, the uncertain aim that cognitive activity pursues. Consequently, we cannot rid ourselves of these biases by operating in a position of feigned doubtfulness.⁴¹ The argument is that, at the time of knowing, we cannot avoid the fact that we always start from a set of beliefs and biases that we take as unquestionable.⁴² Thought cannot proceed in the way proposed by Descartes, starting from a radical doubt.⁴³ With respect to

and dominated by erratic habits, making professional philosophers quasi-unpublished (incapable of organizing their work in a single volume) and chronically unemployed.

38. These papers were originally published in *Popular Science Monthly*; they have been reprinted in several volumes of *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931). The complete series, in order of their original dates of publication, features the following titles: Charles S. Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief” (1877), vol. 5, 358–387; “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” (1878), vol. 5, 388–410; “The Doctrine of Chances” (1878), vol. 2, 645–668; “The Probability of Induction” (1878), vol. 2, 669–693; “The Order of Nature” (1878), vol. 6, 395–427; and “Deduction, Induction, and Hypothesis” (1878), vol. 2, 619–644. The first three in the series are specifically known as Peirce’s “anti-Cartesian papers.”

39. Max H. Fisch, *Classic American Philosophers: Peirce, James, Royce, Santayana, Dewey, Whitehead* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1996), 20.

40. Richard, J. Bernstein, *The Pragmatic Turn* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2010), 33–52. Bernstein’s work on exploring Peirce’s Cartesianism is interesting in that it does not turn to the better-known and widely studied series of articles Peirce published in *Popular Science Monthly* (see note 38), but to another collection of three papers published a decade before in *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, which are reprinted in *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Hartshorne and Weiss: Charles S. Peirce, “Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man” (1868), vol. 5, 213–263; “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities” (1868), vol. 5, 264–317; and “Grounds of Validity of the Laws of Logic” (1869), vol. 5, 318–357.

41. See Peirce, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” 391.

42. See Peirce, “Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man,” 262.

43. See Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief,” 382. Peirce’s philosophy could thus be termed as antifoundationalist, if we understand foundationalism as the doctrine that claims the existence of truths that are not subject to revision.

the second argument, the Cartesian position is that only that of which we are clearly convinced (that which is presented to us as clear and distinct) can be considered true. Peirce affirms that being subjectively convinced of something can never be a sufficient criterion of its truth, since what we take for granted can turn out to be false. The emotional force of conviction is not a criterion of truth. In contrast to the subjectivism of Cartesian epistemology, Peirce proposes a redefinition of inquiry, knowledge, communication, and logic as activities that take place in an intersubjective social context. Peirce's idea of a community of inquirers is also related to the question of the role bias and preconceived ideas play in our possibilities of knowing. Only by submitting our prejudices, hypotheses, and assumptions to public judgment by the community of inquiry can we hope to escape our limited perspectives, test our beliefs, and contribute to the growth of knowledge. The realization of such an intersubjective community of truth seekers requires the assumption that all claims and assertions, including those we take for granted, must be open to review, debate, and, where appropriate, refutation and rejection.

If we take up again the meeting between Gerry, George, and Theodore, what happens there can be interpreted as the constitution of what I would like to call an alliance of communitarian inquiry, which arises and is articulated to try to solve a problem (in this case, some curious nests the young Nagel had found). I propose this description here as an example of what an affirmative education composed of community practices of fallibilistic pedagogy could look like. Such practices could act as "terrestrial attractors"⁴⁴ to overcome the tension of docility/indocility in which some educational discussions are today trapped and which, in any case, are not useful to respond pedagogically to contemporary challenges such as post-truth. The constitution of inquiry alliances between students and teachers, masters and disciples, or more and less experienced individuals, weaves a new series of "string figures,"⁴⁵ where one and the other intertwine new and unexpected knots that give an account of the work done on/through the troublesome situations we are confronted with, embracing the fallibility of the practices and the results of our community inquiry (which, as fallible as they are, do not stop the inquiry, but quite the other way around). Animated by the spirit of communitarian fallibilism, inquiry alliances such as the one constituted between Nagel, George, and Theodore make education possible again, because they break with the optimism/pessimism divide. According to Susan Haack, Peircean fallibilism is located precisely in a different place, different from both optimism (which leads to the dogmatism of considering that at least some of our beliefs cannot be wrong) and pessimism (which leads to the equally undesirable skepticism that holds that all our beliefs could be wrong). The work that results from a fallibilistic inquiry alliance is encouraged by the methodological principle that "any of our beliefs could be

44. Latour, *Down to Earth*.

45. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

wrong"⁴⁶ but, by the same token, it is possible to sustain a hopeful pragmatic spirit that keeps us engaged in successive redefinitions and activities to understand and work with problems as they come up.⁴⁷ If we can be wrong, that means we can also be right. Taken as an educational difficulty, post-truth is one of those problems that pedagogy is not going to solve (nor, as I stated above, should we wish it to do so, or to let it be pedagogized/domesticated as a political-social problem). However, as pedagogues confronted with contemporary challenges such as this one, which might not be educationally solvable, we must keep working with it even where simple "progress" might not be achievable. There would be room for a vague but very productive spirit of hope.

PLURALISTIC PEDAGOGY: "ROGER AND I LEARNT SOME SURPRISING THINGS"

For myself, the garden held sufficient interest; together Roger and I learnt some surprising things. Roger, for example, found that it was unwise to smell hornets, that the peasant dogs ran screaming if he glanced at them through the gate, and that the chickens that leapt suddenly from the fuchsia hedge, squawking wildly as they fled, were unlawful prey, however desirable.

This doll's-house garden was a magic land, a forest of flowers through which roamed creatures I had never seen before. Among the thick, silky petals of each rose-bloom lived tiny, crab-like spiders that scuttled sideways when disturbed. Their small, translucent bodies were coloured to match the flowers they inhabited: pink, ivory, wine-red, or buttery-yellow. On the rose-stems, encrusted with greenflies, lady-birds moved like newly painted toys; lady-birds pale red with large black spots; lady-birds apple-red with brown spots; lady-birds orange with grey-and-black freckles. Rotund and amiable, they prowled and fed among the anaemic flocks of greenfly. Carpenter bees, like furry, electric-blue bears, zigzagged among the flowers, growling fatly and busily. Humming-bird hawk-moths, sleek and neat, whipped up and down the paths with a fussy efficiency, pausing occasionally on speed-misty wings to lower a long, slender proboscis into a bloom. Among the white cobbles large black ants staggered and gesticulated in groups round strange trophies: a dead caterpillar, a piece of rose-petal, or dried grass-head fat with seeds. As an accompaniment to all this activity there came from the olive-groves outside the fuchsia hedge the incessant shimmering cries of the cicadas. If the curious, blurring heat-haze produced a sound, it would be exactly the strange, chiming cries of these insects.

At first I was so bewildered by this profusion of life on our very doorstep that I could only move about the garden in a daze, watching now this creature, now that, constantly having my attention distracted by the flights of brilliant butterflies that drifted over the hedge. Gradually, as I became more used to the bustle of insect life among the flowers, I found I could concentrate more. I would spend hours squatting on my heels or lying on my stomach watching the private lives of the creatures around me, while Roger sat nearby, a look of resignation on his face. In this way I learnt a lot of fascinating things.⁴⁸

46. Susan Haack, "Descartes, Peirce, and the Cognitive Community," *The Monist* 65, no. 2 (1982): 172. Some have even talked of a "contrite fallibilism" to characterize Peirce's philosophy of education. See Vincent Colapietro, "Peirce and Education: Contemporary Reflections in the Spirit of a Contrite Fallibilist," *Foro de Educación* 11, no. 15 (2013): 65–82.

47. Although space limitations make it impossible to expound on this point, to be consistent with the methodological principles Peirce advocates that we use, it is important to recall where his prejudices and prior experiences are placed (Charles S. Peirce, "The Law of Mind" [1892], in *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vol. 6, ed. Hartshorne and Weiss, 102). Peirce worked as a professional statistician, a biographical fact that opens his work to further interpretations. See Theodore M. Porter, *The Rise of Statistical Thinking, 1820–1900* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); and Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar Strauss and Giroux, 2001).

48. Durrell, *My Family and Other Animals*, 22–23

Gerry shows a temperament that might be qualified as typically pluralistic (not only because of his ability to treat his dog Roger as an equal, his dog-brother, his schoolmate in the outdoor classroom that his yard has become): enthusiastically interested in everything, open to experimental exploration of all forms of life, willing to revel in and dole out detailed descriptions of the phenomena he bears attentive witness to. The narrative seems to me to express what might be a James-inspired pluralistic pedagogy: an education where our troubles are approached in profound, sincere, and appreciative respect for other ways of life and viewpoints, while reassuring the acknowledgment our own ignorance and blindness.

Very distinctive of James is his command of the emotive component of language, of metaphorical images and anecdotes that accompany his philosophical disquisitions. His reasoning is plural and far removed from philosophical technification. Furthermore, it reflects some of the features of his unique character. He is said to have been a particularly generous person whose warm and outgoing personality paved the way for sympathetic dialogue with very different types of people. His unusual personality⁴⁹ led him often to change his opinion on an issue from one day to the next. His life was full of indecision and a hesitant multiperspectivism.⁵⁰

Some scholars see this pluralism as a second great philosophical continuity between the generations of pragmatists. William James admired several qualities of English empiricism: its "down-to-earth quality ... , its insistence on the appeal to experience as the touchstone of all knowledge, its abhorrence of jargon, and its habit of explaining wholes by parts"⁵¹ and, like Peirce, he rejected the Cartesian idea that the activity of knowing starts by stating "clear and distinct" impressions and ideas. Speaking that way would involve substituting the specific, dynamic way we experience reality with a set of more or less sophisticated abstractions. James argued that we directly experience the connections, relations, and transitions that occur inside a continuous flow of experience. He occupied a middle ground between recognition that the search for order and the need for simplification are inescapable elements, on one hand, and the denial of the existence of a single, homogenous unity, on the other. This middle ground houses Jamesian pluralism, which: pushes us, without outright rejection of unity, to wonder what type of unity we are speaking of; determines the philosophical task or endeavor, where

49. This is a very relevant aspect when dealing with James's philosophy, if one is seeking some sense of epistemic coherence. James's temperament and personality are to be considered when approaching his work because he himself assigned a strong explanatory potential to temperaments with respect to understanding and addressing philosophical differences. In fact, to James, the history of philosophy can be understood as a dilemma or quandary, and pragmatism as the solution to the problems these differences pose. William James, "The Present Dilemma in Philosophy" (1906), in *The Works of William James*, vol. 1, ed. Fredson Bowers and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 9–26.

50. On the details of James's spirit of indecision, see Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 75–76; and Paul J. Croce, "The Non-Disciplinary William James," *William James Studies* 8 (2012): 1–33.

51. Bernstein, *The Pragmatic Turn*, 56.

irreducibility is a property of the plurality of possible views and no higher view can be held up over the others (because our points of view are forever limited, partial, and incomplete); and combines an attitude of creative sensitivity (open to the determining factors of experience), with an argumentation able to articulate a specific philosophical view (because all our established “truths” must be reviewed when they become contradictory or contrary to fact).

The implications that follow James’s characteristic pluralistic understanding of the world are manifold.⁵² In his famous essays, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings”⁵³ and “What Makes a Life Significant?,”⁵⁴ James points out how we generally lack enough sensitivity to be open to the feelings and opinions of those who live in a different way than we do ourselves, and that we should try to improve our ability to understand and sympathize with other points of view, other lifestyles, and other orientations. Jamesian pluralism invites us to be open to other perspectives, to extend the limits of our sensitivity, to broaden the frameworks within which we situate ourselves in the world. Since a person can be “blind” to a reality, engagement with others can bring us out of our states of blindness by pushing us to see things from other perspectives that broaden and modify our initial positions.⁵⁵ James’s pluralism urges us to take into consideration all the possible varieties of perspectives on things, taking advantage of the opportunities to learn from them, as a way of taking care, within an intersubjective reciprocity, of our judgments, affirmations, and opinions.

If truth is something that happens to an idea,⁵⁶ the most advisable approach from this position is to give the idea as many opportunities (and points of view) as possible. To do so, dispositions and habits are always very important, since we interact with the world through habits and, in turn, habits are what make the world more recognizable and livable.⁵⁷ Thus, from a pluralistic pedagogy, we

52. See Bianca Thoilliez, “Fitting Religious Life into the Life of Schools: James and Rorty in Conversation,” *Ethics and Education* 14, no. 2 (2019): 157–170.

53. William James, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” (1892), in *The Works of William James*, vol. 12, ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 132–149.

54. William James, “What Makes a Life Significant” (1892), in *The Works of William James*, vol. 12, ed. Burkhardt, Bowers, and Skrupskelis, 150–167.

55. Particularly eloquent is James’s personal account of how, during a conversation, someone else can make us see that we were wrong in our judgment (“On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” 134).

56. See William James, “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth” (1907), in *The Works of William James*, vol. 1, ed. Bowers and Skrupskelis, 98.

57. As James observes, “There is no more miserable human being than one in whom nothing is habitual.” William James, *Principles of Psychology* (1890), in *The Works of William James*, vol. 8, ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 126. For a more complete account on the formations of habits within James’s moral education approach, see Bianca Thoilliez, “The Pedagogical Thought of William James: Tactful Teacher and Moral Education,” *Foro de Educación* 15 (2013): 83–102.

should promote habits of thinking and experimenting that are open to and appreciative of the plurality of specific facts and manifestations of the world⁵⁸ (of the kind Gerry shows in his account of his experiences in the garden). This is not as a sentimental celebration of (bio)diversity, but rather to establish the right basis for exploring, re-writing, and affirming that which binds us together. In order to accomplish the pluralistic broadening needed to practice habits such as those displayed by Gerry, we must produce provisioning practices that make it possible to supply ourselves with the widest available diversity of views, descriptions, and orientations. This would free us from the discard/preserve divide because what is at stake is to awaken an appreciation and value for all the material and immaterial goods of the ecosystem. In a context of (pedagogical/democratic/ecological) apocalypse, discarding is reckless and preserving is not enough. Nothing is discarded and banished to the garbage dump, nothing should be preserved anymore just to be exhibited in a museum of natural history: we provision because we are going to *do* something with what we store, classify, and count. We provision for what may come because we live in the exceptionality of an unprecedented age, where the effects of the Anthropocene and the growing presence of post-truth systems threaten the survival of everything prized and appreciable in this world. Practicing an education of cultural provisioning might strengthen links of commitment in/with the world. Provision implies looking ahead, provisioning, being in an active hope. It is not just naïve wishful thinking; cultural provisioning practices are active layers toward Terrestrial care. Misinformation and other manifestations of post-truth are also part of our contemporary Earthly reality: the pluralistically inspired educational response should not consist of discarding them, throwing them away, or banishing them, but, on the contrary, of collecting them, classifying them, and working them. The threats to our way of life will not magically go away simply by pointing them out, accusing them, or condemning them. We must think about them, know them, and study them. On a very small scale, in the garden of his house and in collegial cooperation with his dog Roger, Gerry also accounts, describes, and classifies everything he observes around him. These kinds of ongoing dedicated acts of provisioning can lead us to the crafting of more hopeful futures capable of keeping us together.

FINAL REMARKS

Denial of the environmental crisis is probably the most dangerous post-truth we have to live with. And I say "to live with," not to fight, because as pedagogues we must resist the temptation and the pressures of slipping toward the politicization of education or the "pedagogicalization" of social problems. Political combat has its time and its place, but not in education. Education is the time and place of

58. William James, *Pragmatism, a New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1906), in *The Works of William James*, vol. 1, ed. Bowers and Skrupskelis, 32.

study.⁵⁹ And in order to better study our problems, especially ones stemming from the current post-truth climate, fallibilism and pluralism have been proposed here as entrance doors toward experiences of communitarian alliances of inquiry and cultural provision. They offer a pedagogy that neither fixes or evades our troubles but stays with them, through educational practices with the ability to restore the sort of reciprocal trust and common ground that are necessary for continuing the exploration of common life. A down-to-earth pedagogy is capable of taking care of truths, of looking for ways of keeping our lives together, and of making education possible again.

Susan Haack once said that one of the basic principles that is supposed to distinguish a scientific research investigation (of whatever kind) from other fields of human action, such as writing a novel, cooking dinner, or practicing as a defense attorney in a trial, is that it is an attempt to find some true answers to one or more questions. This may show the relation between Haraway's SF practices and Rorty's storytelling, both of which inspired my own educational speculations using Durrell's Earthbound narratives. There is a distinctive inquiry motivation, a discovery purpose, even though "quite often, once you have answered a question, you find yourself facing a whole slew of new ones."⁶⁰

Addressing together the scale of our problems, particularly those created by the post-truth climate, demands more than an X or not-X approach. Fallibilistic habits of thought need to be practiced and acts of cultural provision need to be cultivated. Trust needs to be restored; hope must be repaired. Educating in these sorts of intellectual pragmatist dispositions (fallibilism and pluralism) may promote the conditions of conversation and the type of ethical commitment that can help students avoid both empty relativisms and blind partisanisms. Addressing the post-truth climate from the realm of education requires teaching practices

59. There are various examples of environmentalism that are a proof of this sort of commitment. I am particularly fascinated by two initiatives: the continuous IUCN's project Red List of Threatened Species, and the 2001–2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. Both projects have shown the potential of provisioning practices that are pedagogically inspiring. Most notable are their very precise instructions to collaborators all around world on how to gather information and how all the research results are openly shared (the Red List of Threatened Species, in particular, is a continuously ongoing project). What they have in common is the fact that they are collective efforts of "provisioning us with" the full plurality of species, ecosystems, and services that account for mutual dependencies (breaking from what Haraway calls the "human exception," in which the exceptional is our relationship of domination and plundering). Hans Schildermans, Joke Vandenabeele, and Joris Vlieghe are studying the pedagogical interest of this sort of Bruno Latour's inspired "study practices"; see their article "Study Practices and the Creation of a Common World: Unearthing the Educational Dynamics of an Urban Farming Initiative," *Teoría de la Educación. Revista Interuniversitaria* 31, no. 2 (2019): 87–108. Of special relevance here, too, is Hans Schildermans' contribution to this symposium, in which he stresses: "study practices are not a way of overcoming the trouble provoked by the event related to the Anthropocene ... they are ways of 'staying with the trouble' to paraphrase [Donna] Haraway, to give these events the power to make us think and envisage less destructive ways of living together." Hans Schildermans, "On Problematic Situations and Problematisations: Study Practices and the Pragmatics of a World To-Be-Made," in this issue.

60. Susan Haack, *Putting Philosophy to Work: Inquiry and Its Place in Culture — Essays on Science, Religion, Law, Literature, and Life* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2008), 37.

capable of promoting experiences of communitarian fallibilistic inquiry and of pluralistic cultural provision. This would ingrain the spirit of fallible scientific exploration into the students' daily encounter with the world and its problems, so that they can attentively observe their everyday encounters with what the course of life may bring, whether one likes it or not, during every waking hour of their lives. A Peirce-inspired fallibilistic inquiry spirit needs to be communally shared, since nothing less than an infinite, evolving community can offer the epistemic authority needed to work with/in post-truth times such as ours are. A James-inspired pluralistic metaphysics would offer our students a chance to understand diversity and plurality so that they experience that, no matter how clearly things seem to be defined, there is always a chance of an alternative interpretation, of something we failed to see. It would also help them understand that we always are incomplete individuals and part of communities in the making, so it is important to keep ourselves open to possible new connections and changes, and thus practices of exchange and the search for agreement need to be reformed and infinitely reimagined in the community. The building of communitarian alliances of fallibilistic inquiry and the promotion of practices of pluralistic cultural provision have been proposed here as useful alternative educational ends-in-view that embody a down-to-earth pedagogy capable of reinstating trust, taking care of truths, looking for ways of keeping our lives together, and making education possible again. Rather than attempting to fix or evade our troubles, this pedagogy stays with them.

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