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# Fitting and Fudging: On the Folly of Trying to Define Post-truth

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**Abstract:** I propose that the ‘post-truth condition’, i.e., the vulnerability of our institutions for establishing and negotiating what is true and worth knowing, is not primarily a pathology, a susceptibility to external manipulation or coercion, as tends to be stressed in the literature, but has first and foremost to do with the unraveling of certain epistemic assumptions. In analogy with T.S. Eliot’s modernist notion that the attempt to capture and concretize an experience or a state of mind requires ‘objective correlatives’ which it conveys, I argue that the trope of post-truth to express the embattled status of expertise can be understood in terms of failed symbolization. In the second section, I spell out what this means in terms of Donald Davidson’s discussion of the problem of defining truth. In the last section, I propose a ‘poetics of political theory’ for understanding the post-truth condition.

**Keywords:** Cleanth Brooks, Donald Davidson, T.S. Eliot, Enlightenment, form, holism, judgment, objective correlative, post-truth, truth

## 1 What is the Objective Correlative to Post-truth?

In what follows, I want to suggest that attempts in political and social theory to analyze and explain the various phenomena that are thought to be captured by the term ‘post-truth’ tend to display a lack of self-awareness with regard to how research and scholarship categorize and concretize, i.e., represent events, occurrences and actions in their analyses and explanations. This deficiency can be described in light of what T.S. Eliot called an ‘objective correlative’ in literary works, i.e., the arrangement of situations, occurrences or sequences of events as objective expressions of a mood, experience, sensibility, attitude or state of mind. The idea is that the depiction of acts or events constitutes a kind of ‘formula’ for expression, much as a mathematical symbol is a figure or a combination of

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figures used to represent mathematical objects, actions on mathematical objects, relations between mathematical objects, and, importantly, for structuring the other symbols occurring in the formula. Formulas thus consist of symbols of various types. In Eliot's view, the successful use of form is impersonal, whether in poetry or in mathematics. This comparison can be misleading, however, since mathematical symbols only have sense within the sign system itself, whereas the 'sign system' of a literary work includes all possible human experience of the world (the objective correlative). In that respect, there is no 'objective correlative' to a mathematical symbol. The artist's work consists of devices for the displaying of relations, but as distinct from the mathematician's work, the arrangement or order aims at the concretization of the real, what Eliot terms 'the external facts'. For our purposes here, the point is that the sense of the symbol is concrete and distinct in itself, since its 'content' cannot be separated from its form (think of Munch's painting *The Scream*); the meaning, as condensed in the form, is thought not to require further description or explanation to be recognizable to anyone.

Eliot offers the example of Shakespeare's skillful communication of Lady Macbeth's state of mind in her sleepwalking; "the words of Macbeth on hearing of his wife's death strike us as if, given the sequence of events, these words were automatically released by the last event in the series. The artistic 'inevitability' lies in this complete adequacy of the external to the emotion (. . .)" (Eliot 1920, 183). The remark quoted above is followed by the assertion that the adequacy named is lacking in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, where, Eliot argues, the mood dominating the title character is inexpressible, because "it is in excess of the facts as they appear (. . .)." Eliot locates the problem in the scantiness of Gertrude's character, which is too insignificant to embody the experience of abhorrence that she arouses in Hamlet. As portrayed, she is not an adequate correlative, which makes it impossible for Hamlet to understand his own state of mind, to identify the object of his thoughts and emotions; thus, there is no plot, no action that his character is driven by events to take, with the kind of necessity that drives the story forward in *Macbeth*. According to Eliot, *the very way the problem is presented* precludes objective equivalence. If Shakespeare had amplified Gertrude's criminality, it would have been to provide the formula for a *different* frame of mind in Hamlet; because she is a kind of cypher, he is paralyzed and confounded by his own revulsion. His thoughts and emotions lead everywhere and anywhere. The meaning of the acts and speeches is thus fundamentally indeterminate. In this formalist account, the concrete expression of a sensibility enters into and emerges out of a shared structure of experience; it is never a matter of subjective interpretation. What is lacking in *Hamlet* is an anchoring in a reality that the audience immediately recognizes, leaving the reader or viewer to fend for himself to

find meaning in the actions and speeches to which he is witness. Eliot concludes that Shakespeare here ‘tackled a problem that proved too much for him’. To grasp what motivated him to do so, would require that we get a grip on something that he himself apparently failed to grasp himself, since, had he understood his own problem, it would have been expressed in the work.

There is an important philosophical point reflected in Eliot’s aesthetic argument, one that is directly germane to the problem of truth and its evil twin, post-truth. As we will see in the next section, there is a long epistemic history in the European tradition of thinking that there must be some unitary guarantor of the veracity of our statements beyond the speaking, writing, saying in the human context in which they are intelligible, that is, make sense and can be grasped as true or not. But here in Eliot’s analysis, there seems to be the first glimpse of another way of thinking about truth, where it is not a matter of some external factor deciding the adequacy of the depiction, but its place in a common world that is recognizable to the audience, in all its intricacy, by virtue of his being human and living a human life. Thus a concrete expression of an experience is ‘objective’ in the sense that it is general, and as such not merely ‘subjective’. Eliot’s idea of objective correlatives suggests that yes, truth is indeterminate insofar as it is not determined or certified by something beyond the states of affairs in which statements and actions have their sense, but that does not mean that determinate signification is impossible. Our attempts at saying something true can be better or worse, more or less successful. But the criterion for determining adequacy is internal to the state of affairs, not beyond it.

By way of analogy, I think that there is something to be gained from considering our own best attempts at expressing the nature of the so-called post-truth condition, i.e., academic interventions in the matter, and the variety of issues and isms taken to fall under it, in terms of what one might call a ‘poetics of political theory’. One of the reasons to do so is that post-truth is said to describe a *Zeitgeist*, or mentality, in which, so the argument goes, emotion takes precedence over facticity, feelings over reason. Thus, in order to understand the condition, one examines what the said emotions are *actually* about and seeks their causes, in order to explain what appears to be a lack of concern for, or even a skeptical and suspicious animosity toward data, facts, evidence and logical consistency. Feelings are said to hold sway over people’s capacity to adjudicate what is or is not the case, what is right, justifiable or true. The aim of explanation, one could say, is to understand Hamlet (the Brexiteer, anti-vaxxer or climate denialist) better than he understands himself by defining, categorizing and arranging his actions and reflections in such a way as to make his responses and behavior follow; in the narrative so constructed, they are made comprehensible, natural, automatic or even inevitable. Recall now that Eliot thinks that Shakespeare succeeds in

*Macbeth* and fails in *Hamlet*, because Lady Macbeth's state of mind is instantiated in her somnambulism whereas the significance of Hamlet's animus toward Gertrude has no objective correlative, is not shown, in her actions or behavior. In this respect, one could say that much current scholarship on post-truth 'fails' in the sense that Eliot claims that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* fails (whether or not his assessment of the plays in question is fair is irrelevant here).

Like Shakespeare, sociologists, philosophers and political theorists and commentators attempt to capture and explain sensibilities, experiences and cognitive states through an arrangement of fixed definitions and categories together with an ordering of events and occurrences, such that the behavior of the objects of study constitutes an objective correlative in the story that they are telling. Such attempts are undermined, I want to suggest, because the way of presenting the problem, 'in excess of the facts as they appear', precludes objective equivalence. Rather, they express the confusion and dispositions they seek to explain, in the way that Shakespeare expressed his own bewilderment. If Hamlet is the climate denier, on this analogy, Gertrude may be analysed that tie post-truth to the effects of globalization and precarity, if one is so inclined, or threatened masculinity and xenophobia, if that is the preferred model of explanation. Any way the motivating force is fleshed out, its function is to provide an objective correlative to the emotion (frustration, anxiety, resentment) thought to dominate thinking and sway judgment away from truth-seeking and the acknowledgement of facts.

The kind of explanatory narratives that I have in mind can belong to a variety of genres. On the basis of value and opinion surveys, for instance, it can be shown that a certain sector of society gets facts about equality and unemployment wrong, which, in combination with and in part due to a general mood of nationalism, tribalism, and welfare chauvinism, undermines a reasonable public discussion about economic distribution and the future of the welfare state. In this story, the character of the people whose options and opinions are at issue are represented as amenable to the 'easy answers' peddled by populist leaders and movements (Hüther and Diermeier 2019). Other studies, especially of a more qualitative bent, tease out sentiments such as anger, hurt, despondency, indignation and mourning over a sense of loss of control over one's life, and the desire for order and predictability as 'the deep story' behind behavior, for instance at the ballot box, in support of policies that would seem from the observer's standpoint to be detrimental to their own interests and against ones that would seem to be beneficial (Cramer 2016; Hochschild 2016). In either case, a character is introduced onto the scene or implied as a menacing offstage presence: 'the populist leader' or 'populist party', who latches on to this mood and these 'irrational sentiments', and distills them into a political force. Alternatively, there are attempts to explain

attraction to fundamentalism and even terrorist groups in terms of the so-called online information threat posed especially by social media and the algorithms of search engines, where the trope of choice is that of disinformation campaigns designed to attract disaffected European youth and indoctrinate them by inculcating or intensifying mistrust, dissatisfaction and alienation so as to threaten the internal unity and stability of the European Union and its member states (see Ördén 2018). A final example might be the ubiquitous genre that pins the embrace of dubious doctrines, suspicion toward scientific consensus and a disregard for expertise and evidence on the trickle-down effects, since the 1990s, of a generalized relativism engendered by ‘postmodernism’ (McIntyre 2018). In this kind of drama, Gertrude is played, as it were, by Michel Foucault or Richard Rorty, telling us that power or language are ‘the very coinage’ of our brain.

The point of stressing the dramatic form of the analyses offered is not to assert or demonstrate a thesis, say, that all discourse is rhetorical. The purpose is simply to stay clear of making any substantial empirical claims myself. The empirical strengths or weaknesses, i.e., the ‘facts of the matter’ involved in any account or type of account are bracketed for the present purposes, in order to bring into view the consequences of the form of explanations of ‘post-truth’, their quality as structures or arrangements of facts, evidence or reasons. In particular, I want to suggest that the premise of the centrality of the emotional rather than intellectual response as the key to understanding the climate of uncertainty, indeterminacy and vague or intense suspicion toward expertise and scientific consensus lacks correlative adequacy: the ostensible attitude of contempt for truth as organizing principle does not make manifest the complexity, fluidity and diversity of reactions, attitudes and motivations playing out in contemporary events, debates and discourse. Most importantly, it does not distinguish between relativism (which assumes that there is something to be relativized) and the disappearance of truth as a possible aim or goal (Malpas 1992). The ‘post-truth’ thesis that the mentality of our epoch is one in which there is, alternatively, an incorrigible ‘basket of deplorables’ or oppressed and unenlightened masses in whom emotions distort facts, passions deafen them to the voice of reason, and prejudice blinds them to the light of the truth also presupposes that there is agreement upon some univocal and adequate understanding of truth or what validates it (Fuller 2018). The conceptual difficulty of articulating one, and its consequences for the post-truth condition, is the topic of the next section.

## 2 A Term in Want of a Definition?

In the literature where the specter of postmodernism is summoned as either cause or effect (sometimes both) of relativism and the politicization of science, culture and education, the Enlightenment is often invoked, and associated with the idea there is some straightforward definition of truth or facticity or justification at stake. But this is not only simplistic, it also misconstrues or at very least oversimplifies the Enlightenment ideas that it claims to uphold and defend. Questioning status quo, convention and received opinion with regard to truth has been the lifeblood of philosophy since Socrates, through Descartes and Kant, past Popper and into the present. To be sure, in mainstream Anglo-Saxon philosophy, the dominant school in high-ranking professional journals and prestigious departments, ‘serious’ discussions of truth (as opposed to popularized journalistic interventions) have usually taken the form of arguments for and against a given theory within an established taxonomy of positions: roughly, correspondence, coherence, pragmatist, or deflationary theories. There are, however, those who, on the basis of an immanent critique of such arguments and with varying degrees of success, have attempted to distance themselves from the coercive practice of forcing any thought into an entrenched ‘ism’. The title of the present paper is a nod to Donald Davidson’s late essay, ‘The Folly of Trying to Define Truth’, where Davidson offers what he calls a “diagnosis of our aporia about truth”, to wit: “We are still under the spell of the Socratic idea that we must keep asking for the *essence* of an idea, a significant *analysis* in other terms, an answer to the question what *makes* this an act of piety, what makes this, or any, utterance, sentence, belief, or proposition true. We still fall for the freshman fallacy that demand that we *define* our terms as a prelude to saying anything further with or about them” (Davidson 1996).

In the aforementioned essay, Davidson offers a concise history of the conceptualization of the relationship between truth and knowledge in philosophy that goes like this. Socrates’ repeated attempts to get at the essence of courage, virtue, beauty, temperance etc. fail, the dialogues ending aporetically. In a middle to late dialogue, the *Theaetetus*, Plato treats the so-called problem of knowledge in a way familiar to modern philosophers, as true belief together with an account that warrants or justifies that belief (without which the belief would be mere opinion). Davidson sees this as the original sin of epistemology, since it requires that we succeed in combining causal and conceptual elements in accounts of memory, perception and intentional action in such a way that they are analyzable into some basic and distinct terms. But what he most of all wants us to notice is that in the dialogue, what is under investigation is not the nature of truth, but

what constitutes justification. And the practice of assuming the sense of whatever term one needs without further ado whenever one wants to put it to use in an analysis of something else is endemic in the history of philosophy, Davidson notes. If a philosopher aims to analyze intentional action through the concepts of belief, desire and cause, for instance, she will not be detained fretting over the meaning of any of the key terms. Similarly, belief, truth and causality will figure into a clarification of the concept of memory without much hand-wringing about the clarity of the concepts so employed. What Davidson sees as the lesson of this exercise is that however ‘feeble and faulty’ our attempts at making connections between basic concepts, we learn more from them than from trying to formulate correct and clarifying definitions in terms of even more fundamental concepts.

His reasoning is that the kinds of things that occupy philosophers, such as truth, knowledge, action, cause, the true and the right, are so fundamental that it would be difficult to imagine any attempt at conceptualization without them. They are irreducible because they are implicated in almost all our thinking, in one way or another. He writes: “what makes these concepts so important must also foreclose on the possibility of finding a foundation for them which reaches deeper into bedrock” (Davidson 1996, 264). Regarding the concept of truth, he says, “we cannot hope to underpin it with something more transparent or easier to grasp”. On the other hand, the indefinability of truth, its ‘indeterminacy’, if you will, in no way implies that the concept is ‘mysterious, ambiguous or untrustworthy’. I will not delve in any detail into the arguments that Davidson provides in order to make good on this remark. For present purposes, I want only to call attention to a feature of his defense of Aristotle’s handy characterization of truth (‘to say of what is that it is, or what is not that it is not’) as good enough as it stands, namely, the argument that the truth of a sentence depends upon its *structure*, how the meanings of the parts stand in relation to one another in the language in which it is articulated. If I understand him correctly, this is not at all a relativistic thesis, but a sober observation that philosophers have been seeking something that isn’t there: “there is no transcendent single concept to be relativized” (272). Rather, what ultimately ties language to the world is that the conditions that typically incline us to take an assertion to be true are also what constitute the truth, and hence the meaning of the assertion (275). The ‘fact of the matter’ deemed to be true or false is something to be judged, and such judgments rest invariably on a host of prior judgments.

Davidson thinks that philosophy needs to resist what he calls ‘the definitional urge’, including the predilection to *substitute* some quasi-definition or ostensibly more rigorous concept (such as ‘warranted assertability’) for our homey, everyday

sense of truth. He proposes a different ‘methodology’ altogether: trace the connections between the concept of truth “and the human attitudes and acts that give it body” (276). He means by this that our interest in truth is due to our interest in the world and in doing things in it: we speak of truth regarding beliefs, utterances and statements about the things, acts and occurrences which they concern. In the end, we are advised to consider truth in the same way as he suggests that we think of rationality, to wit, as describing “structures we can find, with an allowable degree of fitting and fudging, in the behavior of more or less rational creatures gifted with speech” (278) It seems to me that this is not very far from Eliot’s notion of an objective correlative as concrete expression.

I bring in Davidson for three reasons. First, here we have one of the most influential philosophers of the latter half of the twentieth century, whose works consisted of a unified and systematic approach to problems in epistemology as inextricable from the philosophy of language, action and mind, and in so doing rejected both relativism and skepticism. Yet, as we have seen, neither was he a proponent of realist theories with regard to ‘objective truth’. To the contrary, on a Davidsonian account, if we want to know whether distrust or dismissal of some assertion is warranted, we will have to consider it holistically, that is, in terms of its place within a complex structure of assertions and actions as they combine in a given event. And, importantly, to reason thus is not to deny truth, but to *seek* it, if by that one means getting clearer about the presuppositions involved in our judging a statement to be true or false.

Second, given this holism, the form or structure of our thinking is not just some envelope into which facts or data or information are inserted; rather the organization is intrinsic to the meaning, and thus the truth, of what is said or thought. Returning to the topic of the first section, this is why the manner of presentation has to be adequate to the thought—in Eliot’s idiom, the true and real, what we are convinced of, constitute the objective correlative of the symbolization (If one insists upon staying within the terminology of contemporary analytic philosophy, one might say call the reasoning articulated here a kind of ‘externalism’). Without the objective correlative, the symbolization fails to symbolize, the expression fails to express, in the sense of providing a concrete instantiation which leads to a definite conclusion that is not merely interpretation from a certain point of view. The sign remains fundamentally indeterminate. Another way of putting it is to say that adequate expression of the thought or experience Y should manifest its meaning, rather than being explained by something else. Or, in the words of another formalist theorist, “It is not experience that organizes expression, but the other way around – *expression organizes experience*. Expression is what first gives experience its form and specificity of direction” (Vološinov 1973, 85).

Third, while there is no essence to be grasped in truth-telling and truth-acceptance, and thus no need to start out with some clear-cut definition before explaining its place in our lives, according to Davidson, by the same token, we cannot expect to understand an assumed radical alteration of that place by seeking its causes on that assumption. To suppose at the outset, in advance of any inquiry, that expressions of caution, suspicion, hesitation, incredulity or dissatisfaction toward current institutions of knowledge are *effects* of something else is to perform the operation of substitution that follows on the definitional urge.

But expertise, one might think, licenses the procedure of substitution. The problem is that the assumptions that are an integral part of the model, built already into its conceptual apparatus, techniques for adjudicating validity and so forth cannot all be stated at once, if at all, which means that the basis for the authority invested in expertise is never fully apparent. The knowledge of that knowledge precludes adequate symbolization. Seen in the light of Eliot's criticism of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, one could say academic attempts to explain the post-truth condition fail because the experts are not themselves clear about what their problem is. As construed, it is fundamentally indeterminate.

### 3 The Problem of Formulating the Problem

If we acknowledge that modern science, like modern society, is always in transition, and that today's grave certainties can and likely will become tomorrow's humorous anecdotes, and that the intellectual heroes of our time might be the toppled statues in days to come, I propose that the best way to prepare for the future is to take a step back from the present, and consider the structure or forms of our collective thinking, rather than focus on the specific contents. The idea of form that I have in mind is tied both to Eliot's idea of an objective correlative and to Davidson's idea that rationality is not some static order or organization but a shorthand term pointing to the complex of cognitive labors involved in what he calls 'fitting and fudging', and fits well with what Kant called 'enlarged thought' (Rider 2013). The notion I want to advance is that the real substance of clarification or elucidation lay in its success or failure at enabling the individual to overcome the limitations of his starting points, reflect upon it from another point of view and thus correct or modify his initial position, integrating that new perspective into his thinking as a whole so that it becomes part of his character as a thinker or reasoner. In short, this means that the primary purpose of the kinds of explanations proposed cannot be achieved through 'telling' the truth as some heap of facts, but through showing one way to satisfy the kind of doubts and

dissatisfactions that the problem formulated expresses. Instead of dismissing these expressions of hesitancy toward authoritative knowledge, one should recognize them as signifying efforts of reason to satisfy the demands that it makes on itself.

A more helpful way to understand the post-truth condition might then be to see it, not as an attack on or retreat from the Enlightenment, but as a consequence and extension of it. In Stanley Rosen's view, the problem with postmodernism is not that it is counter-Enlightenment, but that it is the Enlightenment taken to such theoretical extremes that it finds itself in a state of perpetual second-guessing and suspicion, a kind of epistemic paranoia: "Postmodernism is the Enlightenment gone mad" (Rosen 1987, 142). Something similar can be said of the post-truth condition. The information and exchange made possible by entirety of what we know and can do having made available to anyone with a smartphone in his pocket is Diderot's Encyclopedia on steroids. In the *Encyclopédie*, Denis Diderot stated explicitly that its aim was to change *the way people think*, to allow them to be able to *inform themselves*, to help them know things and be able to do them for themselves. The express goal, for Diderot as well as for the other contributors, was to diminish the epistemic authority of the Jesuits, which kept people intellectually passive. By incorporating all of the world's knowledge, the *Encyclopédie* would be a tool for public self-enlightenment for a new enlightened generation and for generations to come. Notably, like the DIY<sup>1</sup> sites on the internet, there was a strong focus on 'how to', that is, on the useful or mechanical arts and craftsmanship. This is the important lesson of Enlightenment thinking, not some abstract notion of an autonomous agent dutifully and routinely applying the laws of reason as formulated and certified by the credentialed cognoscenti (which actually comes closer to the Scholasticism against which the Enlightenment rebelled). In that sense, one might very well, as Steve Fuller suggests (Fuller 2018), think of the Enlightenment as a populist movement, aimed at depriving the established institutions of knowledge (in this case, the Catholic Church) of its privileges and prerogatives. What I want to add to this picture, however, is another aspect of the radicality involved, which I think has repercussions for how we think of truth and

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<sup>1</sup> DIY is an acronym for 'do-it-yourself', a term used since the early 19th-century for manuals, activities and magazines (such as *Popular Mechanics*) devoted to providing clear explanations and instructions for carpentry, electrical and motor repair, plumbing and other such practical aims. The acronym has been both popularized and generalized on the internet on sites devoted to disseminating methods for building, modifying, or repairing things by oneself without the guidance of professionals or certified experts, and now encompasses not only practical applications but also a much broader range of skills, including those previously associated with higher level academic, artistic and technical training.

post-truth today.<sup>2</sup> In particular, I want to propose that the heart of the Enlightenment project was not the establishment of objective facts or universal knowledge, but the self-formation of the thinking that makes it possible to know, in the strict sense, anything at all. The main concern was not with establishing truth, but with enabling everyman to be able to do things for himself, including assessing and adjudicating the validity of truth claims.

Hannah Arendt emphasized that the distinction that Kant instituted between reason and knowledge has had profound effects on how we conceive of both:

We owe to Kant the distinction between thinking and knowing, between reason, the urge to think and understand, and the intellect, which desires and is capable of certain, verifiable knowledge. Kant himself believed that the need to think beyond the limitations of knowledge was aroused only by the old metaphysical questions of God, freedom, and immortality and that he had ‘found it necessary to deny knowledge to make room for faith’; by doing so he had thrown the foundations of a future ‘systematic metaphysics’ as a ‘bequest to posterity’. But this shows only that Kant, still bound by the tradition of metaphysics, never became fully aware of what he had done, and his ‘bequest to posterity’ turned out to be the destruction of all possible foundations of metaphysical systems. For the ability and the need to think are by no means restricted to any specific subject matter, such as the questions which reason raises and knows it will never be able to answer. Kant has not ‘denied knowledge’ but separated knowing from thinking, and he has made room not for faith but for thought. He has indeed, as he once suggested, ‘eliminated the obstacles by which reason hinders itself.’ (Arendt 1971, 422)

Arendt defines reason, the activity of thinking, as “the habit of examining or reflecting upon whatever happens to come to pass, regardless of specific content and quite independently of results” (Arendt 1971, 418), describing the ‘deaths’ of God and metaphysics as ‘thought events’ instigating a decisive sea change in human mental life. On her view, thinking is something above and beyond the biological conditions and material constraints of its activity. Man, she says, has an inclination “and, unless by more urgent needs of living, a need to think beyond the limitations of knowledge, to do more with his intellectual abilities, his brain power, than to use them as an instrument of knowing and doing” (Arendt 1971, 421). Strictly speaking, she argues, when we are thinking, we are not anywhere in particular. Even if our thoughts are concerned with the most ordinary things rather than abstract ideas of concepts, ‘the old domain of metaphysical thought’, we are not trapped in whatever appears in our surroundings, but move freely in

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<sup>2</sup> This section makes use of ideas I presented in an invited paper given at the conference ‘Registers of Philosophy V,’ April 13, 2019, Budapest, organized by the Institute of Philosophy of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and published in the Institute’s Working Papers in Philosophy series, 2019/4.

the act of thinking. To think of someone or to reason about something is to remove oneself or take a step back from whatever it is that we are thinking about (see Arendt 1968, 1978).

For Kant and his Enlightenment contemporaries, the conditions, possibilities, and limitations of the paradigmatic forms of *Wissenschaft*, that is, mathematics and the physical sciences, were of foremost concern. Kant's hesitation regarding the scientific status of metaphysics as it had hitherto been conducted, i.e., his suspicion that the old metaphysics was not a science at all, was the starting point of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. His problem was not concerned with the results (doctrines, claims, and teachings) of metaphysics as such, but with the methods for attaining them. The methods appropriate to the special sciences, and which serve them well, lead irrevocably to the formulation of basic problems that of necessity result not in knowledge, but in antinomies of reason. The sciences are defined and delimited by the methods employed to solve distinct and determinate problems. Such methodological predetermined delimitation is useless and potentially harmful to a form of inquiry lacking that kind of object. What remains for rigorous philosophical inquiry is to direct its attentions to its own resources, possibilities, and delimitations, that is, to take itself as its own object. Metaphysics is possible only as thinking about the conditions of thought, or reason's critique of itself. And reasoning about the truth will not lead us to some Truth about it, but back to ourselves as thinkers. Self-reflection, as Arendt noted, has to do with removing oneself from the scene of events, as it were, and following the direction of one's own thoughts. Importantly, this means also thinking about the conditions that obtain when thinking.

Commenting upon Kant's essay, 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' (Kant 1996, 58–65), Michel Foucault suggests that we notice how Kant introduces a new question into philosophical reflection, namely, the question of the present, the now, in its contemporaneity. The question Kant is attempting to answer philosophically can be formulated as: "What is happening today? What is happening now? And what is this now which we all inhabit, and which defines the moment in which I am writing?" (Foucault 1986, 88–96). According to Foucault, Kant's attempt at an answer indicates just how difficult it is to answer such a question, precisely because one is always part of one's times, both as agent and element. Since Kant, the potential radicality of reason as an activity has consisted precisely in this aim to problematize the present that is the condition of one's own discourse. In other words, any genuinely rational critique of the present is always first and foremost a matter of self-criticism and self-awareness (implying no distinction here between the singular and the plural, the I and the we).

The concept of self-criticism as central to enlightenment consists in this directionality: self-criticism is located here, in my (our) own thinking, rather than targeting some problem ‘out there’ and among others (in society, culture, politics). Self-criticism, in the sense I am using the term, is less something that you choose or do not choose to engage in or be committed to, than something that you *express*; it displays the problem with which one’s reason is struggling. The kind of explanations that I enumerated in the first section of this paper express a relation of explanandum and explanans; in self-criticism, there is no such distinct relation. As Foucault reconceives Kant’s insight, we are always already both actor and element in our present culture, inextricably bound up with its language, events, ideas and ideals, and so forth. When we notice that we are discontented with our own culture, it is the dissatisfaction itself that poses the question to us: what is it in my (our) way of thinking, in my (our) way of life, that could or even perhaps should be different? What is it that is ‘given’, that we take for granted, that perhaps isn’t at all so self-evident or necessary as we take for granted in our everyday dealings and discourses (nor even in the intellectual life that is parasitic upon them)? Where do these received and recognized conventions come from, and what purposes do they serve? What would it mean, what could it mean, to try to see them as not necessarily belonging to me (us)?

This is the respect in which postmodernism is Enlightenment gone mad. In a fevered state of perpetual self-inspection to guarantee that nothing is taken at face value, it gets stuck in an unending pursuit of its own tail. With regard to the post-truth condition, it may look as if we are in a double-bind: if we attempt self-critical self-awareness of our own starting points, the explanation seems to lose force qua explanation in the empirical sense. But if we don’t make the effort, we are all Hamlet pointing our collective fingers at Gertrude, without really understanding why.

Those who take themselves to have clarified the causes of post-truth do so as if it were an object or phenomenon out there, amenable to scientific or scholarly methods, when in it actually has to do with the conditions of their own thought. The truthers and the post-truthers, whoever they are, all seem trapped in the antinomies of reason because they do not direct their attention to their own intellectual resources, possibilities and limitations. One way of approaching Arendt’s claims that, strictly speaking, we are nowhere when we think, is to put it somewhat differently, and say rather that thinking, insofar as it is a stepping back from the affairs of the world, has to do with a temporal rather than a spatial positioning toward something, a vantage point, stance, or attitude of thoughts in movement in relation to one another. I want to suggest that the modernist, formalist analysis of poetry, which is explicitly intended to distinguish

it from, say, historical, scientific or philosophical prose, actually has a bearing on considerations of the conditions of our own historical, scientific and philosophical thinking. Following Davidson's proposed methodology, I return to the ideas with which the paper began, and suggest that much is to be learned by paying attention to the way the structure of clarification as much as to its content.

## 4 Revealing the Rough Ground of Judgment

In a famous essay, 'The Heresy of Paraphrase', the great formalist critic, Cleanth Brooks, attacks the implicit dualist assumption built into conventional readings of poetry, which he thinks are "much worse than inadequate: they are positively misleading in their implication that the poem constitutes a 'statement' of some sort, the statement being true or false, and expressed more or less clearly (. . .)" (Brooks 1947, 196). What is 'said', he argues, cannot be separated from how it is said and remain poetry; and being a poem is integral to what the poem 'says', or, as Brooks put it: "The nature of the material sets the problem to be solved, and the solution is the ordering of the material". But one could argue that this is true even of the prose of scholarship. Unless we assert the primacy of how thoughts are intrinsically related to one another in a study, the 'pattern of thinking', if you would like, we haven't understood the thinking displayed in the article or essay at all, but are left with an abstract compositional structure in which statements or 'thought items' are contained. By pointing this out, I do not wish to align myself with the sorts of deconstructive readings that seek to lay bare the rhetorical strategies of demonstration. My point is almost the reverse, that the work speaks for itself, even, or perhaps especially, when it involves contradictions, paradoxes ambivalences and intricate complexes of attitudes. Indeed, as in poetry, one might think that such features display the real character of human thought, its rough ground.

Brooks says of the characteristic unity of poems, disregarding whatever logical unity they may or may not possess, that it "lies in the unification of attitudes into a hierarchy subordinated to a total and governing attitude" (Brooks 1947, 207). Now Brooks himself thinks that this distinguishes poetry from philosophy, science or history (or rather, he is too modest to make any claims whatsoever about the latter). Be that as it may, the notion that it is possible to seek and find a unifying 'governing attitude' is one that makes sense when considering works of scholarship in the human sciences. The governing attitude in these cases is not only the explicit research question, say, 'what are the causes and effects of the post-modern condition?', but also the doubts, reservations, hesitations, uncertainty, confusions, concerns, perplexities and ways of dealing with these that the author has in reasoning her way through to the answer. But the

very idea of expertise conceals or substitutes these elements: it often presupposes that there is a correct procedure for thinking about the conditions for our social, political and economic lives together, one which furthermore requires a specialized language that operates with standard definitions and entrenched techniques, and is more ‘transparent’ than everyday words used in an everyday way using everyday practices from everyday life. The academic form is thought to guarantee the universality of rigorous procedure, and the propositions emanating from it.

Brooks argues that poetry does not state ideas, but *tests* them.

Or, to put it in other terms, a poem does not deal primarily with ideas and events, but rather with the way in which a human being may come to terms with ideas and events. All poems, therefore, including the most objective poems, turn out on careful inspection to be poems really ‘about’ man himself. A poem then, to sum up, is to be judged, not by the truth or falsity as such of the idea which it incorporates, but [...] by its coherence, sensitivity, depth, richness, and toughmindedness,

writes Brooks in ‘The Problem of Belief and the Problem of Cognition’ (Brooks 1947, 256). Unlike Brooks, I don’t see why this should not apply equally to academic prose that attempts to step back and consider the conditions of our thought as something belonging to it and not as an external object, some ‘fact of the matter’ that is fundamentally independent of how we think about it or express it. Regarding the character of his own academic writing, Brooks reflects on his own formalism as entailing the possibility of general criteria for evaluating how well a poem succeeds, even if what constitutes a poem cannot be defined once and for all. One might say that, like Davidson, he is an anti-realist (about poetry), but not a relativist about meaning and truth in poetry. In ‘Criticism, History and Critical Relativism’, he echoes Kant’s idea of enlarged thought in *The Critique of Judgment*, when he acknowledges:

If there is any absolutism implied, I prefer not to conceal it, but to bring it out in the open. The foregoing discussions of poetry may, indeed, be hopelessly subjective. But, for better or for worse, the judgments are rendered, not merely in terms of some former historical period and not merely in terms of our own: the judgments are very frankly treated as if they were universal judgments. But if I am willing to expose the assumptions on which my own judgments rest, I am equally desirous of exposing the assumptions which underlie the typical varieties of attack on such judgments. (Brooks 1947, 217)

Brooks’ discussion of the nature of literary criticism here might apply equally to works in political theory or social analysis. The context in which Brooks makes the remark cited above is one where he is contemplating the question of why so many at the time found his approach troublesome. The situation to which he is referring is one that he characterizes as an intellectual environment that cannot

or will not abide an attitude (in the sense discussed above) that makes demands on our capacity for deliberation and judgment; the characterization he offers is strikingly familiar, although perhaps the predicament has deepened. He says that the attacks against his approach to literary criticism seemed to fall into a pattern that exemplifies the state of intellectual culture in general. He therefore asks the reader to read his remarks as “concerned with something more than the defense of a particular critical method. They have to do [. . .] with the question if we can have literary criticism at all” (Brooks 1947, 217–218).

Human thinking ordinarily involves judgment, discrimination and discernment, that is, distinguishing between right and wrong, better and worse (see Rosen 1999). In this respect, the pseudo-scientific form of certain kinds of academic writing constitutes a kind of coercive rhetoric, but one which seems to have lost its power to convince. The shared experience of a human being trying to come to terms with the difficulties of thinking coherently and without illusions about difficult matters occupying his mind, the sort of articulations of thought that Brooks identifies as poetic, on the other hand, can offer ‘truths’ of another kind, ones which are potent precisely because they don’t pretend to establish matters of fact in any empirical sense. To the contrary, like poetry, they unsettle notions, alive to the actual movement of thought and thus less vulnerable to the genuine skepticism and even cynicism of our day. Brooks’ idea of thinking as meaningful ordering or structure that makes an expression both discrete and concrete is a more conceptually articulated version of Eliot’s objective correlative. In both cases, the stress is on the active function of form in thinking.

To symbolize or provide a meaningful form or order is not simply to shape a material, but to arrange or organize units that are themselves meaningful, whose meaning is determined by having a certain determinate functional place with respect to the other units which, taken together, constitute the whole (see Descombes 2014). The form or ‘what it is’ of the tree or the desk can be recognized more or less automatically. The perceptible form can be detected, as it were, mechanically. The order of meaning, i.e., the arrangement of elements into a meaningful whole, however, requires thinking or reason. This is why ‘criticism’, as Brooks understands it, is necessary for grasping poetry. It is also why the humanities and social sciences exist at all, that is, to aid and develop our understanding of meaningful wholes: languages, religious customs, laws, rituals, dances, films, concertos, scientific practices, social media threads etc. Within an ordered whole, each of the elements take place, not as self-contained units of meaning, but rather as units of connection to the other elements of the whole. Grasping these connections requires a certain focusing of attention because the meaning, which is specified by the order, cannot be simply seen at a glance in the work in the way that we just ‘see’ the form of the tree or the desk.

Does this mean that, at least with regard to human experiences, practices and artefacts, ‘everything is interpretation’? No, the formalist thesis, quite to the contrary, is that certain phenomena require ‘attention to form’ because they *are* form. Form is meaning; thinking is form. A thinking without form, an amorphous thought, cannot be thought at all. An idea, to be distinct, must be discernible from other ideas, which is to say that it is already a form (as is suggested by the term *eidos*). Works of poetry are especially condensed ideas in the sense of meaningful form, whereas a desk, for instance, while it has to have form to be real and recognizable as a desk, does not consist of ideas (i.e., form). If we are trying to understand an idea, we must pay careful attention to its place in a series of ideas, or, as we say, ‘the line of reasoning’ it expresses. But, importantly, succession in human thinking is not mechanical. The form cannot be read out of the text without close attention to the units of connection, which are also the elements; in other words, the ‘idea’ is the meaningful order of the thoughts conveyed. The kinds of explanations of the post-truth condition discussed earlier are all attempts at better understanding specific kinds of meaningful orders, not trees or rocks. The problem is that they themselves are meaningful orders, dependent on the many prior acts of expression or symbolization that constitute the knowledge, understanding and know-how that we have.

What all this amounts to is this: as agents and elements of the present, let us call it the post-truth condition, we can do no more than discuss, weigh and consider experience in a variety of ways. Whatever angle we take will require some formulation, which will structure the way we pose the problem and thus what solutions or answers are possible or might seem necessary. That symbolization, in turn, will yield certain kinds of results which would not be rendered by a different ordering and arrangement. But recognizing this does not open the floodgates of relativism and nihilism, since reason will not be satisfied by just any old concatenation. The expression must have some objective correlative in a potentially shared experience of our common world.

The hope of the Enlightenment was that political freedom would engender and encourage a perpetually improved capacity for the exercise of sound judgment, for which reason thinkers like Diderot and Kant were so optimistic about the liberating potential of education. The idea that doubts about or discontent with convention, established institutions and received wisdom can be explained away or rejected out of hand as unreasonable as such would have been anathema to them. We would better understand the condition in which we find ourselves by meditating on our own starting points, indeed even taking seriously the possibility that some of these may be deficient, slanted or wrong, than by reassuring ourselves that we need not take those of others into account as genuinely worth considering. The aim would be to be able to see the rationality of a certain kind of

thinking and behavior, not as theoretically plausible, but as actually plausible. It is only by integrating it into our own thinking as a real, as potentially ‘true’, if you like, that we can move beyond the opposition as mere stance-taking toward enhanced or enlarged thought. The other alternative is to continue playing the role of Hamlet, repeatedly expressing our revulsion toward Gertrude without ever really knowing why.

## 5 Concluding Remarks

This paper, it will be recalled is not about content, but form, specifically the dynamic structure of thinking capable of self-correction and enhancement through engagement with the world and the other thinkers and actors in it. Assuming that I have interpreted Eliot, Davidson and Brooks right, and that they do have something important to say to us about how to think about thinking, a more practically minded political analyst might still rightly yearn for an answer to the burning question, ‘What is to be done?’ Are we to sit back and just accept that election results in liberal democracies are under constant attempts at manipulation by Russian troll factories? What do we do about people who actively obstruct our collective efforts to save ourselves and the planet from catastrophic climate change? It strikes me that the empirical answer to the practical question will necessarily have to do with the role of expertise in what might be called the scientific-educational-financial complex. The decline of epistemic authority need not be taken as a sign of inevitable decline, but as a healthy sign in liberal democracies that its citizens want to be counted among what the early pragmatist philosophers called “the community of inquiry”, that is, that each and every man strives to have what Peirce (1877, 22) called “a clear logical conscience”.

Our established institutions for science, education, culture and policy formulation could do more, perhaps something more important, than seeing to it that their results are communicated and disseminated. It is not self-evident that our academic conceptual schemes adequately express what they seek to explain.

Let us take the example of the notion of the Anthropocene, about which the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk remarked, “The proliferation of this concept can mainly be traced back to the fact that, under the guise of scientific neutrality, it conveys a message of almost unparalleled moral-political urgency” (cited in Davidson 2019). The notion derives from a context in which a group of scientists met to describe dramatic planetary changes; the institutionalization of a ‘fact’ such as the designation of a new epoch on the stratigraphical timescale is an arduous, slow collective process of extraction, analysis, measurement and calculation,

requiring enormous intellectual effort and substantial economic and technical resources. Even if the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) determines that the evidence justifies a clear demarcation from the Holocene epoch, that decision has to be ratified by the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS). The ‘fact’ so determined will thus be a *judgment* based on the findings of an enormous collective enterprise, examined by experts invested with the authority to further the scientific agenda by coming to agreement as to how to proceed. In this respect, the scientific fact of the matter is as much a decision as discovery; it is not a statement representing or reflecting an observation, but a collective cognitive act to arrange or order observation and experiments into a coherent idea that adequately concretizes and expresses ‘the external facts’ (Rider and Hyvönen 2022). If researchers find representative markers in the rock record that identify the point at which human activity “exploded to such a massive scale that it left an indelible signature on the globe” (Subramanian 2019, 169), that insight can be a shared point of reference for further debate in which the plurality of possible perspectives is acknowledged and brokered. The danger of using ‘facts’ as if they were simple observations or incontrovertible proofs rather than hard-won results of ongoing and tentative investigation is that it has the effect of coercing the polity into silence and submission; in short, it pulls science and scholarship into the sphere of the political, undermining their role as a common resource in a shared world.

While literary scholars can provide us with analyses that point out subtleties that not everyone might notice and thus enhance our grasp of *Macbeth*, they do not do so by telling us ‘what it’s about’. That we all understand because of our common humanity. The interpretation of what exactly *Hamlet* is actually about, on the other hand, is something of a cottage industry. There is a risk that the way in which we formulate the problem of post-truth will create a deluge of scholarship on the notion, without us ever having a clear idea of what it’s all about.

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