

## UNDERSTANDING IN A POST-TRUTH WORLD: COMPREHENSION AND CO-NAISSANCE AS EMPATHETIC ANTIDOTES TO POST-TRUTH POLITICS

Andrew Kirkpatrick

**ABSTRACT:** The election of Donald Trump and the accompanying alt-right fervor of fake news and alternative facts has brought into focus the so-called post-truth era. In this paper I argue that the term ‘post-truth’ amounts to little more than the mainstream articulation of the postmodern condition, or what Frederic Jameson called ‘the cultural logic of late capitalism’. It is argued that the thoroughly postmodern ‘marketplace of ideas’ has seen truth reduced to a thing or object to be packaged and sold in order to meet individual preferences, and that this has enabled the notion of post-truth to emerge. It is argued that though this is often veiled as a democratization of truth, the tendency of supply-side economics to manufacture demand has resulted in the production of competing, surplus truths, which are then ‘sold’ at the lowest, most efficient price possible. In light of this, it is argued that the post-truth era does not reflect an absence of truth, but rather its inverse; it involves the proliferation of truths. However, despite this pluralization, there remains a steadfast commitment to certainty through the implicit assumption that ‘truth’ reflects an objective standpoint. What this betrays is an underlying ontological commitment to static being. Accordingly, I contend that missing from post-truth politics are attempts at understanding. Unlike truth, understanding is taken as a dialectical movement that assumes an ontology of becoming. Alfred North Whitehead and Maurice Merleau-Ponty both provide ontological schemes in which the becoming of nature can be explained in terms of comprehension and co-naissance—as literally a ‘co-grasping,’ ‘co-birth’ or ‘co-knowing’. On this view, understanding is taken to be ontologically prior to truth and the mode through which nature produces itself. From this, I argue that understanding—as comprehension and co-naissance—can provide an empathetic alternative to truth, with such an empathetic alternative required if we are to overcome the post-truth stasis afflicting cultural and political life.

**KEYWORDS:** Post-truth politics; Empathy; Understanding; Comprehension

## INTRODUCTION: ON STYLE AND CONTENT

The spectacle presents itself as something enormously positive, indisputable and inaccessible. It says nothing more than “that which appears is good, [and] that which is good appears.” The attitude which it demands is passive acceptance which in fact it already obtained by its manner of appearing without reply, by its monopoly of appearance. – Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, § 12

This paper attempts to tie together a broad range of phenomena that help to constitute the pervasive, yet vaguely defined, ‘post-truth’ era. As a result, the footnotes in this paper include an eclectic mix of far-right conspiracy theories, mainstream news articles, and academic literature; not all of which are credible sources. But this reflects a broader point to be made about post-truth discourse; namely that it is the manifestation of a widespread *incredulity* that is said to afflict postmodern societies.<sup>1</sup> The inclusion of these sources is not designed to give them academic credence. Rather, in drawing on these diverse—and unorthodox—sources, the aim of this paper is to paint a picture of how these texts intersect with academic literature. In selecting these sources I have tried to avoid any overt bias or discrimination. I have included articles from what would be considered the mainstream Left of media organizations, along with articles from the mainstream Right. On a different axis, I have sought inclusions ranging from the codified law of White House executive policy to anti-establishment sources that would proudly reject the notion of ‘authority’ altogether.<sup>2</sup> This is not done in the pursuit of a tepid sense of ‘balance,’ but rather reflects an attempt to assemble a collage of post-truth fragments in order to make sense of them as a coherent whole. My training in academic philosophy, in particular in the philosophies of Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty, provides the context for this assemblage. Importantly, this is not a discipline specific paper, nor is it interdisciplinary. Rather, it is *extra-disciplinary*—that is, it is an attempt to go beyond academic disciplines altogether. Though this might run the risk of resulting in an undisciplined work, this is a risk I am willing to take.<sup>3</sup> In post-truth discourse, it seems that this kind of risk taking is increasingly required of academics.

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<sup>1</sup> J-F. Lyotard and F. Jameson, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1986, p. xxiv.

<sup>2</sup> The role of the Internet in fermenting post-truth discourse should be self-evident. The electronic sources cited in this paper are all freely available online.

<sup>3</sup> Though my academic training and experience does not allow me to fully ‘step outside’ my own disciplinary requirements.

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For this reason, the narrative I am presenting could be said to represent a tale of two papers. The first tends towards the more ‘spectacular’ language of post-truth discourse. Unfortunately, this seems to be an indication of political *praxis* in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By contrast, the second half of this paper consists of academic philosophy in its more technical sense. Unfortunately, this kind of thinking seems to be dangerously lacking from political *praxis* in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As such, this paper must be taken as a movement that gradually progresses from the language and style of post-truth politics towards a more philosophical and academically rigorous argument. However, this is not to say that the first half of the paper is totally devoid of intellectual content. On the contrary, it is an essay in its most original sense and remains philosophical throughout.<sup>4</sup> So while there might appear to be a ‘gap’ between the two halves of this paper, it is important that these two halves are ‘seen together’ as a unified whole characterized by movement. In this way, the style and content of the paper are designed to implicate each other. By its conclusion, I hope it becomes obvious why I have chosen to write the paper in this way.

Due to the nature of this paper, a brief roadmap of its contents is required: first, I will outline a definition of post-truth politics, arguing that the term ‘post-truth’ amounts to little more than the mainstream articulation of the postmodern condition. It will then be argued that the postmodern ‘marketplace of ideas’ has reduced truth to the status of ‘thing’ to be packaged and sold in order to meet individual preferences. It is argued that this approach to truth has facilitated the ascension of Donald Trump, who has been able to capitalize on the postmodern marketplace of ideas in order to assert himself politically. However, despite often being touted as a political ‘outsider,’ it will be shown that Trump is ultimately motivated by the same underlying assumptions of the establishment politicians that he claims to oppose—on both the Left and the Right. From this, it is argued that more than a political failure, post-truth politics can be said to represent an *ontological* failure, with this failure rooted in our de facto ontology of static being. In order to address this failure, I propose an ontology of becoming, which makes room for understanding as ontologically *prior* to truth. In developing this, I will draw on Alfred North Whitehead’s process metaphysics and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of flesh. Ultimately, I argue that through such an approach we can arrive at understanding as an empathetic alternative to the problems posed by static being and its manifestation in post-truth politics.

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<sup>4</sup> As per Montaigne, I take my lead from the French verb *Essayer*, meaning ‘to try’ or ‘attempt.’

## POST-TRUTH: OR, THE CULTURAL LOGIC OF POSTMODERNISM

In Albert Camus' novel *La Peste*, the plague is used as a metaphor for the rise of fascism in Europe leading up to and during the Second World War. Despite obvious signs of the plague, the established medical profession, media and government are all reluctant to name the plague for what it is. Camus writes:

[I]t was clear to those who were concerned with this curious illness that they were dealing with a real epidemic. This is when Castel, one of Rieux's colleagues ... came to see him.

'Of course,' he said 'you know what it is, Rieux, don't you?'

'I'm waiting for the results of the tests.' [Rieux replies]

'Well, I know. And I don't need tests. I spent part of my life working in China, and I saw a few cases in Paris, twenty years ago – though no one dared put a name to it at that time ... Come on, Rieux, you know as well as I do what it is.'

'Yes, Castel,' [Rieux] said. 'It's almost impossible to believe. But it appears that it must be the plague.'<sup>5</sup>

Post-truth is our plague. And like the plague, this idea is nothing new. In fact, the so-called post-truth era that we currently endure is little more than the morbid actuality of the postmodern condition. But what do we mean by the postmodern condition? As Jean-Francois Lyotard describes it, the postmodern condition is marked by an 'incredulity toward metanarratives.'<sup>6</sup> This incredulity results in the privileging of *les petits récits*—little, localised and fragmented narratives, at the expense of totalizing, absolute, 'master' narratives. For those who embrace postmodernism as something to be celebrated, these grand narratives represent domination from a master, often condemned as 'domineering, homogenizing and oppressive.'<sup>7</sup> Contrary to the imposition of a single, absolute truth, postmodern truths are found at the grass roots of common sense, emanating from the individual's perspective. These truths are both nomadic and monadic. That is to say, relative.

Does the postmodern condition simply reflect an absence of truth? Importantly, the postmodern condition is not manifest in the absence of truth, but in its inverse. It is marked by the proliferation of truths—in the plural. After all, the notion of relativism depends upon a multiplicity of truths, and not on the negation of truth as a concept. Let us not forget that it is in the 'post-truth' world that so-called 'truther' movements

<sup>5</sup> A. Camus and T. Judt, *The Plague*, trans. R. Buss, London, Penguin, 2001, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> Lyotard and F. Jameson, p. xxiv.

<sup>7</sup> A. Gare, 'Towards an Environmentalist Grand Narrative', in B. Gleeson and N. Low (eds.), *Governing for the Environment: Global Problems, Ethics and Democracy*, Houndmills, Palgrave, 2001, pp. 107-117.

flourish—and importantly, there are plenty of them. Holocaust deniers<sup>8</sup> and 9/11 truthers<sup>9</sup> are perhaps the most obvious.<sup>10</sup> That the moon landing was faked is also a classic of the truther canon.<sup>11</sup> Of course, climate change skeptics and deniers fit the bill, often offering us unmitigated access to the real truth behind climate change—the truth is, climate change is just a Chinese hoax.<sup>12</sup> According to leading alt-right figure Alex Jones, even Hillary Clinton’s suspect opening of a pickle jar on late night television reveals a far more sinister plot requiring empirical investigation (one pickle jar at a time).<sup>13</sup> There are truthers who claim that the Sandy Hook massacre was orchestrated by US government agencies and staged by child actors.<sup>14</sup> In Australia, we have Port Arthur trutherism, which in a similar vein denies the veracity of the Port Arthur massacre.<sup>15</sup> Of course we also have the fluoride free groups<sup>16</sup> and anti-vaxxers<sup>17</sup> who straddle a fine line with not only celebrity TV chefs,<sup>18</sup> but also the self-styled alt-right standard bearer of Australian politics; Pauline Hanson.<sup>19</sup> In a post-truth world, it seems

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<sup>8</sup> *Is the Holocaust a Hoax?* [website], <https://www.biblebelievers.org.au/holohoax.htm>, (accessed 2 June 2017).

<sup>9</sup> J. Austin, ‘Was 9/11 an Inside Job? Call for TRUTH over Building 7 collapse on eve of 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary,’ *Express*, 10 September 2016, <http://www.express.co.uk/news/weird/709000/Was-9-11-an-inside-job-Call-for-TRUTH-over-Building-7-collapse-on-eve-of-15th-anniversary>, (accessed 2 June 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Trump’s support of the ‘birther’ movement, which raises questions over the legitimacy of Barack Obama’s US citizenship, has also been well documented.

<sup>11</sup> J. Fox, ‘10 Reasons the Moon Landing Could Be a Hoax’, *Listverse*, 28 December 2012, <http://listverse.com/2012/12/28/10-reasons-the-moon-landings-could-be-a-hoax/>, (accessed 2 June 2017).

<sup>12</sup> D. Trump, ‘The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive’, *Twitter*, 6 December 2012, see: <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/265895292191248385?lang=en>, (accessed 2 June 2017).

<sup>13</sup> *Pickle-Gate: Hillary Caught Faking Feat* [online video], *The Alex Jones Channel*, 23 August 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uP2fdBUpcFQ> (accessed 2 June 2017).

<sup>14</sup> ‘Sandy Hook Exposed?’, *Snopes*, <http://www.snopes.com/politics/guns/newtown.asp> (accessed 2 June 2017).

<sup>15</sup> *The Truth About Port Arthur* [website] <http://southeastasianews.org/portarthur/index.html>, (accessed 2 June 2017).

<sup>16</sup> ‘The Fluoride Conspiracy’, *Information Liberation*, <http://www.informationliberation.com/?id=14949>, (accessed 2 June 2017).

<sup>17</sup> T. Bollinger, ‘The Truth About Vaccinations – History and Hoax’, *The Truth About Cancer*, <https://thetruthaboutcancer.com/the-truth-about-vaccinations/>, (accessed 2 June 2017).

<sup>18</sup> M. McKenzie-Murray, ‘Pete Evans and the rejection of science’, *The Saturday Paper*, 1 April 2017, <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/2017/04/01/pete-evans-and-the-rejection-science/14909652004436>, (accessed 2 June 2017).

<sup>19</sup> ‘Pauline Hanson joins Insiders’, *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, 5 March 2017, <http://www.abc.net.au/insiders/content/2016/s4630647.htm>, (accessed 2 June 2017).

that we have not given up on truth per se; we instead pursue ‘alternative facts.’<sup>20</sup>

This abundance of truth simply conforms to the logic of our time, which is the logic of the marketplace. Has postmodernism, or what Frederic Jameson called the cultural logic of late capitalism,<sup>21</sup> hit a critical mass in the post-truth era? That the term ‘post-truth’ receives widespread and casual utterance on mainstream news media outlets seems to signify that it has. Like Dr Rieux, it seems that we are finally prepared to name this plague for what it is—yet we remain largely unperturbed. This is because post-truth is, to all sensibility, instinctively outrageous, and therefore good for ratings. It is for this reason that we find it actively promoted by the nihilistic agents of the spectacle, who revel in post-truth fervor—from self-confessed alt-right trolls like Milo Yiannopoulos<sup>22</sup> to the outrage-fueled and ratings-obsessed Donald Trump. We endure this plague of post-truth enthusiasm against the unrelenting background of the spectacle, which Debord describes as ‘the sun that never sets over the empire of modern passivity.’<sup>23</sup> Like deer in the headlights, it is this passivity in the face of the post-truth spectacle that demonstrates the erosion and decay that postmodern ideas have already had on cultural and political life beyond the confines of academic language games. That is to say, the ‘real world’ discourse beyond academic philosophy has finally caught up to the scourge of postmodernity in an explicit way. Prior to this it was merely implied through rampant individualism and consumer culture, wherein a ‘philosophy’ came to be seen as a thing to possess, like a car or a sandwich filling. However, despite its plurality and interchangeability, philosophy so conceived remains fundamentally passive and static; more like a hat to wear or a position to adopt. The phrase ‘my philosophy is...’—an all too familiar utterance and source of great annoyance for many professional philosophers—succinctly captures the individuated, thing-ness of 21<sup>st</sup> century philosophy, along with its perceived role in common parlance. In this sense, philosophy is certainly not a movement characterized by the active pursuit of wisdom or the development of ideas. Rather, it is an opinion, a free-floating

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<sup>20</sup> R. Revesz, ‘Donald Trump’s presidential counselor Kellyanne Conway says Sean Spicer gave ‘alternative facts’ at first press briefing’, *Independent*, 22 January 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/kellyanne-conway-sean-spicer-alternative-facts-lies-press-briefing-donald-trump-administration-a7540441.html>, (accessed June 2 2017).

<sup>21</sup> F. Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1991.

<sup>22</sup> D. Eisenberg, ‘Milo Yiannopoulos Says Trolling Women is Doing God’s Work’, *Mediaite*, 2 September 2016, <http://www.mediaite.com/entertainment/milo-yiannopoulos-says-trolling-women-is-doing-gods-work/>, (accessed 2 June 2017); K.V. Brown, ‘The Ultimate Troll: The Terrifying Allure of Gamergate Icon Milo Yiannopoulos’, *Fusion*, 27 October 2015, <http://fusion.kinja.com/the-ultimate-troll-the-terrifying-allure-of-gamergate-1703852307>, (accessed 2 June 2017).

<sup>23</sup> G. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Detroit, Black & Red, 1983, § 13.

sample taken from the much vaunted and ideologically loaded ‘marketplace of ideas.’

However, it would be too simplistic to blame postmodern theorists.<sup>24</sup> Certain philosophers are also to blame; and this is an intentional pun. These are the philosophers who have reduced philosophy from a love of wisdom to a crude and dogged arresting of truth, which is increasingly seen as a big-game trophy to be placed in museums, dictionaries, or algebraic symbols. Ironically, it is this attitude that provides the conditions for something like ‘post-truth’ to emerge in the first place, with postmodernism simply representing the ‘dark side’ of positivism.<sup>25</sup> Whereas positivism assumes the thing-in-itself, positing truth as an object that its methods alone can illuminate, postmodernism tends to assume things-in-themselves. It is *laissez-faire* positivism without the pretension or desire for absolute illumination.<sup>26</sup> Those who embrace postmodernism are content to feel around in the dark, grasping one object, then another, to find the thing-in-itself *du jour*.

A typical criticism of postmodern relativism is that if everything is true and equally valid, then nothing is true, and truth is meaningless. I am not sure this is a sufficient criticism, or even a useful one. Arguing about truth with someone like Milo Yiannopoulos—who has made an art of semiotic pollution<sup>27</sup>—is a fruitless pursuit. He is a professional obscurantist, and we can count amongst his type the fossil fuel lobbyists and advertisers in general. This is unremarkable. When truth becomes a product, as it has in the marketplace of ideas, street hawkers are bound to emerge in order to sell truths. This is often veiled as a democratization of truth, and this democratization of truth explains why the totalizing grand narrative of climate science falls flat in the face of the democratized truth peddled to and by Trump’s

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<sup>24</sup> For instance, the work of pessimistic postmodern theorists such as Debord, Lyotard and Baudrillard can be read as a grim *diagnosis* of the postmodern condition rather than a manifesto in favor of it. This amounts to an awareness that should serve more as a warning than an endorsement. See: A. Kirkpatrick, ‘Modernity, Post-Modernity and Proto-Historicism: Reorienting Humanity Through a New Sense of Narrative Emplotment’, *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2014, p. 68.

<sup>25</sup> I owe this characterization of postmodernism as the ‘dark side’ of positivism to Lachlan Ross, whose paper ‘On the imaginary truth: How to get a grip on reality beyond realism’ was presented to the Joseph Needham Centre for Complex Processes research group at Swinburne University on the 10<sup>th</sup> of May, 2017.

<sup>26</sup> We are reminded that ‘The spectacle presents itself as something *enormously positive, indisputable and inaccessible*’ (emphasis added), Debord, § 12.

<sup>27</sup> Arran Gare describes semiotic pollution as ‘the power of transnational corporations and media moguls to corrupt and pollute healthy semiosis.’ This is largely achieved through rhetoric designed to undermine the ability for people to think rationally. See: A. Gare ‘The Semiotics of Global Warming: Combating Semiotic Corruption’, *Theory and Science*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2007.

‘deplorables,’<sup>28</sup> advertising agencies, and twitter feeds. Simply put, there is a better product on the market. If the idea of climate change is getting you down, we have something else to offer; what if coal was actually good for humanity?<sup>29</sup> If Al Gore’s truth was an inconvenient one then this must surely represent the opposite; a truth of convenience.

The question is, could we really expect anything else when we conceptualize truth in terms of a ‘marketplace’ of ideas, underpinned as it is by the notion of competing truths in which the best truth simply ‘wins out’? That Al Gore’s was ‘an’ inconvenient truth rather than ‘the’ inconvenient truth also conforms to this logic of the marketplace, implying that his is merely one amongst many; choose your own adventure. However this expectation that, in a marketplace of ideas, the best truth will somehow just rise to the top does not take into account the fact that markets generally tend towards the lowest common denominator. On this account, truth is not hard, but easy. Or rather, the best truths are easy. These truths are peddled at the lowest price possible, as easily digestible gruel that requires the least amount of effort to consume. It should be of no surprise to us, then, that a platform like twitter, limited as it is by 140 characters per tweet, has become President Trump’s medium of choice. Likewise, it is no wonder that Al Gore failed to cut-through; his truth was not easy to swallow. As with Debord’s spectacle, in the marketplace of ideas ‘that which appears is good, [and] that which is good appears.’<sup>30</sup>

The point to be made is that post-truth politics is the only logical outcome when we allow market metaphors to dominate and define our cultural and political life. In light of this, how are we to interpret Trump’s spectacular rise to the White House? Of course, this can only be understood in market terms, as a function of the political marketplace. Business metaphors are already rife in politics; we know that political parties are open about the need to manage their brand and ‘sell their message.’

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<sup>28</sup> J. Johnson, ‘Meet Donald Trump’s ‘basket of deplorables’’, *Washington Post*, 13 September 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/meet-donald-trumps-basket-of-deplorables/2016/09/13/f90d5da6-7989-11e6-ac8e-cf8e0dd91dc7\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.37675876d64f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/meet-donald-trumps-basket-of-deplorables/2016/09/13/f90d5da6-7989-11e6-ac8e-cf8e0dd91dc7_story.html?utm_term=.37675876d64f), (accessed 2 June 2017); D. Merica and S. Tatum, ‘Clinton expresses regret for saying ‘half’ of Trump supporters are ‘deplorables’’, *CNN*, 12 September 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/09/09/politics/hillary-clinton-donald-trump-basket-of-deplorables/index.html>, (accessed 2 June 2017); L. Lopez and M. Conlin, ‘Fed up with Washington, Trump’s ‘deplorables’ shake up the elite’, *Reuters*, 9 November 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-voters-idUSKBN1341AB>, (accessed 2 June 2017).

<sup>29</sup> ‘Coal ‘good for humanity’’, Prime Minister Tony Abbott says at \$3.9b Queensland mine opening’, *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, 13 October 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-10-13/coal-is-good-for-humanity-pm-tony-abbott-says/5810244>, (accessed 2 June 2017).

<sup>30</sup> Debord, § 12.



Taxpayers are viewed as shareholders, while the running of government is regarded as an exercise in business management—after all, a key part of Trump’s election platform was that he would bring his business acumen to the White House. As the new CEO of the United States, what executive bonus is Trump after?

For the duration of the campaign, Trump’s hostile takeover of the Republican Party effectively transformed it into a front for his own personal brand, and this front has since been extended to the White House. To say that Trump is trying to realize anything substantial for the American people would be a gross exaggeration. Trump was burnished at the height of neoliberal enthusiasm and his entire life has been a zero sum game composed of winners and losers. Ultimately there can be only one winner in life for Trump: himself. He is the perfect Hobbesian specimen whose goal is to co-opt as much power as possible.<sup>31</sup> Having made his money in real estate, he has been able to harness his power and celebrity to become commander-in-chief of the world’s most powerful military. In this position he has proven to be just as—if not more—hawkish than many accused Hillary Clinton of being.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, as per the establishment tradition, he has filled his royal court with loyalists<sup>33</sup> and family.<sup>34</sup> Taking this parody up

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<sup>31</sup> For a characterization of Hobbes’ philosophy in relation to individual power, see: A. Kirkpatrick, ‘Purposeless Technology and Chrematistic Pursuits: The Implicit Subordination of Homo-Economicus’, *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, vol. 13, no.1, 2017, pp. 272-275.

<sup>32</sup> M. Landler, ‘How Hillary Clinton Became a Hawk’, *The New York Times*, 21 April 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/24/magazine/how-hillary-clinton-became-a-hawk.html?mcubz=0>, (accessed 2 June 2017); J. Hahn, ‘A vote for Hillary Clinton is a vote for war’: Green Party’s Jill Stein warns of nuclear war in Clinton presidency”, *Breitbart*, <http://www.breitbart.com/big-government/2016/10/14/stein-vote-clinton-vote-nuclear-war/>, (accessed 2 June 2017); ‘Syria: Donald Trump orders missile strike against Assad airfield in retaliation for chemical attack’, *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, 7 April 2017, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-07/us-launches-cruise-missile-strike-on-syria/8425132>, (accessed 2 June 2017); M. Coppins, ‘Donald Trump, Inevitable Hawk’, *The Atlantic*, 8 April 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/04/donald-trump-inevitable-hawk/522390/>, (accessed 2 June 2017); D. Trump, ‘North Korea is looking for trouble. If China decides to help, that would be great. If not, we will solve the problem without them! U.S.A.’, *Twitter*, 11 April 2017, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/851767718248361986>, (accessed 2 June 2017).

<sup>33</sup> ‘Trump taps loyalists for Cabinet picks: Session for AG, Pompeo as CIA director’ *Fox News*, 18 November 2016, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2016/11/18/trump-taps-loyalists-for-cabinet-picks-session-for-ag-pompeo-as-cia-director.html>, (accessed 2 June 2017).

<sup>34</sup> ‘Ivanka Trump to be assistant to US president’, *BBC News*, 30 March 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-39438769>, (accessed 2 June 2017); M.S. Schmidt, E. Lipton and C. Savage, ‘Jared Kushner, Trump’s Son-in-Law, Is Cleared to Serve as Adviser’, *The New York Times*, 21 January 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/21/us/politics/donald-trump-jared-kushner-justice-department.html?mcubz=0>, (accessed 2 June 2017); M. Oppenheim, ‘Donald Trump’s son says nepotism a ‘factor of life’’, *Independent*, 5 April 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/eric-trump-nepotism-factor-of-life-forbes-trump-tower-ivanka-trump-a7667891.html>, (accessed 2 June 2017).

a notch, he even resides at his Floridian winter palace Mar-a-Lago most weekends.<sup>35</sup> It seems that in throwing out establishment politicians, America has opted for something more closely resembling the pre-revolutionary court of Versailles. This is Trump: landlord, warlord, aristocrat, and leviathan.

How has Trump achieved this awesome power? In an increasingly confused and frightened world, bombarded as we are by inconvenient truths and their convenient counterparts, Trump has taken advantage of a misplaced nostalgia for Reagan's America, while simultaneously promoting a hollow and inconsistent brand of protectionism. On the one hand he peddles the voodoo faith of trickle-down economics in his push to 'Make America Great Again.' This is a throwback to tax cuts for the super wealthy<sup>36</sup> and the abolishment of tyrannical regulations.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, Trump stokes the very real fears and anxieties that Reagan's economic program produced in America's working class in the first place. This is the anti-NAFTA, anti-TPP, American Made Trump.<sup>38</sup> The question is, how does this square with Reaganomic doctrines of deregulation, the liberalization of trade, the privatization of public assets and massive tax cuts for the super wealthy? The short answer is that it does not. Trump is quite comfortable playing both sides. He is incoherent, but this does not matter in a post-truth world. To borrow the terminology of the marketeers: supply outstrips demand. Truth has been devalued, and it was devalued long before Kellyanne Conway's invocation of 'alternative facts.' In using this term, Conway merely gave voice to what we were already familiar with. She may have named *The Plague*, but surely we were unsurprised.

Given these inconsistencies, which side of Trump will ultimately triumph? Will it be Reagonite Trump or the blue-collar champion? It is likely that neither of these will

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<sup>35</sup> P. Bump, 'Donald Trump spends 12<sup>th</sup> consecutive weekend away from White House at Trump-branded resort', *Independent*, 24 April 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/donald-trump-mar-a-lago-trump-resort-virginia-12-consecutive-weekend-florida-winter-white-house-a7698861.html>, (accessed 2 June 2017).

<sup>36</sup> D. Rushe, B. Jacobs and S. Siddiqui, 'Trump under fire over 'huge tax cut for the rich'', *The Guardian*, 27 April 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/apr/26/trump-tax-cuts-proposal-deductions-brackets>, (accessed 2 June 2017).

<sup>37</sup> Trump's executive policy is that for every new regulation, two existing ones must be abolished—regardless of content. See: 'Presidential Executive Order on Reducing Regulation and Controlling Regulatory Costs', 30 January 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/01/30/presidential-executive-order-reducing-regulation-and-controlling>, (accessed 2 June 2017).

<sup>38</sup> G. Korte, 'On his 100<sup>th</sup> day in office, Trump orders review of free trade agreements', *USA Today*, 29 April 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2017/04/29/100-days-trump-order-review-free-trade-agreements-commerce/101066150/>, (accessed 2 June 2017).

prevail, since both appear to be adoptable masks that can be swapped out and shifted between depending on the audience. Again, could we really expect anything else when philosophy has been reduced to a fashion accessory that one may fleetingly possess? However, beneath these masks of sanity, there is a consistency to Trump, and this consistency is found in his combative nature. For Trump, life is black and white, composed of winners and losers. This is the same social Darwinist account of human nature that is accepted and promoted by the so-called 'establishment' politicians he claims to oppose. However, this mindset is no longer exclusive to the Right. There has also been a twofold acceptance of Margaret Thatcher's infamous claim that 'there is no alternative' to neoliberal economics on the mainstream Left as well. First, they have come to embrace neoliberalism as their ultimate reference point and default starting position. This acceptance has been compounded by their myopic delusion that there can be no *credible* alternative to their own weak, left-brand of liberalism.<sup>39</sup> In harboring this incredulity toward any metanarrative that might rival the individualism of economic rationalism, the mainstream Left find themselves not only echoing Thatcher, but also vindicating Lyotard's diagnosis.

On the whole, what this amounts to is a false dialectic between the Left and the Right, whereby they simply feign opposition to one another while making the same base assumptions. Trump, often touted as an outsider, does not represent a true departure from neoliberalism. Rather, in Trump we are presented with a confused and intentionally muddled version of the same old neoliberal social Darwinism. Trump is playing *their* game, but he is playing it better than they are, having outplayed both Republicans and Democrats to achieve maximum individual power. On this assessment, it seems that Reaganite Trump does indeed win out over blue-collar Trump. The false dialectic has not been shattered after all; a new player has simply entered into the fray. And so perhaps we should look to the theatre to help explain this.

It is in Act V, Scene II of *Hamlet* that a dueling Laertes and Hamlet switch rapiers in their scuffle; Hamlet unwittingly adopts Laertes' poisoned blade, felling him by his own treachery.<sup>40</sup> This allows Fortinbras, Norwegian outsider, to storm the castle unhindered. And so our own political pantomimes play out in similar fashion. Trump, a veritable Fortinbras, has taken control of Denmark while the traditional Left and Right madly duel in a chaotic, senseless and decadent bout; each ultimately undone by the same poison.

Of course, the election of Trump was met with utter disbelief. Nowhere was this

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<sup>39</sup> The undermining of Bernie Sanders by the Democratic Party hierarchy is evidence of this.

<sup>40</sup> W. Shakespeare, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, Oxford, The Shakespeare Head Press, pp. 708-712.

shock more apparent than on the faces of his political opponents. Clinton's supporters were certain that Trump could not win—this truth was paid for on the marketplace of ideas and bundled with their party membership fees. Importantly, and despite a long and bitter election campaign, this was a truth that appeared *without reply*;<sup>41</sup> or at least it was a truth that was not open to the kind of reply that it might have received from Trump's rust-belt 'deplorables.' Yet the inconvenient truth about the election is that Trump did win—and many still do not understand how or why. This is at the heart of the issue; truth and understanding are two very different things.

#### TOWARDS AN ONTOLOGY OF UNDERSTANDING

More than a political failure, this lack of understanding should be regarded as an ontological failure. This is because the notion of truth carries with it some serious ontological weight. That is, truth primarily concerns the nature of 'being' or 'what is.' When we speak of truth in terms of what 'is,' then that which 'is not' is typically considered 'false.' This dichotomy of true and false translates into a thoroughly Parmenidean dichotomy of being and not being. This is the black and white mindset of Trump, who sees the world in terms of winners and losers. At best, this is limiting. At worst, it is downright debilitating. In place of this, an ontological account of understanding is required, and such an account can be found in the philosophies of Alfred North Whitehead and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

To ask 'what is?' for Whitehead is, quite simply, to ask the wrong question. For Whitehead the distinction between true and false is 'largely irrelevant for the pursuit of knowledge.'<sup>42</sup> Rather, such matters belong to the domain of the simple-minded logician. This is summed up by Whitehead in regards to his former student and collaborator, Bertrand Russell: 'Bertie says that I am muddle headed, but I say that he is simple minded.'<sup>43</sup> Of course, Russell represents one of those certain philosophers I referred to earlier, whose logical positivism attempted to arrest and pin down truth in symbolic abstractions. Happily confused and muddle-headed by contrast, it is not a matter of 'what is' for Whitehead, but a matter of 'what becomes'—of what emerges.

In Whitehead's metaphysics, actual entities are those 'real things' that make up the actual world. As Whitehead puts it, 'there is no going behind actual entities to find

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<sup>41</sup> 'The attitude which [the spectacle] demands ... [is] already obtained by its manner of appearing *without reply*, by its *monopoly of appearance*' (emphasis added), Debord, § 12.

<sup>42</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 11.

<sup>43</sup> C. Hartshorne *Insights and Oversights of Great Thinkers: An Evaluation of Western Philosophy*, Albany, SUNY Press, 1983, p. 255.

anything ... more real.<sup>44</sup> Also referred to as ‘actual occasions,’ these entities are understood to be durational processes of becoming. It is through these actual entities that Whitehead is able to attribute a notion of subjective experience throughout the whole of nature, with actual entities also understood as ‘subjects’ or ‘drops of experience.’<sup>45</sup> If we understand actual entities as units of experience and transitory processes of becoming, then we can begin to think about the ‘life,’ as it were, of actual occasions. This life span of actual entities is understood as a process of attaining ‘satisfactions’ or ‘achievements,’ with ‘concrecence’ the word used to describe the phase of growth that entities undergo in achieving their satisfactions, signifying the growing together of many into the unity of one. This is achieved through acts of what Whitehead calls prehension, coming from the Latin verb *prehensio* meaning ‘to seize.’ Eternal objects provide the ‘subjective aim,’ or ‘lure,’<sup>46</sup> of an actual entity, and reflect the nascent potentiality of nature. There is, then, a two-fold potentiality in nature; there is a ‘general potentiality provided by eternal objects’ and a ‘real’ potentiality ‘conditioned by the data provided by the actual world.’<sup>47</sup> The ‘achievement’ of actual entities reflects the outcome of this dialectical interaction between the past and future, resulting in the growing together of entities into objects for future acts of becoming.

Concrecence and prehension imply that actual entities are not atomistic objects *externally* related to one another, but experiencing subjects that are open and *internally* related to one another, growing into, with, of, and from one another. Unlike Leibniz’s windowless monads, Whitehead’s actual entities are thoroughly ‘windowed’ and open to one another. Furthermore, actual entities are also *affectively* related to one another, with prehensions also termed ‘feelings.’ Feeling is understood by Whitehead to be analogous to perception, whereby to *feel* is also to *perceive*. So when an actual entity, as an experiencing subject, *prehends* an external object, it is *perceiving*, *experiencing*, and *feeling* that object. In short, actual entities are those processes of becoming that make up the actual world. On this view, seemingly static objects are taken to be derivative achievements of a more fundamental process that unfolds through the active seizing and growing together of actual occasions.

This metaphysical doctrine is also mirrored in Whitehead’s theory of education. For Whitehead, the educative process is composed of three phases: Romance,

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<sup>44</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 18.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> E.M. Kraus, *The Metaphysics of Experience: A Companion to Whitehead’s Process and Reality*, New York, Fordham University Press, 1998, p. 108.

<sup>47</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 65.

Precision, and Generalisation.<sup>48</sup> As Elizabeth Kraus notes, no single one of these phases can be singled out as the most important, however if understanding is to take place at all, it ‘must begin with a moment of romance.’<sup>49</sup> This is associated with notions of adventure and inspiration, which maintain an ambivalent relationship with perfection. While the ideal of perfection is required for inspiration, the actual *attainment* of perfection will lead to the withering of inspiration.<sup>50</sup> Hence, there is always a requirement for novelty in learning; for a romantic impulse that leads to an imaginative leap, or what Whitehead calls the *Adventure of Ideas*. In short, for any idea to take hold, for any genuine understanding or *com-prehension* to take place, learning requires that an individual be affected by an emotional lure, or a curiosity, understood in Whitehead’s terminology as romance.

This idea of romance implies a certain *ambiguity* and *obscurity* brought on by a lack of clarity. While perfection aimed at is ‘beautiful,’ the beauty is found in the process and the act of creation. Perfection attained through repetition, for instance through the ‘mechanical acquisition’<sup>51</sup> of wrote-learned facts, will be a hollow and illusory perfection; an empty truth. This is not a sign of learning at all, but rather a sign of decay. This is partially what Whitehead means when he says that ‘it is more important that a proposition be interesting than ... true.’<sup>52</sup> The emphasis is placed on the attainment of *new* forms and feelings as opposed to the reiteration of what has already been achieved. In short, a true fact is rendered impotent unless it awakens within us a response by way of some feeling; that is, unless it elicits some romance.

For Whitehead, understanding as *com-prehension* is not just the mode through which we come to know things; it is also the mode through which nature produces itself. On this view, understanding and experience become identical insofar as they denote existence. When we speak of truth as ontologically prior to understanding, we are committing the dual fallacies of what Whitehead calls simple location and misplaced concreteness.<sup>53</sup> Truth is, at best, a simply located abstraction functioning as a past achievement or by-product of comprehension.

A similar appeal to understanding can be found in Merleau-Ponty’s later works through the notion of *co-naissance*. But first, what ‘is’ for Merleau-Ponty? For Merleau-Ponty *la chair du monde*—the flesh of the world—constitutes all that is. That is to say, for

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<sup>48</sup> Whitehead, *The Aims of Education*, p. 28.

<sup>49</sup> Kraus, p. 9.

<sup>50</sup> A.N. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, New York, The Free Press, 1961, p. 257.

<sup>51</sup> Kraus, p. 9.

<sup>52</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 259

<sup>53</sup> For an account of these fallacies, see: A.N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, New York, The Free Press, 1967, pp. 50-51.

Merleau-Ponty the flesh of the world constitutes ‘being’ or ‘truth.’ Explication of this ontology arises primarily in his final, incomplete work posthumously published as *The Visible and the Invisible*. Notably, a working title for this unfinished manuscript—composed of three reasonably complete chapters and extensive working notes—was *L’Origine de la Vérité*, or *The Origin of Truth*.<sup>54</sup>

According to Merleau-Ponty, the flesh of my body and the flesh of the world are one, with Merleau-Ponty going so far as to say that we are made from *la même étoffe*—the same stuff. Merleau-Ponty famously demonstrates this in terms of the left hand touching the right hand. Does this mean that we can interpret the flesh as something akin to Spinoza’s monistic substance? Not necessarily. There is a danger, when thinking the flesh, of lapsing into a naïve holism that would dissolve all differences in nature. However, this error is based on a materialist interpretation of the flesh that Merleau-Ponty resoundingly rejects. Merleau-Ponty tells us that ‘The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance.’<sup>55</sup> Nor is it ‘a fact or a sum of facts ... in the sense of corpuscles of being which would add up or continue on one another to form beings ... Nor is [it] ... some “psychic” material... [or] representation for a mind.’<sup>56</sup> How, then, are we to understand the flesh?

We can avoid naïve holism when we assume a flesh of process, and there is a precedent for this. Merleau-Ponty recognises that along with continuity there must be a sense of difference in the flesh, that is, a ‘gap’ or an *écart* between the touching and the touched. However, such ‘gaps’ need not imply total discontinuity. As Merleau-Ponty puts it:

This hiatus between my right hand touched and my right hand touching, between my voice heard and my voice uttered, between one moment of my tactile life and the following one, is not an ontological void ... it is spanned by the total being of my body, and by that of the world.<sup>57</sup>

What is Merleau-Ponty offering us here? Rather than corpuscularian void-space, the flesh is said to span these gaps; they are thick with its general sense of being. How can this be? It is worth noting that the French word *étoffe* is translatable to English as ‘stuff,’ ‘cloth,’ or ‘fabric.’<sup>58</sup> So when Merleau-Ponty says that we are ‘made of the same stuff’ in

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<sup>54</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty and C. Lefort, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. A. Lingis, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1968, p. xxxiv.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 139-140.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>58</sup> G. Johnson, *The Retrieval of the Beautiful: Thinking Through Merleau-Ponty’s Aesthetics*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2009, p. 32.

reference to the flesh,<sup>59</sup> we can equally understand this as being ‘made of the same fabric.’ This understanding of the flesh as an ironically *immaterial* fabric helps us to guard against a movement that would *iron out* the differences in the flesh. Rather, this conception of the flesh indicates that it is the folding over of the flesh that creates these gaps, providing the space and depth in which the flesh is then able to *in-crease* itself beyond itself. Rather than breaking down the flesh, this is a conceptual movement that builds it up. That is, we are presented with a flesh of *emergence* and *creative becoming*.<sup>60</sup>

On this understanding, my left hand may be one fold of the world’s flesh while my right hand is another. Yet these hands share in the same body and in the same world. They are cut, or abstracted, from the same cloth. Their continuity is grounded in perceptual exchanges, wherein the left hand feels, perceives, and recognizes the right hand as different—much like Whitehead’s perceiving and feeling actual entities. This exchange is only possible through a dialectic of proximity and distance. On this understanding, gaps do not serve to atomize, disconnect or cleave the flesh. On the contrary, these gaps are what unite it. This is because ‘gaps’ provide the spaces in which movement, recognition, and becoming are able to take place. In providing this room to grow, these gaps become fundamental in transforming the flesh from a flesh of static monism—being—to a flesh of movement and dynamic emergence—becoming.

Thus it is in gaps that we are provided a space for mobility, and this mobility can be understood in reference to the familiar phenomenological concept of intentionality. Central to Husserlian phenomenological doctrine, intentionality is understood as the ‘fundamental property of consciousness,’<sup>61</sup> which is described as either being directed *towards* or *of/about* something.<sup>62</sup> Coming from the Latin verb *intendere*, meaning ‘to point’ or ‘to aim at,’ there are two levels of intentionality that Husserl appeals to. These are ‘act intentionality’ and ‘operative intentionality.’ Husserlian phenomenology tends to emphasize act intentionality, which can be read as the conscious awareness that is *of* or *about* things. By contrast, operative intentionality is a more primordial, *pre-reflective* intentionality that entails being directed *towards* something.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty shifts his phenomenological focus

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<sup>59</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, trans. J.M. Edie, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1964, p. 163.

<sup>60</sup> For a more detailed account of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of flesh, see: A. Kirkpatrick, ‘Feeling in the Flesh: Approaching an Ecological Ethic Through Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty’, *Parthesia*, no. 28, 2017, pp. 176-196.

<sup>61</sup> R. McIntyre and D.W. Smith, ‘Theory of Intentionality’ in J.N Mahony and W.R. McKenna (eds.), *Husserl’s Phenomenology: A Textbook*, Washington D.C., University Press of America, 1989, p. 147.

<sup>62</sup> M. Reuter, ‘Merleau-Ponty’s Notion of Pre-reflective Intentionality’, *Synthese*, vol. 118, no. 1, 1999, p. 69.



towards operative intentionality, which is said to exist ‘beneath’ act intentionality.<sup>63</sup> This is the motor-intentionality of the body-subject<sup>64</sup> who habitually grasps the world. The differences between the two levels of intentionality can be summed up as the difference between pointing and grasping. Act intentionality that is ‘of or about’ points at an object, while operative intentionality is directed *towards* the object. When we point at something, we remain stationary and removed from that object. The gap between the object and the individual is not a traversable space, but a void of distance. Pointing *objectifies* the thing as static, distant, and other. By contrast, operative intentionality that is directed ‘towards’ an object requires movement and achievement. Unlike pointing, it is a *grasping* that involves a bodily movement which envelops the object and grows towards it. In this sense, we are reminded not of *intendere*, which is to point, but of the latin *prehensio*, which is to seize. While grasping seizes and incorporates the ‘thing,’ this is not a uni-directional movement. Importantly, the object, or the world, also lures us. Therefore, we can say that Merleau-Ponty’s notion of operative intentionality reflects a phenomenological *com-prehension*.<sup>65</sup> That is, a co-grasping that occurs between self and the world. This idea of *growing together*, or concrescence, also finds a precedence in Merleau-Ponty’s use of the term *co-naissance*.

Borrowed from French poet and dramatist Paul Claudel,<sup>66</sup> *co-naissance* has an important double meaning for Merleau-Ponty. *Naissance* is the French word for ‘birth,’ while *connaissance* comes from the verb *connaître*, which means ‘to know’ or ‘to understand.’ Hence, to have *co-naissance*, is to have both an ‘understanding’ and a ‘co-birth.’ This has a subtle but important difference to the verb *savoir*, which also means ‘to know.’ To know in terms of *savoir* is to know ‘of’ or ‘about’ something; it is the knowledge of pointing. In Whitehead’s terminology, the knowledge of *savoir* might be considered precision without romance—a distant pointing without feeling. In contrast to *savoir*, understanding in terms of *connaissance* implies a more comfortable familiarity with something, which in turn raises the notion of *famille*, or family. Thus to have an understanding is to have a familial bond, a genetic relationship, or *to be of the same flesh*. Rather than an objective tool, this is a knowledge that dwells within and constitutes us,

<sup>63</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. D.A. Landes, Abingdon, Routledge, 2012, p. 441.

<sup>64</sup> Reuter, p. 72.

<sup>65</sup> Importantly, in the preface of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty notes that the “That through this enlarged notion of intentionality, phenomenological “understanding” is distinguished from classical “intellection” ... and so phenomenology can become a phenomenology of genesis.” p. lxxxii. This role of understanding as *genesis* has important implications when we consider questions concerning *The Origin of Truth*.

<sup>66</sup> W.S. Hamrick and J. Van der Veken, *Nature and Logos: A Whiteheadian Key to Merleau-Ponty’s Fundamental Thought*, Albany, SUNY Press, 2011, p. 26.

insofar as it shapes our experience and informs our ongoing engagement with the world. That is to say, *co-naissance* is a knowledge that spans and constitutes both the knower and the known, or the toucher and the touched, as two folds of the same reversible flesh. The notion that *co-naissance* is indicative of a familial bond becomes more concrete when we consider that Merleau-Ponty also refers to the flesh as ‘mother.’<sup>67</sup> When we understand the flesh as mother, we understand it as that which enables *co-naissance* to take place.

While Merleau-Ponty’s theory of intentionality is clearly influenced by Husserl, his emphasis on the operative intentionality of the body-subject locates his thought closely alongside Whitehead’s metaphysics. Just as Merleau-Ponty’s theory of operative intentionality emphasises the role the world plays in *grasping us*, Whitehead’s theory of education tells us that understanding does not occur when we merely grasp, or acquire the idea—it can importantly only begin when the idea grasps us, or lures us towards it. On this interpretation, the flesh is not a being, but a becoming, and the way the flesh becomes is through *co-naissance*. That is, understanding involves a process of *growing together*; a concrescence marked by com-prehension and *co-naissance*. Thus for Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty, understanding effectively becomes *The Origin of Truth*.

#### CONCLUSION: UNDERSTANDING AS EMPATHETIC?

At its most fundamental level, the problem of ‘post-truth’ represents an affront to dialectical thinking. As I adopt it, dialectical thinking is not so much a rigorous method as it is a general style of thought. Rather than clarity, this is a style that tends towards greater confusions,<sup>68</sup> resulting in an awareness of greater ignorance and complexity. While this style of dialectical thinking might achieve less clarity and less ‘truth,’ what it does provide is a greater capacity for understanding. Ignorance in this sense should be taken as a *prerequisite* for wisdom, with this approach to knowledge summed up by Whitehead, who notes:

In my own work at universities I have been much struck by the paralysis of thought induced in pupils by the aimless accumulation of precise knowledge, inert and unutilized. It should be the chief aim of a university professor to exhibit himself in his own true character—that is, as an ignorant man thinking, actively utilizing his small share of knowledge. In a sense, knowledge shrinks as wisdom

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<sup>67</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 267.

<sup>68</sup> Similar to how Whitehead characterizes the study of philosophy as ‘a voyage towards the larger generalities.’ A.N. Whitehead, D.R Griffin and D.W. Sherburne, *Process and Reality: Corrected Edition*, New York, The Free Press, 1978, p. 10.

grows.<sup>69</sup>

This awareness of ignorance is dangerously lacking in post-truth discourse. Not just for those on the alt-right, but also for those on the neoliberal Left—not to mention those in groups like ISIS, who are so certain of their beliefs that they are willing to blow themselves up over them. The problem is not that these groups are ignorant of the truth. Rather it is the opposite; they are afflicted by an absolute certainty. As Camus points out, it takes a certain kind of person to commit suicide; namely, one who is certain that life is not worth living.<sup>70</sup> Implicitly, those who commit suicide find a greater meaning in death, and we can include within this the apparent political suicide of mainstream parties. If politics includes productive dialogue *with* your opponents instead of disingenuous and strictly oppositional debate, then it seems that politics is simply not worth doing.

As a result, we find ourselves gridlocked in certainties. This image of gridlock is important. Gridlock represents a turgid, corpuscularian entity that conforms to the post-truth logic of a rigid, isolated many. These things-in-themselves are, like Leibniz's windowless monads, perspectives that are closed to one another. But what does gridlock sound like? In gridlock, complex situations and frustrations are outsourced to flat, monotone car horns, resulting in discordant, anti-symphonies. This might create a lot of noise, but it gets nobody anywhere. This is what post-truth politics feels and sounds like. What we require to overcome this gridlock are acts of understanding, and genuine understanding can only be achieved when we think in terms of comprehension and *co-naissance*.

What this approach offers us is an empathetic alternative to truth as a way of relating to each other and knowing the world. It is empathetic because it implies a growing together, a being born together and being constantly renewed by our experiences with and of the other. On this view, to understand another person is to do more than simply dwell in their shoes; it involves being changed and becoming different because of this experience. We can learn a lot by looking at the world understanding. To understand is to stand under—to dwell within, or be close to. This can only be appreciated in an active sense, requiring a movement that seeks to

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<sup>69</sup> A.N. Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays*, New York, The Free Press, 1967, p. 37.

<sup>70</sup> 'Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized ... the absence of any profound reason for living ... One kills oneself because life is not living, that is certainly a truth ... But does that insult to existence, that flat denial in which it is plunged come from the fact that it has no meaning?' A. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. J. O'Brien, London, Penguin, 2005, pp. 4-7. See also: A. Kirkpatrick, 'Chaos, Indifference and the Metaphysics of Absurdity: The Ethical Challenges Posed by Gare's Process Thought,' *Process Studies Supplement*, no. 21, 2015, pp. 26-34.

overcome a distance. It is the taking up of a novel position, not in isolation, but in response to and as *lured* by the other through a sense of romance.

The problem of ‘post-truth’ occurs prior to the addition of a prefix. It lies in the concept of truth itself, as a static and enduring ‘thing’. We are ‘post-truth’ not because truth is *passé* and we have moved beyond it as a concept. We are post-truth because we already have and possess our truths. This has only been amplified by the postmodern condition, whose little narratives serve as impenetrable bastions of certainty. Most alarming in post-truth discourse is the lack of empathy for and movement between these little narratives. Such empathetic movements can provide the sorely needed antidote to our post-truth plague. However, in our increasingly divided political times, when the global stakes have never been higher, attempts to cross these gaps are conspicuously missing. The question we need to ask ourselves is: do our ontological commitments allow us to overcome these distances? What I am suggesting is that our de facto ontology of static being does not.

Deakin University  
akirkpat@deakin.edu.au

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