

Bertrand Russell and the Ethics of Truth: A Critique of Pragmatism from James to Orwell

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Abstract: This article examines Bertrand Russell’s engagement with pragmatism through his critical yet respectful treatment of William James and John Dewey in *A History of Western Philosophy* (1945). While Russell endorses the metaphysical innovation of neutral monism, especially in James’s doctrine of radical empiricism, he rejects the pragmatist redefinition of truth as a function of practical success. The analysis reconstructs Russell’s main arguments against pragmatist epistemology, emphasizing his insistence on truth as correspondence between belief and reality. Particular attention is given to Russell’s theory of belief, his conception of the “bearer of truth,” and his critique of instrumentalist approaches that conflate usefulness with validity. The article concludes by drawing a parallel with George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, showing how Russell’s concerns anticipate the political and ethical risks of subordinating truth to utility. In light of current challenges such as misinformation, algorithmic manipulation, and post-truth politics, Russell’s critique emerges as a timely defense of objective truth and the conditions for free inquiry and public discourse.

Keywords: Bertrand Russell; John Dewey; objectivity; pragmatism; theory of truth; William James.

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1. Introduction

The early decades of the twentieth century marked a turning point in the development of modern philosophy. Among the intellectual movements that emerged in response to the perceived limitations of classical metaphysics and absolute idealism, pragmatism stood out for its radical redefinition of traditional concepts such as meaning, knowledge, and especially truth. Pragmatists like William James and John Dewey sought to ground philosophy not in abstract speculation, but in experience, action, and consequence. They proposed that beliefs should be treated as tools for coping with life—instruments for navigating reality rather than static representations of it. For both thinkers, the truth of a belief was to be measured not by its correspondence to external facts, but by its capacity to function effectively in guiding action.

Bertrand Russell, a central figure in the rise of analytic philosophy, responded to pragmatism with a combination of admiration and strong criticism. In the penultimate and preceding chapters of his *History of Western Philosophy* (1945), devoted respectively to William James and John Dewey, Russell presents a sustained polemic against the pragmatist theory of truth—which he considers its most original and most problematic doctrine. At the same time, he expresses a deeply respectful and even sympathetic attitude toward both philosophers. He acknowledges their originality, moral seriousness, and their shared dissatisfaction with the speculative excesses of idealism. Most notably, he praises one key pragmatist idea with which he substantially agrees: the doctrine of *neutral monism*.

Russell's critique of pragmatism must be situated within the broader intellectual context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While he shared the pragmatist impulse to reject metaphysical absolutism and engage with lived experience, he was equally committed to preserving a conception of truth grounded in objective correspondence with reality. This commitment to realism would come to define much of analytic philosophy in the decades that followed. The two chapters on James and Dewey thus offer a valuable perspective on Russell's complex relationship to the pragmatist tradition—a relationship shaped by both philosophical convergence and principled disagreement.

This article explores that relationship by focusing on the two central ideas that structure Russell's engagement with pragmatism: his rejection of the pragmatist redefinition of truth, and his partial endorsement of neutral monism. The discussion reconstructs Russell's arguments against the utility theory of truth, explores his metaphysical agreement with James's radical empiricism, and highlights his evolving account of belief and the "bearer of truth." In conclusion, the paper extends Russell's warnings about the political implications of redefining truth, drawing a parallel with Orwell's dystopian critique of ideological language, and briefly reflects on contemporary challenges posed by misinformation, algorithmic discourse, and AI-generated realities.

2. William James and the Doctrine of Neutral Monism

According to Bertrand Russell, the three principal figures associated with pragmatism are William James, John Dewey, and F. C. S. Schiller. Among these, Russell considers Schiller of lesser philosophical significance and focuses primarily on James and Dewey. Notably, he does not include Charles Sanders Peirce in this list, despite Peirce's foundational role in articulating the pragmatist maxim. In *A History of Western Philosophy*, Peirce appears only indirectly: first, when James is credited with adopting Peirce's principle that the meaning of an idea is to be clarified by its practical consequences (Peirce 1878); and second, in Russell's mention that Dewey approvingly cites Peirce's definition of truth as "that opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate."

James's prominence in Russell's discussion is not incidental. Beyond his historical significance, James is singled out for his formulation of the doctrine he initially termed *radical empiricism*, and which his followers later came to call *neutral monism*. It is this metaphysical innovation that Russell finds not only original but deeply compelling.

At the heart of neutral monism lies a rejection of the classical dichotomy between subject and object—a dichotomy central to Western philosophy from Socrates through Descartes. The traditional epistemological model assumes that knowledge is a relation between a subject (the knower) and an object (the known) and is closely tied to ontological dualism: the subject is

aligned with mind, the object with matter. Neutral monism challenges the metaphysical primacy of this distinction. It posits instead that reality is composed of a single type of fundamental “stuff”—what James called *pure experience*—which can function either as subject or object depending on relational context.

James’s radical move is to deny that consciousness is a metaphysically independent entity. Rather than being a substance distinct from the world, consciousness is a functional property of certain configurations of pure experience. A given portion of experience can serve as the perceiver in one context and the perceived in another. There is no inherent ontological divide between mental and physical, subjective and objective; such distinctions emerge from relational patterns rather than from fundamental categories.

Russell not only embraces the core insight of neutral monism but describes his shift toward it as a philosophical conversion. In a pivotal passage, he writes: “For my part, I am convinced that James was right on this matter, and would, on this ground alone, deserve a high place among philosophers” (Russell 1945).

Despite this endorsement, Russell raises a terminological concern. The term *experience*, he notes, is too closely associated with human psychology and may inadvertently suggest a form of idealism. For common sense, experience is something living beings have—yet for Russell, the fundamental constituents of the world must be applicable to both animate and inanimate reality. He therefore prefers more neutral terms, such as *events* or *occurrences*.

Nonetheless, the philosophical significance of neutral monism remains. By abandoning the rigid opposition between mind and matter, neutral monism provides a metaphysical foundation compatible with both scientific realism and a naturalistic account of consciousness. It offers a third alternative to the traditional dichotomy between idealism and materialism. Russell’s own later work—including his theory of perception, his analysis of sense-data, and his causal theory of knowledge—bears the mark of this influence. Although he would formulate neutral monism more rigorously than James and adopt different terminology, the metaphysical core of the doctrine remains intact.

Thus, while Russell would later turn to critique James’s theory of truth, he remains profoundly indebted to James’s insight into the structure of

reality. Neutral monism stands as one of the few areas where Russell finds deep and lasting agreement with the pragmatist tradition.

3. Russell's Critique of James's Theory of Truth

While Bertrand Russell expresses admiration for William James's metaphysical insights, especially the doctrine of neutral monism, he unequivocally rejects the pragmatist redefinition of truth—the idea that truth is what “works.” According to the core pragmatist thesis, a belief is true if it proves practically effective: if it leads to satisfactory, beneficial, or otherwise desirable outcomes in experience. This is the defining feature of pragmatism, shared by both James and Dewey, and the source of its name. For Russell, however, this theory undermines the very foundations of epistemology.

In *Pragmatism* (1907), James writes: “The true is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as the right is only the expedient in the way of our behaving” (James 1907, 28). He later adds that if belief in God “works satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word, then it is true.” In other words, beliefs are true not because they correspond to facts, but because they help us live better, solve problems, or feel fulfilled. Russell considers this claim not only mistaken but dangerous.

He develops three main arguments against it:

Epistemic Unmanageability. Russell first argues that the pragmatist theory is unworkable in practice. To determine whether a belief is true, one must assess the consequences of believing it and evaluate whether those consequences are beneficial. For example, consider the proposition: “Columbus crossed the Atlantic in 1492.” According to the pragmatist, we must judge whether believing this yields good outcomes. But this is absurd. One might get a higher grade on an exam for giving the right date—a good outcome. Yet for someone else, this might mean losing a scholarship due to lower relative performance—a bad outcome. Consequences differ across contexts and individuals. Truth becomes interest-relative and subjective, no longer grounded in stable criteria.

Infinite Regress. Second, Russell shows that pragmatism leads to a vicious regress. If a belief is true because it has good consequences, then

we must evaluate whether those consequences themselves are good. But to do that, we must form additional beliefs—beliefs about the consequences of the original belief—which must also be evaluated. This process never ends. Each layer of belief requires another to justify it, leading to an infinite regress that makes epistemic grounding impossible.

Ontological Confusion. Most damningly, Russell argues that pragmatism severs truth from reality. If truth is determined by usefulness, then beliefs about non-existent entities could be deemed true. For instance, belief in Santa Claus may produce joy in children, but that does not make “Santa Claus exists” a true proposition. Truth, Russell insists, must be tied to what causes a belief—namely, the actual existence of the entity in question—not to the effects it produces. The belief that Columbus existed is true because Columbus actually lived, not because believing in him brings satisfaction.

Russell sees James’s theory as driven by a desire to vindicate religious faith. By equating truth with practical success, James creates a conceptual space in which belief in God can be validated by its psychological benefits. But this reverses the logical order. A believer does not say, “I believe in God because it comforts me.” Rather, they say, “I am comforted because I believe that God exists.” The belief is held to be true first, and only then does emotional comfort follow. To invert this relationship, Russell argues, is to confuse epistemology with psychology.

Moreover, Russell contends that if truth is what serves human needs, then truth becomes susceptible to ideological manipulation. Those in power—political, religious, or corporate—can define what is “useful” and, therefore, what is “true.” Pragmatism, thus construed, opens the door to propaganda and relativism. Russell’s concern is not merely theoretical; he sees this conception of truth as a threat to intellectual freedom and scientific integrity.

Despite his admiration for James’s ingenuity and courage, Russell concludes that the pragmatist theory of truth must be rejected. Truth must be objective, grounded in a belief’s correspondence to facts—not in its psychological or pragmatic utility. Otherwise, philosophy forfeits its critical function and becomes an instrument of persuasion or comfort.

4. John Dewey

The two central principles of pragmatism discussed in relation to William James—the doctrine of neutral monism and the redefinition of truth—also appear in the philosophy of John Dewey, though in distinct and more systematized forms. While Dewey does not explicitly formulate a metaphysical doctrine akin to James’s “pure experience,” his conception of the organism and its relation to the environment implicitly rests on a metaphysical outlook that closely resembles neutral monism. As with James, Bertrand Russell accepts this metaphysical core but forcefully critiques the associated theory of truth.

Dewey’s philosophy centers on the concept of *inquiry*, which he frames in biological and functional terms. As Russell interprets him, Dewey begins with the idea of an organism—not merely a physical body or a detached mind, but a unified, adaptive entity. When an organism interacts with its environment, the result may be satisfactory or unsatisfactory. In cases of failure or disruption, adjustment must occur. If the environment is altered, the process is external. But if the organism changes internally—by adjusting its beliefs, habits, or understanding—this process is what Dewey calls *inquiry*. Inquiry is thus an adaptive mechanism, a way for the organism to reestablish equilibrium through internal reorganization. Russell summarizes this view with a vivid military analogy:

During a battle, your primary concern is to change the environment – namely, to defeat the enemy. But during reconnaissance before the battle, your main concern is to adjust your own forces in light of the enemy’s position. This earlier phase is the phase of “inquiry.” (Russell 1945)

This conception of inquiry, grounded in evolutionary biology and behavioral psychology, leads directly to Dewey’s *instrumentalist theory of truth*. Beliefs, in this framework, are not representations of an independent reality but tools for successful adaptation. Truth becomes a function of problem-solving: a belief is true to the extent that it contributes to resolving the disequilibrium that prompted inquiry. In contrast to the traditional correspondence theory, Dewey’s account is dynamic, contingent, and contextual.

Russell finds much to admire in Dewey's underlying metaphysics. He sees Dewey's notion of the organism as implicitly neutral monist: mental and physical phenomena are not distinct substances but different aspects of one unified system. Beliefs, in this picture, are not immaterial ideas floating in a separate mental realm but dispositions to act—embedded in behavior and shaped by environmental interaction.

To illustrate this, Russell offers two striking examples. First, imagine someone at a zoo who hears over the loudspeaker that a lion has escaped. Even without seeing the lion, the person reacts with fear and heightened alertness. This reaction—physiological and behavioral—constitutes the belief that a lion has escaped. Whether based on direct perception or linguistic input, the organism's state expresses the same belief. Second, consider someone descending a staircase in the dark. They do not consciously think, "There is a step beneath my foot," but step forward confidently. The belief in the continued presence of steps is embedded in their action. Only when the steps end unexpectedly and they stumble does the belief become explicit. This illustrates that beliefs can exist unconsciously and non-verbally, as tendencies or orientations within the organism.

Up to this point, Russell and Dewey are largely in agreement. But the divergence appears when we ask: *what makes a belief true?*

For Russell, a belief is true if it corresponds to a fact—if the state of the world matches the propositional content of the belief. Returning to the battlefield analogy: suppose reconnaissance reports that the enemy is concentrating forces on the left flank. If the general acts on this belief and wins the battle, that success alone does not make the belief true. The belief is true if and only if the enemy was indeed massing forces on that flank—regardless of the outcome.

Dewey, by contrast, evaluates truth based on success in inquiry. A belief is validated not by its match to an independent reality, but by its utility in guiding action and resolving problems. If the general wins the battle, then—*from Dewey's perspective*—the belief may be said to have "worked," and thus is justified. This shift from correspondence to function is where Russell mounts his strongest critique.

He argues, as he did against James, that *success is an unreliable guide to truth*. A belief might lead to success by accident, or fail due to unrelated

factors. In the staircase example, a person might descend safely while holding a false belief, or fall despite having a true one. Truth, for Russell, cannot be equated with practical effectiveness.

Moreover, Russell warns that Dewey's instrumentalism risks *relativizing historical truth*. If truth is what works, then the truth of a historical claim depends on its present-day utility, not on what actually happened. This opens the door to ideological manipulation: narratives about the past may be judged "true" based on their political or educational effectiveness, rather than their fidelity to fact. For Russell, this is epistemologically and ethically unacceptable. Historical propositions—such as "Caesar crossed the Rubicon in 49 BCE"—must be assessed according to whether they correspond to past events, not whether they serve current goals.

This concern leads to a deeper philosophical question: *what is the proper bearer of truth?* Russell insists that it is not sentences, utterances, or even statements in themselves, but *beliefs*—mental states with propositional content, held by conscious agents. Words may express a belief, but only when they are spoken with conviction and understanding. Repeating a sentence without grasping its meaning—as in the case of parroting "A lion has escaped from the zoo" without awareness—does not constitute a belief, and thus cannot be evaluated for truth or falsity.

Russell's emphasis on the *bearer of truth* reflects his commitment to a realism grounded in the structure of belief. Even though he finds Dewey's metaphysical framing compatible with his own—particularly in its rejection of Cartesian dualism—he rejects Dewey's attempt to ground truth in the fluid, instrumental outcomes of inquiry.

For Russell, *truth must remain correspondence with fact*. It is not a flexible tool to be judged by what "works," but a relation between thought and reality. While inquiry may be the method through which we arrive at true beliefs, it does not itself define truth. In abandoning this principle, Russell believes Dewey risks turning philosophy into a servant of expediency.

5. The Political Stakes of Truth: Russell, Orwell, and the Ethics of Objectivity

Bertrand Russell's critique of pragmatism culminates in a warning that extends far beyond epistemology. While his disagreements with William James and John Dewey focus on the redefinition of truth as a matter of practical success, Russell ultimately identifies deeper ethical and political dangers. If truth is untethered from correspondence with reality and is instead defined by what "works" or what is useful, it becomes vulnerable to manipulation – particularly by those in positions of power. For Russell, this represents not merely a philosophical error but a civilizational threat.

In the final sentences of *A History of Western Philosophy*, Russell reflects on the effects of modern scientific and technological advancement. He warns: "Modern technique has revived the sense of collective power among human communities...I feel here a grave danger—the danger of what I might call cosmic pride" (Russell 1945).

This *cosmic pride*—the illusion that humanity can not only act upon the world but reshape its moral and epistemic foundations—tempts us to treat truth as a tool of will rather than a constraint upon it. If truth is redefined as what serves our purposes, then those with the most power are best positioned to define what counts as true.

Russell fears that pragmatism's instrumentalist conception of truth encourages precisely this illusion. In divorcing truth from a mind-independent reality, pragmatism offers a seductive but ultimately corrosive vision of human beings not as discoverers of truth, but as its creators. The consequences of this view are powerfully dramatized in George Orwell's dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), published just four years after Russell's work.

In Orwell's imagined regime, the ruling Party rewrites history and language in order to control perception and belief. The Party's chilling slogan makes the stakes explicit: "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past" (Orwell 1949).

In this world, facts are fluid, and truth is reduced to political expediency. There are no stable realities—only shifting narratives dictated by authority. Language, belief, and memory no longer aim to reflect the world but to reinforce domination. Russell, though writing as a philosopher rather than

a novelist, anticipates this epistemological totalitarianism. He sees in pragmatism's reduction of truth to practical success the philosophical foundation for Orwell's nightmare.

To be clear, Russell does not accuse James or Dewey of authoritarian intent. On the contrary, he regards them as morally earnest thinkers. But he worries that the logic of pragmatism, taken to its conclusion, erodes the very idea of truth as something objective and independent of human aims. Once truth is defined by utility, it becomes pliable. And once it becomes pliable, it can be engineered—not only by governments, but by corporations, media systems, and digital algorithms.

This concern is no longer hypothetical. In the contemporary world, the distinction between truth and falsehood has become increasingly fragile. Social media platforms privilege engagement over accuracy. Algorithmically curated content creates epistemic bubbles. Misinformation spreads at unprecedented speed, often generated and amplified by artificial intelligence. Deepfakes blur the line between reality and fabrication. In this context, Orwell's post-truth dystopia has moved from fiction to daily experience.

Russell's defense of truth as correspondence—as fidelity to what is—stands as a moral imperative. Without this anchor, public discourse becomes hollow, scientific inquiry collapses into consensus-building, and the possibility of rational disagreement vanishes. Even in democratic societies, when truth is subordinated to utility—in advertising, politics, or journalism—the result is not pluralism, but manipulation. What matters is no longer *what is true*, but *what works*—for branding, for ideology, for influence.

Russell's critique of pragmatism, then, is not merely a disagreement about epistemological theory. It is a call to intellectual and civic responsibility. Truth must not be equated with what is persuasive, beneficial, or emotionally satisfying. It must remain accountable to a world that exists independently of our interests and desires. Only then can reasoned communication, free inquiry, and ethical integrity be preserved.

In defending objectivity, Russell aligns not only with traditional philosophical realism but with the ethical commitments of a democratic society. As Orwell understood, and as Russell foresaw, the collapse of truth into utility endangers both freedom and thought. The stakes of this philosophical

debate are nothing less than the preservation of truth itself as a cultural and moral ideal.

6. Conclusion

Bertrand Russell's engagement with pragmatism reveals a principled defense of the conditions under which knowledge and public discourse remain possible. While he appreciated William James's neutral monism and John Dewey's biologically grounded inquiry, Russell rejected the pragmatist redefinition of truth as merely what is useful to believe. For him, truth must retain its objective status as a relation between belief and fact, not a function of practical success.

His concern extended beyond theory to ethical and political dangers that arise when truth is reduced to utility—dangers dramatized in Orwell's vision of totalitarian control over language and memory. In today's era of algorithmic misinformation, politicized narratives, and automated content generation, Russell's warnings remain urgently relevant.

Defending truth as correspondence is not nostalgic realism but a foundational principle of free thought, democratic culture, and philosophical integrity. Without this commitment, the intellectual and ethical bases of science, philosophy, and democracy risk erosion. Russell's critique serves as a vital reminder that truth must transcend utility to preserve both accuracy and freedom.

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