

2012

## On Pragmatism and Esteem

Melba Vélez Ortiz

Grand Valley State University, [velortme@gvsu.edu](mailto:velortme@gvsu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/com\\_articles](https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/com_articles)

---

### ScholarWorks Citation

Vélez Ortiz, Melba, "On Pragmatism and Esteem" (2012). *Peer Reviewed Articles*. 5.  
[https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/com\\_articles/5](https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/com_articles/5)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Communications at ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Peer Reviewed Articles by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

---

# On Pragmatism and Esteem

Melba Hoffer<sup>1</sup>

Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies  
12(4) 317–321  
© 2012 SAGE Publications  
Reprints and permission:  
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/1532708612446430  
http://csc.sagepub.com



## Abstract

Is the Penn State controversy a public relations crisis or a moral one? While all relevant parties have made public efforts to carry out public relations campaigns to salvage their individual reputations, efforts to address the moral aspects of their actions are lacking. A proper pragmatic and post-pragmatic effort to regain public esteem demands an institutional commitment to transparency; to look to the truth for aid and then tell the truth. A true pragmatic approach demands ethical agents look beyond temporary benefits in order to properly calibrate human aims and purposes. More contemporary forms of pragmatism grounded in critical and radical inquiry demand an even stronger commitment to social justice and truth-telling as appropriate moral interventions in times of crisis.

## Keywords

ethics, pragmatism, esteem

On December 27, 2011 an ex-neighbor of Jerry Sandusky told ABC News that Sandusky “should have been more careful with boundaries.” This statement was chosen as the title of the news report, though it reads as a stunning understatement of the well over 100 separate acts of sexual abuse of minors of which he is accused. What the ex-neighbor said next illustrates the difficulty in sorting out the various positions in the scandal and identifying what’s at stake. The ex-neighbor told reporters that while he “would love to revel in the memory of Sandusky as a friendly neighbor, the pragmatism in him will not allow it.” Bryers said of the allegations, “a hug can be misconstrued. But there’s no way you can misconstrue anal rape” (Smith, 2011).

## Esteem

In an effort to protect its brand, the Penn State board of trustees participated in a decade long cover-up prior to firing Head Coach Joe Paterno and University President Graham Spanier in November of last year. The decision to fire Spanier was based on his failure to disclose the on-campus allegations from 2002 that have since become a focal point in the Sandusky case. The firing of Paterno was based on similar reasons, though in his case the trustees took additional measures to make sure Paterno found out from the board and “not from the radio.” In announcing its decision the board expressed “regret” for letting go of Paterno after 61 years. Most notably, the trustees did not issue an apology for their failure to follow up on this case. Trustee Keith Eckel defended the board’s handling of the scandal by saying, “I believe we met our responsibilities as

soon as we knew them,” he said. “I believe we were deliberate in that process” (Ganim, 2002).

Is this a public relations crisis or a moral one? At least some members of the board feel they met their responsibility and did so in a timely manner. However, what responsibilities are these? Are they responsibilities to the school? To the victims? To the brand? To the Penn State community? To all of the above? It seems the relevant parties in this controversy are still fighting for esteem. The university along with its board of trustees, Joe Paterno (and Paterno’s family after his death), President Spanier, and even Sandusky, want the public to remember them for their good deeds as well. In a public relations campaign, the goal is to make every effort to rebuild the reputation of a business and restore its relationship to the community. When a moral wrong is committed we look for signs of genuine remorse as opposed to vindication. In the eyes of many, forgiveness is granted not extracted. If the accused parties in the Penn State scandal are attempting to do both, one attempt hinders the other. This tension can be observed in all aspects of the controversy. It is a convoluted web of loyalties, interests, and duties to the public wrestling for preeminence and significance. A moral crisis requires the ethical agent to surrender its pride and reputation as a gesture of repentance. A public relations crisis necessitates the management of public opinion. It requires

---

<sup>1</sup>Grand Valley State University, Allendale, MI, USA

### Corresponding Author:

Melba Hoffer, School of Communications, Grand Valley State University,  
Office 214 LSH, 290 Lake Superior Hall, Allendale, MI 49401, USA  
Email: hofferfm@gvsu.edu

that the focus of public scrutiny be redirected or diminished to protect economic interests. So to what extent does it make sense to view this controversy as a moral crisis? Or more importantly, to what extent should this be treated as a moral crisis and not a public relations one?

## Players

Thus far, Sandusky's explanation for his alleged crimes look nothing like what one might expect from someone who wishes to be forgiven for a moral wrongdoing, let alone crimes of the magnitude of which he is accused. In 1998, Sandusky admitted to showering with Victim 6, hugging him in the shower, and conceded it was wrong. Yet it was a university police detective who told Sandusky never to shower with children again. Years later, in November 2011, in an audio interview with NBC's Bob Costas, Sandusky defended himself by stating that one incident, in which a graduate assistant told a grand jury he walked in on Sandusky raping a young boy, was merely "horseplay." Regarding the litany of other charges, Sandusky claims that nothing "inappropriate" took place. These statements were met with public outrage, leading a couple of writers from the DailyBeast.com to declare this interview "killed" Sandusky's case (Bennet & Bernstein, 2011). Worse yet, in a nearly 4-hour audio interview with the *New York Times* published on December 3, 2011 and titled "Jerry Sandusky In His Own Words" Sandusky responded to 40 charges of molesting young boys by stating "these are individual matters," "I don't know," and finally stating his gut feeling is that some of these kids "just got pulled in" (In His Own Words). Instead of forgiveness, Sandusky attempted to gain sympathy from the public as he declared,

I miss coaching, I miss Second Mile. I miss Second Mile kids. I miss interrelationships with all kinds of people. I miss my own grandkids. I miss, I mean you know I'm going to miss my dog. So, I mean, yeah, I miss, yeah. Good grief. (In His Own Words)

The statements above reflect a desire to manage public opinion by denying culpability for these crimes and by appealing to the public's pity. The statements do nothing to communicate a sense of genuine remorse. Let's not forget Sandusky admitted to at least one instance of showering with a minor. Hence, even if Sandusky was not guilty of all the crimes of which is accused, his failure to express compassion for at least one acknowledged victim is disturbing. Perhaps, most notably Sandusky's comments attempt to shift the public's focus from the victimization of children to Sandusky's own perceived victimization. So which one is real? Which one is more legitimate? How are we to allocate public esteem in light of the available representations?

In this post-postmodern time, when consequences are said to be constructed through a politics of representation, it is imperative to remind ourselves that the moral and the material are inextricably linked. Even in the absence of absolute truths, pragmatic, prophetic, and feminist post-pragmatist approaches to ethics all demand that we prioritize liberation, care and the creation of greater individual freedom for all members of society. In the words of Denzin, Lincoln, and Giardina (2006) "materially, actions are thus judged in terms of moral consequences and the meanings people bring to them" (p. 777). Sandusky's explanations to the public narrow our scope of moral interest to his own misfortune thereby discounting the oppression, degradation and present and future harm to his alleged victims as well as the repercussions of these crimes for the broader social order. As Bryers, Sandusky's ex-neighbor, was quoted at the beginning of this essay, "a hug can be misconstrued. But there's no way you can misconstrue anal rape."

Esteem comes from outside of ourselves, so although it is understandable for Sandusky to want to redeem himself in the eyes of the public, his lack of accountability make this difficult. A moral crisis entails a recognition of wrongdoing (even at a small scale) and a desire to right wrongs. It also requires a realization of how one might have played a part in a present state of affairs. Sadly, even "in his own words" none of this insight is apparent. Finally, at its best, a moral crisis yields a profound change in consciousness that might prevent future harmful acts by a moral agent. This providence also seems absent from the public remarks Sandusky has made so far.

In large part, the Penn State scandal is made more egregious by the cover-up that ensued the discovery of the crimes. The general public and fans alike have expressed outrage that subsequent crimes were not prevented once the first allegations of impropriety were made. One figure that has been at the center of recrimination has been Head Coach, Joe Paterno. Throughout his long and distinguished coaching career, Paterno was often described as pragmatic. Bill Conlin of the *Philadelphia Daily News* called Paterno's decision not to run for political office in 1996 a pragmatic decision by a "multidimensional, incredibly complex throw-back to the Renaissance age in Italy when benevolent despots ruled the walled city-states aligned in their own Happy Valleys" (Conlin, 1996). This statement paints public perception of Paterno as a figure of great political power with a penchant for allowing some freedoms to the "walled city-states aligned in their own happy valleys." In the context of the current scandal, this statement takes on an ominous tone that vaticinates Paterno's future downfall. This political analogy also portrays pragmatism in problematic ways because it sanctions unchecked and unaccountable forms of power (including that exerted by benevolent despots) as part of a pragmatic political ethic.

This is not the case. In *Keeping Faith*, leading American pragmatist philosopher Cornel West explains that a true pragmatism “brings the most subtle and sophisticated analytical tools to bear to explain and illuminate how structures of domination and effects of individual choices in language and in nondiscursive institutions operate” (West, p. 95). So while we can only point to Mr. Conlin as the source of a representation of Paterno as a despot, it is noteworthy that in a popular view, despotism and pragmatism can operate together. Joe Paterno embodies this misrepresentation of pragmatism as a set guiding principles for the simple accumulation or preservation of individual power.

Throughout his long coaching career, Paterno was been described as possessing a dual nature; both emotional and pragmatic. He was often described as pragmatic when his team faced a difficult upcoming game. Similarly, when Paterno announced his decision to let Defensive Coordinator Tom Bradley go in January of 2011, the press called this a pragmatic decision. After his death, Paterno’s emotional character took center stage in the press. One newspaper headline asked, “Did Joe Paterno Die of a Broken Heart?” (Kloster, 2012). *The Washington Post* noted the “outpouring of grief and admiration on the Penn State Campus in State College.” The article notes, “the base of the statue was decorated with scores of candles, flowers, T-shirts, and blue and white pom-poms.” Paterno’s family issued the following statement on his passing, “He died as he lived, he fought hard until the end, stayed positive, thought only of others and constantly reminded everyone of how blessed his life had been” (Shapiro, 2012). Absent from this later account is further discussion of Paterno’s pragmatic virtues.

## Institutional Response

Pragmatism was also brought up as a justification for Penn State’s actions concerning years of allegations made against Sandusky by outraged parents, University employees and police, and ultimately, a Grand Jury. In November 8, 2011, Penn State cancelled a regular weekly Paterno press conference before the Saturday football game against Nebraska. Penn State, then, fired Paterno as many in the press called this decision a “legally-pragmatic thing.” The label of pragmatism in this case attempted to justify said institutional response as one driven by the demands of the market, legal threats, or to protect economic interests, but it does not call attention to any moral duties to the public or the victims on the part of the board of trustees. So, whose trust are the “trustees” beholden to? Are they entrusted only to protect the brand and the economic interests of their institution? Are they entrusted to safeguard the good name of the University? Are they entrusted with providing moral leadership? Members of the public have reacted to the scandal by accusing the university and its administration of a cover-up and calling attention to just that, a crisis of moral leadership.

## Branding

Those who worry about the University as a “brand” with economic interests extend beyond administrative offices. Some segments of the student population reacted to the controversy by expressing concerns about how the scandal might affect the “brand” and organizing attempts to drive members of the press away from the campus. In a *New York Times* article, published November 10, 2011

Jenna Hrubes, a senior, said her marketing class on Wednesday turned into a session about how such a scandal can be handled and how it can damage a valuable brand . . . “We talked about how perception becomes reality and how this is ruining the reputation of this university,” she said. (Schweber & Perez-Peña, 2011)

In a marketing sense, the regaining or reclaiming of esteem features as the primary goal of an organization in crisis. In this sense, what the public thinks of a group, as Hrubes states, becomes the reality. But what is the pragmatic value of changing appearance instead of reality? What, if any, are the repercussions of attempting to shift perception, create a new reality, without regard for challenging or resisting existing structures of domination? A brand, is dependent on the esteem of the public and its patrons. There is nothing other than esteem that keeps a brand profitable. However, when there are (even possible) crimes commitment against persons, what is at stake becomes more than the value of the brand. Yes, a moral crisis and a public relations crisis are both focused on regaining esteem but the esteem to be regained in both cases is very different in kind. The esteem to be regained in a public relations campaign need not reach beyond a perception level of awareness. However, facing a moral crisis of leadership requires a change in consciousness, a reassessment of an organization’s role and responsibilities. In a crisis of morality, when there is no transformation, there is no triumph. In a marketing sense, a public relations crisis need not assess the consequences of experiments in reality construction, but pragmatic and postpragmatic handling of a moral crisis depends on it.

## Ethical Tension

In fairness to Penn State administrators and trustees, a brand like theirs is not only a source of revenue for the University but also a key source of employment, scholarships, and enrollment for its constituents. While protecting “the brand,” the university is safeguarding the interests of those who depend on such revenue streams for their individual success or their livelihood. For this reason, the institutional attempts to cover up Sandusky’s misconduct may be perceived as “damage-control.” In this view, if the

trustees are elected to protect the interest of the brand, they are in fact providing a valuable service by ensuring revenue streams remain available to assist those individuals pursue success through said means. However, as a public institution, as one dedicated to higher learning, and, more importantly, as an organization made up of individuals accountable to their community and their society, Penn State's negligence appears unjustifiable. By weighing the harm inflicted on these young victims against the benefits afforded to a larger group of individuals dependent on high revenue streams, we see the former is altogether unacceptable while the latter is a desirable outcome among other possibilities. In other words, protecting the revenue streams that sustain even a large group of individuals by endangering, violating children does not add up. From an ethical perspective the harm inflicted on the children is material, devastating, and with repercussions lasting well beyond the present, while diminishing revenue, though harmful in its own right, does not entail the degradation, violation, and exploitation of innocent persons. Furthermore, I surmise that had the university taken a different course of action and suspended/fired Sandusky 10 years ago, a public relations effort to protect the brand would have been more appropriate and likely successful. It is only after appropriate measures have been taken to right a wrong, that a public relations effort centered on the reclaiming of public esteem is both legitimate and justifiable.

### The Truth About Pragmatism's Take on Evil and The Future

If we take pragmatism to be a useful tool for estimating the appropriate institutional response to the scandal, we find that pragmatism in all its forms, as a philosophical and ethical approach demands an entirely different response whether attempting to save the brand or provide moral leadership in times of crisis. In *Keeping Faith*, West (1993) takes an in-depth look at pragmatism's answer to the "diabolical irrationality" many pragmatists, including Josiah Royce, believe to be inherent to human societies. Quoting C.I. Lewis, West (1993) explains,

Pragmatism could be characterized as the doctrine that all problems are at bottom problems of conduct; that all judgments are implicitly, judgments of value, and that, as there can be ultimately no valid distinction of theoretical and practical, so there can be no final separation of questions of truth of any kind from questions of the justifiable ends of actions. (p. 98)

In this sense, while evil is inevitable in this world and the diabolical irrationality of others may perplex us at times, it is this "deep sense of evil that fuels the struggle for justice"

(p. 96). West (1993) reminds us that in times of crisis and moral confusion a true pragmatic approach looks to the truth "for aid." For pragmatists, the "truth is a species of the good." (p. 99) As such, telling the truth is a form of pragmatic intervention. Telling the truth helps to keep the ends of our actions just and it is imperative in times when we are confronted with great evil that we speak out. He explains, "I believe that a deep sense of evil and the tragic must infuse any meaning and value of democracy." (p. 103)

Given the chilling fact that Sandusky's alleged crimes involve ten victims over 15 years it is critical to echo West's (1993) insight that "for pragmatists the future has ethical significance because human will—human thought and action—can make a difference in relation to human aims and purposes" (p. 100). The lives and well-being of all the victims and their families has forever been affected not only by the actions of one man but also by those who participated in the cover-up of his crimes and especially by those who perjured themselves in an effort to prevent them from becoming public. A true pragmatic approach demands ethical agents look beyond temporary benefits to properly calibrate human aims and purposes.

More contemporary forms of pragmatism grounded in critical and radical inquiry demand an even stronger commitment to social justice and truth telling as appropriate moral interventions in times of crisis. Denzin et al. (2006) call for "a prophetic, feminist postpragmatism that embraces and ethics of truth grounded in love, care, hope and forgiveness" (p. 770). In this view, love, reflective practice, honesty, and accountability, rather than profit or self-interest, are at the center of social interaction and moral significance. This is a useful model for analyzing a controversy of the complexity of Penn State's because of the many competing representations and demands for public esteem at stake. In an attempt to safeguard their reputation, the players in this scandal offer the public different takes on the truth. They tell their story and a way that puts them in a better/different light. They want to remind the public of their good deeds and shift attention away from their complicity in these terrible events. Both a prophetic and feminist postpragmatic pragmatism recognize reality as a social construction without forgoing a commitment to the quest for truth. So while "for the postpragmatist feminist there is no neutral standpoint, no God's-eye view of the world" a morally defensible action must weigh in the "practical, political, moral, social consequences it produces for an actor or collectivity" (Denzin et al., p. 776)

### Censure and Esteem

So is this a public relations crisis or a moral one? We have seen that it is both. However, although all relevant parties have made public efforts to carry out public relations

campaigns to salvage their individual reputations, efforts to address the moral aspects of their actions are lacking. A proper pragmatic and postpragmatic effort to regain public esteem demands an institutional commitment to transparency; to look to the truth for aid and then tell the truth. A feminist postpragmatist approach goes even further by calling for love and forgiveness as part of its central tenets. However, the public's forgiveness must be earned and moral agents are called on to reflect their love for humanity as they make positive contribution to a politics of resistance, hope, and freedom. For Cornel West (1993), pragmatism at its best takes a certain form. This form requires that its constitutive features and fundamental components "keeps track of social misery, solicits and channels moral outrage to alleviate it, and protects a future in which the potentialities of ordinary people flourish and flower" (p. 127).

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### References

- Bennet, J., & Bernstein, J. (2011, November 16). Lawyers: Costas interview "killed" Sandusky's case. *TheDailyBeast.com*.
- Conlin, B. (1996, December 21). Lions' Joe Paterno celebrates the Big 70. *Wilmington Morning Star*, p. 4C.
- Denzin, N. K., Lincoln, Y. S., & Giardina, M. D. (2006). Disciplining qualitative inquiry. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 19(6), 769-782.
- Ganim, S. (2002, January 19). Penn State trustees defend decisions to fire Joe Paterno and Graham Spanier, say they owe no apologies. *PennLive.com*.
- Jerry Sandusky in his own words. (2011, December 3). *Nytimes.com*.
- Kloster, A. (2012, January 29). Did Joe Paterno die of a broken heart? *AlbertaTribune.com*.
- Schweber, N., & Perez-Peña, R. (2011, November 10). From football coach to case study at Penn State. *Nytimes.com*.
- Shapiro, L. (2012, January 22). Joe Paterno, former Penn State football coach, dies at 85. *Washingtonpost.com*.
- Smith, C. (2011, December 27). Ex-neighbor says Sandusky "should have been more careful with boundaries. *ABCNews.go.com*.
- West, C. (1993). *Keeping faith: Philosophy and race in America*. New York, NY: Routledge.

### Bio

**Melba Hoffer** (Ph.D., University of Illinois) is an assistant professor in the School of Communications at Grand Valley State University. Dr. Hoffer's areas of research are communication ethics and environmental communication in the U.S. and the Caribbean. Her work examines the ways in which the long-term success of conservation efforts depend upon fundamental shifts in cultural values, in aesthetic and moral communication, and in shared understandings of how the individual fits into social and ecological communities. In addition, Dr. Hoffer had researched and published in the era of Latin-American/Caribbean/Latina-o philosophy and intellectual history.