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On Truth and Instrumentalisation

Chris Henry

Two issues were raised in discussion at the 2015 London Conference in Critical Thought that I will address here. The first issue was that of the nature of truth as a source of legitimation. In his paper, Jones showed that Schmitt's political theology conceptualises political legitimacy as derived from 'secularised theological concepts'.¹ Yet Jones re-injects the theological into these secularised concepts: for him, politics is constituted by a leader who appeals to a legitimating power as justification for their own leadership, whilst those 'under' this leadership also necessarily submit to the same authority. Jones develops his theory of politics in this article by conceptualising truth as a disruption of 'certain absolutes' by political leaders, founded upon this secularised yet nonetheless theological idea of legitimation. As presented at the conference, my reading of Badiou places him in a similar position to Jones; whereas Jones used both explicitly Christian and secular theological terminology to locate political authority in the divine, Badiou uses a particular configuration of mathematics (specifically Zermelo-Fraenkel (ZFC) set theory) to locate truth in the void. Mathematics, according to Badiou, is the language of ontology itself and articulates truth within the world as a ruptural break from the standard order of things.² Both authors therefore wish to explain the axiomatic by which we can tell the truth of situations, but cannot explain the truth of this *condition of truth*. The first problem can be condensed thus: what can tell us the truth of God, or the truth of mathematics, upon which so much justification relies?

The second issue raised was that of circularity, or the self-referential nature of truth claims. Jones was asked whether or not the necessity on the part of the truth teller to proclaim the legitimacy of God undermined the idea of God as sacred. It seems that the secular justification of the authority of God is, in fact, a profane justification

¹ C. Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

² A. Badiou, *Being and Event* (London: Continuum, 2011), 15.

that simply presupposes the divine authority of God. Likewise, when Badiou argues that the subject pays fidelity to an event in order to actualise its lessons in subsequent situations as truths, he presupposes the (mathematical) conditions of the event. Both authors therefore conceptualise truth through circular reasoning: truth is articulated by one who proclaims fidelity to a presupposition (i.e. God or mathematics) which then authorises their proclamation *post hoc*. My argument, however, as an alternative for Badiou's and Jones', was also challenged for its circularity. In my conference paper, I argued that 'concepts are truthful for Deleuze as long as they express an event', where an event is understood as a qualitative or quantitative change in the state of affairs.³ On this basis, when Deleuze joins Nietzsche in claiming that objects do not exist separately from their expression, he removes the mind/body duality that underpins conventional theories of truth and the aletheiatic theories of both Jones and Badiou.⁴ For Deleuze, neither the mind, nor language (nor, therefore, truths) refer, cohere nor correspond to a mind-independent world. Instead, following Spinoza, the world and the mind are expressions of a single univocal event and it makes no sense to say that one can adequately refer to another.⁵ Because Deleuze discounts a mind-independent

³ See G. Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy; Spinoza* (London and New York: Zone Books, 1992). See also J. Williams, "If Not Here, Then Where? On the Location and Individuation of Events in Badiou and Deleuze." *Deleuze Studies* 3(1), 2009, 106. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza is at pains to demonstrate both that the 'order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things', and that both thought and extension are expressions of God (which is the same as nature) (See Spinoza, *Ethics: Treatise on The Emendation of the Intellect and Selected Letters* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Pub. Co, 1992), Ic25, II, 28)). On this basis, for Deleuze, concepts can be true only if they have been created as part of a material change, as opposed to being the result of a formal (i.e. mathematical) operation. Formal operations specify their conditions, the truth of which they cannot account for, and thus fall foul of the first problem outlined above.

⁴ F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil / On the Genealogy of Morality* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014, § 13.

⁵ For this reason, it does not make sense to formally differentiate between truth and truthfulness (i.e. saying something true or saying something sincerely believed) with regards to Deleuze's philosophy. As MacKenzie explains, 'if the event is that which makes sense possible in the first place [...] the meaning of events will never be given by reference to a predetermined ideal of how sense relates to events' (I. MacKenzie, and S. Malesevic, *Ideology After Poststructuralism* (London and Sterling: Pluto Press 2002), 22). In other words, there is no formal distinction between truth and truthfulness for Deleuze, for the latter presupposes the facticity of an object a priori of its expression, an a priori which Deleuze disavows. The terms are used here interchangeably.

world in favour of an event-oriented ontology, which treats mind and world as aspects of events however, I was asked to account for how any claim to truth could be made of things—including truth itself—that are constantly changing as they are expressed by the event. How, in other words, can Deleuze account for the truth of the production of truth?

In response to these two problems, this paper makes two claims. Firstly, it shows that thinking the truth of any particular concept (such as politics) is founded upon an instrumental logic that betrays the truth of a situation. Truth cannot be thought ‘of something’, for this would fall back into a theory of correspondence. Instead, truth is a function of thought. In order to make this move to a functional concept of truth, I outline Dewey’s criticism, and two important repercussions, of dogmatically instrumental philosophy. I then show how Badiou’s philosophy is indeed guilty of instrumentalisation, but emphasise that his prioritisation of truth is nevertheless important to maintain. The second claim this paper makes is that the criticism of Deleuze’s conception of truth as circular is misplaced, as it is founded on the assumption that Deleuze conceptualises the truth of objects. Instead, I show that, for Deleuze, truth is not a property of an object but of its production. To reach this conclusion, I develop what I call Dewey’s account of pragmatic instrumentalisation (as opposed to the dogmatic instrumentalisation he criticises) into Deleuze’s conceptualisation of truth as the process of making sense of our precarious world. I conclude by making some provisional remarks that Deleuze’s pragmatic account of truth paves the way for an ethics that is not founded on truths it cannot explain (i.e. God or mathematics), but as an ongoing, subversive practice.

Instrumentalisation

In *Experience and Nature*, John Dewey argues that, hitherto, all philosophy has been constituted around the principle of instrumentalisation, whereby concepts are developed as part of an attempt to understand the world in service of a cause. Importantly for Dewey, prefiguring Althusser’s concept of ‘denegation’, this cause is rarely admitted to be part of the process of instrumentalisation. He shows this philosophical lineage tracing back to Platonic inspiration

and the appropriation of artisanship by ancient philosophy.⁶ By instrumentalising the world with both the Platonic ideal form and Aristotle's efficient and final causes, objects are appropriated by philosophy in an attempt to reduce the world to a set of properties which both Plato and Aristotle could articulate to suit their political goals. As developed below, the point I want to make here is not that it is necessarily an issue to appropriate thought for a purpose, but that that purpose must not be dogmatic.

The upshot of dogmatic intellectual appropriation of the world is two-fold. Firstly, as Sleeper puts it, this appropriation 'is the root cause of the dualisms that litter the train of Western thought from Plato to positivism, driving conceptual wedges between matter and form, body and mind, fact and value'.⁷ Were it not for the 'contemplation of eternal truths dimly perceived as somehow transcending and governing the confusing world of the live creature', he argues we could 'evolve our first philosophy from the logic of experience, from the analysis of existential problems and their means of resolution'.⁸ In other words, Dewey accuses the entire tradition of Western metaphysics of setting out from first principles that it cannot—or will not—account for, and the resultant construction of abstract claims upon false dualities, such as dialectics.⁹ Secondly, the instrumentalisation of the intellect serves a management function, with the mode of management matching the mode of instrumentalisation. In service of this intellectual appropriation, as Dewey argues, self-evidence ceases to be important for developing new ideas and, if new phenomena destabilise the existing philosophical postulates, they are cast aside, re-presented or disregarded in favour of efficient management.¹⁰

To support his claim, Dewey highlights mankind's experiences of an existentially precarious world, where the precarity of existence must be accounted for metaphysically to the same extent as its stability.¹¹ Precarity is not an empirical observation—Dewey would not argue, for

⁶ J. Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (New York: Dover Publications, 1958), 128.

⁷ R. W. Sleeper, *The Necessity of Pragmatism: John Dewey's Conception of Philosophy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 136.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 46-47; Sleeper, *The Necessity of Pragmatism*, 114-117.

¹⁰ Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 130.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 40-44.

example, that 1929 is any more precarious than 1928—but a metaphysical claim. Situations that individuals find themselves in are, for Dewey, not wholly comprehensible because they are presented to the individual by a partial encounter.¹² For example, a student’s experience of a classroom might be constituted by the interaction with their teacher, their peers and the classroom geography, but this would only be a contingent and local presentation of the larger situation which would include government targets for syllabuses and University budgets. For Dewey then, an individual encounters a situation into which they enquire. This encounter forms the antecedent conditions for this inquiry, yet the situation that the individual encounters extends much further than is presented to the individual. It is this extension into what is *not* presented to the individual that constitutes the situation’s precarity, whilst the learned intellect immanently constitutes the situation’s stability. The encounter between thought and a situation is important for Deleuze’s conceptualisation of truth and will be expanded on below but, first, what is the problem with the dogmatic intellectualisation of the world, as undertaken by Badiou and Jones?

Dogma

The weight of Badiou’s political prescriptions relies entirely upon their (rational, axiomatic) subtraction from both *doxa* (opinion) and the sensible.¹³ Using the mathematical apparatus of ZFC set theory, Badiou’s intellectual project is to ‘militantly pursue the severing of the infinite from the One, making it impossible to reappropriate the former’, thus affirming ‘the pure one-less infinity of the multiple as such’.¹⁴ Put in Dewey’s terms, Badiou wishes to affirm precarity as that which conditions our potentially infinite ability to act as we may want, were it not concealed by our petty human sensibilities (i.e. *doxa* or the ‘One’). Badiou’s revelation proceeds by reversing the Platonic priority of the One over the multiple and infinite, and demonstrating how the infinite can be accessed *despite* the One. So, in certain

¹² J. Dewey, *Logic: Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Holt, 1938), 106.

¹³ See also: P Hallward Badiou: *A Subject to Truth. Minneapolis and London (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 93-106; A. Badiou, Metapolitics (London and New York: Verso, 2005), especially ch. 10; and S. Critchley, Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of commitment, politics of resistance (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2008).*

¹⁴ F. Gironi, *Naturalising Badiou: Mathematical Ontology and Structural Realism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 32.

situations, the presented order of things is ruptured in an event which allows the faithful to act in accordance with the teachings of that event.¹⁵ It is here that Badiou's project looks remarkably similar to Jones', who also thinks that proclaiming fidelity to an inaccessible realm from which truth can be articulated is a necessary part of a political account of legitimacy. However, as others have also noted, Badiou's ontology also relies upon epistemological propositions that both reduce and secularise his conception of the infinite.¹⁶ The distinctions that Badiou uses in order to elucidate his ontology—those of truth/*doxa*, intelligible/sensible and is/is not—are denegated, ideal postulates that condition his ontology before being re-introduced as symptoms of it.¹⁷ So, Badiou's ontology does fall to Dewey's criticism of instrumentalisation: Badiou instrumentalises thought in a circular argument which declares that this instrumentalisation is a product of the ontology it specifies.

The circular problem of Badiou's mathematical ontology can be put more generally: any philosophy which purports to tell the truth *of* something (including the world itself, or the propositional form of a truth statement) instantiates an ontological duality between truth as the truth of some-thing and anything else which is not that some-thing. As a result, it must also admit to not being able to tell the truth of what is not that thing. Indeed, the four main theories of truth (coherence, correspondence, pragmatist and deflationary), as well as Badiou's and Jones' theories, make claims about either the truth of the form of propositions, sentences or claims, or of the world.¹⁸ Because each theory specifies its own remit, it cannot explain the truth of what it does not specify and, most importantly, this includes the ability to tell the truth of the mind/world differentiation that is implicit (and often

¹⁵ A. Badiou, *Being and Event* (London: Continuum, 2011), 52-59.

¹⁶ See S. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), 127-170; A. Badiou, *Theoretical Writings* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 260; F. Laruelle, *Anti-Badiou: The Introduction of Maoism Into Philosophy* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 111-118; Gironi, *Naturalising Badiou*, 13.

¹⁷ Laruelle, *Anti-Badiou*, 115; D. Sacilotto, "Towards a Materialist Rationalism: Plato, Hegel, Badiou", *Badiou Studies*, 2(1), 2013.

¹⁸ See F. F. Schmitt, *Theories of Truth* (Malden, Oxford and Carlton: Blackwell, 2004), 1-31; See also A. Parr (ed.), *The Deleuze Dictionary Revised Edition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 292-293. Others have reduced this list simply down to 'beliefs' (See A. G. Burgess and J. P. Burgess, *Truth. Princeton and Woodstock* (Princeton University Press, 2011) 3).

explicit) in all of the theories. Furthermore, the mind/world split necessitates that the mind either form a perspective of the world (such as in correlationist theories of truth) or form judgements of perspectives (such as in coherence theories). According to this necessity, traditional theories of truth result in an unreconcilable differentiation between different truth claims, where different subjects will have different perspectives or judgements from each other. Although Badiou rightly avoids traditional, propositional theories of truths, in his case the circularity is to be found within his ‘truth procedure’, i.e. in the distinction between the truth of non-being (the void) and not the truth of being (the sensible/opinion). Badiou states what the truth can be told *of* and proceeds to elaborate how we may do this.¹⁹ In all cases, however, it is hard to accept theories of truth that limit the remit of their application by prescription. If the concept of truth is to be held on to, what is needed is an ambitious account of truth that can account for everything, including its own account of the truth.

Truth as function

It is often supposed that contemporary philosophy shies away from conceptualising the truth, if it does not reject the concept entirely, for precisely the problems associated with circularity mentioned above.²⁰ It might be more productive to focus instead on concepts such as equality, representation or stability to ground political claims. Yet, as Rorty confirms, philosophers rarely say that there is no truth even if they are reported to do so.²¹ As contemporary philosophy has attempted to move beyond dogmatic metaphysics towards contingent structures, truth must also (to a greater or lesser extent) be a functional part of contingent structures. Indeed this might explain why philosophies that do not focus on truth as the articulation and

¹⁹ In particular, see A. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds* (London and New York: 2009). Badiou defines a truth procedure as that which results from an event and conditions the event’s actualisation within subsequent situations. According to Badiou, there are four truth procedures (politics, science, art, and love) and, with regards to the political, Badiou claims that ‘the procedure it engages exhibits a political truth, only under certain conditions’ (A. Badiou, *Metapolitics* (London and New York: Verso, 2005), 145).

²⁰ N. Gavey, "Feminist Poststructuralism and Discourse Analysis: Contributions to Feminist Psychology", *Psychology of Women Quarterly* (13), 1989, 462.

²¹ R. Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1.

exploration of structures understandably take centre stage in place of a detailed scrutiny of how structures are constituted. However, if Dewey is correct to argue that thought instrumentalises a precarious world, then truth must be seen as a concept with which to understand how different and changing structures adequately instrumentalise it. The ‘truth of the matter’ would then not be a description of the world under any one *particular* transcendental description of truth. Instead, truth might be thought of as a functional component of the sense that understands the world, which appropriates and creates different structures as necessary. Dogmatic instrumentalisation becomes pragmatic instrumentalisation. This process, whereby the subject creates appropriate and adequate structures for its use, is what Dewey calls an inquiry into the world and Deleuze calls an apprenticeship.²²

Deleuze’s idea of apprenticeship can be thought of as a practice of living truthfully in the world. As opposed to Badiou’s and Jones’ conception of truth, which rejects the truth of the world in favour of truth found outside it, Deleuze wants us to affirm the world. Yet Deleuze is hostile to traditional theories of truth and this is particularly clear when he argues that the ‘mistake of philosophy is to presuppose within us a benevolence of thought, a natural love of truth’.²³ This motif, often repeated throughout Deleuze’s work, is a warning against those who assume that thought inherently leads to what is good for the one who thinks. Thought is not essentially good for the individual because it is not totalising; it does not contain all that is necessary to know the truth of the world. Were this to be the case, the adequacy of thought to the world would necessarily be ‘*de jure*, and not simply a question of fact’.²⁴ In other words, proving that thought (and therefore truthful statements) contain within them the aptitude to tell the truth is a Sisyphean feat: every truth claim must be bolstered by

²² This paper argues that Deleuze, and not Dewey, provides the more suitable conceptualisation of truth. Dewey’s inquiry is in line with Popper’s theory of science: it is essentially falsificationist. His theory assumes the probability that statements made will not be true in the future as one of their preconditions (Dewey, *Logic: Theory of Inquiry* 345). As Nissen develops in a detailed criticism of this conceptualisation of truth however, a statement that is true except to the extent that it is not true can hardly be called a truthful statement at all (L. Nissen, *John Dewey’s Theory of Inquiry and Truth* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton & Co, 1966), 98). Therefore, Deleuze’s conceptualisation is preferable because, for him, truth is always true, irrespective of spatio-temporal change.

²³ G. Deleuze, *Proust and Signs* (London and New York: Continuum, 2008), 11.

²⁴ G. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* (London: Continuum, 2004), 20.

the theory of truth that grounds it, the rules of which, in turn, must be re-evaluated in terms of the new claim. It is, however, tautologous to suggest that a theory can test its claim according to its own terms. Instead of relying on a benevolent and totalising image of thought to *find* the truth, Deleuze's conceptualisation of truth is functional, and Deleuze argues that truth is '*betrayed* by involuntary signs'.²⁵

What does it mean for truth to be betrayed by signs? In order to know truth, Deleuze argues that we 'must first experience the violent effect of a sign, and the mind must be "forced" to seek the sign's meaning'.²⁶ For Deleuze, the individual encounters situations through four kinds of signs that exist in differential relation to each other: worldly signs (those of meaning); amorous signs (those that impel one to become sensitive to something); sensuous signs (those that give one joy or sadness); and artistic signs (signs of pure affectivity).²⁷ The encounter, for Deleuze, forces the individual to understand a situation, and this understanding is created in part by the affectivity of signs and in part by the signs' relation to thought. There is no truth of the world in-itself, as this implies that there are objects *a priori* of sense to find the truth *of*. Instead, for Deleuze, sense is true if it has been created by the individual in synthesis *with* their previous understanding *and* what they have learned from their encounter with the world. To explain this, Deleuze uses the melancholic example of a man who has been lied to by his partner, asking, '[w]ho would seek the truth if he had not first suffered the agonies inflicted by the beloved's lies?'.²⁸ The deceived is impelled to inquire into the truth, not of the lies that he has been told (for these constitute only part of his situation), but rather of his wretchedness (i.e. his situation). His sense of the situation—his truth—has been betrayed by the encounter, which has constituted his melancholy as part of the situation. In this regard, Deleuze's idea of truth avoids the circularity found in Badiou's and Jones' ideas. Truth is not a truth *of* something (i.e. the world or void), and is therefore not open to questions about its limited remit, but it is *a function of making sense in the world*.

²⁵ R. Bogue, *Deleuze's Wake: Tributes and Tributaries* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 64. See also Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, 11. Emphasis mine.

²⁶ Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, 16.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1-10.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

Ethically truthful

Truth, according to Deleuze, appears to be so far removed from the four traditional theories of truth as to disqualify it as being truth at all, or at the very least so obscure as to render it redundant.²⁹ So what is to be learned from it? There are three points to be taken from Deleuze's conceptualisation of truth. The first is that Deleuze invites us to learn: for Deleuze, we are apprentices in the world to the extent that we learn about ourselves embodied within precarious situations. Thus, when Deleuze argues that 'the condition of truth is not opposed to the false, but to the absurd',³⁰ he encourages us to literally *make sense* of otherwise absurd situations. Understandings of situations are not fixed before they are encountered, so frittering one's life away as a result of being lied to by ones' love is not necessary. Instead, one might creatively affirm one's own place with respect to the liar; not all lies are bad, and learning the truth of the situation *makes* sense of the lie. Secondly, truth is non-propositional, although it may incorporate propositions within it. For Deleuze, propositions only tell a partial truth—the truth *of* the proposition—which amounts to no truth at all, and he reminds us that 'the truth has no need to be spoken in order to be manifest'.³¹ Thirdly, and most importantly, truth is both ethical and subversive.³² Through his critique of dogmatic *a priori* and transcendental claims, Deleuze encourages individuals to take an active role in their own lives in order to remain open to the encounter.³³ One must hold attempts to coerce, dominate, control or lie to us to account, not for the sake of necessarily rejecting these attempts for the sake of it, but to ensure that they benefit us. Deleuze encourages us to make sense of dogmatic ideas and, in doing so, think of ways we might resist their effect on us.

²⁹ This is indeed the position taken even by the majority of Deleuze scholars who articulate their opinions in conversation, though rarely in text. Three notable exceptions to these scholars however are Rancière, Djordjevic, and Smith (see J. Rancière and R. Djordjevic Rancière, "Is There a Deleuzian Aesthetics?" *Qui Parle*, 14(2), 2004, 1-14; see also D. W. Smith, "Temporality and Truth", *Deleuze Studies*, 7(3), 2013, 377-389).

³⁰ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 18.

³¹ Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, 20.

³² A. Negri, *Spinoza for our Time: Politics and Postmodernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 97-98.

³³ I. Semetsky, "The Problematics of Human Subjectivity: Gilles Deleuze and the Deweyan Legacy", *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 22(3-4), 2003, 219.

Deleuze's conceptualisation of truth clearly flies in the face of traditional theories, Badiou's mathematical truth procedures and Jones' Schmittian account of a political theology of truth, eschewing their penchant for organisational and top-down regulation of thought. When politics is presented as a precarious situation to which solutions must be found, Deleuze's theory of truth prompts the individual to problematise its apparent obviousness, and pragmatically instrumentalise thought to make sense of the situation.