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Truth as Disruption

Tim Jones

In this paper I am seeking to advance a claim that an individual engaged in political discourse does so as one unavoidably, and even ontologically, under authority. Pretence to the contrary does not eliminate this but rather opens multiple avenues for covert power-plays. I share with Chris Henry a desire to begin with the personal and ethical as foundational to the political, and admire his employment of Deleuze's resistance to the oversimplification of situational truths. My main concern here is to address the *servile* nature of the politician in both pragmatic and ontological senses and by derivation to propose political speech as the act of public truth-telling; even and especially when the truth represents a disruption to the teller, and its telling a sacrifice.

Offering an imaginative framework for politics as the act of public *truth*-telling entails a general detailing of the legitimating power which is being appealed to in arbitration of the truthfulness of proclamations. Elizabeth Phillips points out that the idea of 'political theology' precedes Christianity, starting with the Roman refinement of the Hellenic idea of the city-state. "The phrase "political theology" she says, 'was first employed in the Stoic philosophy of ancient Rome, which distinguished between three types of gods and thus three types of theology; the personified forces of nature (natural theology), the gods of legend (mythical theology) and the officially worshipped gods of the polis (political theology).'¹ She goes on to show how this idea was developed through the 'two cities' idea in Augustine's City of God which critiques the Imperial political theology in light of the new Christian understanding of Christ as the God of the eternal city. Politics itself is inherently 'theological' in the sense that (regardless of religious confession or lack thereof) appeals tacit and explicit are routinely made by leaders to power(s) which legitimate their position and edicts. Carl Schmitt's observation that 'all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts'

¹ Elizabeth Phillips, *Political Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (UK: Continuum, 2012), 4.

implies that the appeal to the absolute is present in political theory and practice regardless of the presence or absence of appeal to a specific god or gods.² John Caputo points out that ‘when Derrida says that there are “theological prejudices” embedded in “metaphysics in its entirety, even when it professes to be atheistic”, he means that when metaphysics poses as the supreme authority that pronounces “there is no God,” it simply reenacts the role of God. It leaves the “center” standing and reoccupies it with other metaphysical pretenders to the throne: Man, History, Science, Reason, any version of Žižek’s “Big Other.”’³

Any species of the explicit pronouncement of deity(ies) as a ground might be distant to modern secular administrations, but our Western public plural ethics are still built upon deference to shadowy pseudo-theological notions of legitimating power. Max Horkheimer writes in critique of Paul Holbach’s *Systeme de la Nature* (which he characterizes as ‘the bible of eighteenth century materialism’); [w]hen they build a system, theists and atheists alike posit an entity at the top.⁴ That is to say, that all systems carry the vestigial form of the theologies which underpinned the cultures in which they were bred, but with that ‘evacuated centre’. Therefore, all of the machinery for making claims to authority and truth are not in fact internally coherent but still purport to an external validity.

I appreciate that this is the kind of ‘dogmatic’ ethics that Chris Henry is resisting, rightly seeing these power-plays as potentially legitimating the oppression of one human group by another on the basis of dogmatic theological or pseudo-theological truth claims. But resisting the reality of absolutes could in itself be dangerous as it sidesteps the phenomena described, thereby preventing scrutiny of its variegated appearances in the theoretical basis of each and every political administration. If dogmatic truth claims are unavoidable, as I assert, subversion and emancipation are found not in their avoidance but in exposure and interrogation of the legitimacy of their grounds,

² Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (USA: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 36.

³ John D. Caputo, Caputo, Review of *Difficult Atheism: Post-Theological Thinking in Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Nancy and Quentin Meillassoux*, by Christopher Watkin, Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews, 2012, <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/31269-difficult-atheism-post-theological-thinking-in-alain-badiou-jean-luc-nancy-and-quentin-meillassoux/>.

⁴ Max Horkheimer, *Critique of Instrumental Reason* (UK: Continuum, 1974), 43.

and the real outcomes of their doctrines. There is no reason why a confessional theological system should necessarily not prove to be emancipatory even for non-adherents to its doctrines. Between 1902 and 1904, whilst in power as Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Abraham Kuyper published an extensive three volume work called *De Gemeene Gratie* ('Common Grace') wherein he outlined his understanding of God's providential working in the whole of human society:

The social side of man's creation in God's image has nothing to do with salvation nor in any way with each person's state before God. This social element tells us only that in creating human beings in his likeness God deposited an infinite number of nuclei for human development in our nature and that these nuclei cannot develop except through the social bond between people. From this viewpoint the highly ramified development of humanity acquires a significance of its own, an independent goal, a reason for being aside from the issue of salvation. If it has pleased God to mirror the richness of his image in the social multiplicity and fullness of our human race, and if he himself has deposited the nuclei of that development in human nature, then the brilliance of his image has to appear... Then will have occurred that full development of humanity in which all the glory of God's image can mirror itself.⁵

Differentiated from the special or particular grace of salvation in Christ, Kuyper draws a wider circle, based on the Noahic covenant. He sees that, despite sin and fallenness, the world and humanity are still in God's hands. The world and human culture offer possibilities for God's glory to be demonstrated.

The Deleuzean/Spinozan configuration which Henry offers does not actually escape the charge of dogmatism either; the burden of sovereignty is merely shifted onto the 'speaking world' (requiring a kind of 'faith-in-world' in spite of the temporary nature of both world

⁵ Abraham Kuyper, *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (USA: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 178.

and aletheiaic event), which therefore ends up serving as the big other' referred to above. 'But Nature does not say anything', says Horkheimer, 'as little as Being, which has been tried recently and which is supposed to deliver its oracles through the mouths of professors. The place of God is taken in each case by an impersonal concept'. And furthermore, with reference to the inherently theological character of even naturalistic systems, he says '[t]he dogma of a Nature which can speak and command – or at least serve as a principle for deducing moral truths, was an inadequate attempt to go along with science without giving up the age-old longing for an eternal guideline'.⁶

But, supposing that the world does indeed speak (and speaks truthfully), this immediately presents us with further problems of reception. How do we adduce that we have heard the world aright? If the world's speech were clear and our hearing good, from whence do disagreements, political debate, moral preference, etc. originate? The debate then centres upon interpretation, and whilst a radically relativist situational construction of truth may serve as an emancipatory device for the individual, even then it constitutes a localised power-grab, wherein the subject is still seeking to assert sovereignty, even if that ends up being merely internal resistance. Because of its entirely subjective nature, whatever the emancipatory potential of this move, it can only benefit the subject and is impotent beyond their person. The actual subversion of top down political change is instead derived from a sense of 'creatureliness' and personal submission to truth beyond temporal hegemony (truth to which the creature itself is, perhaps unwittingly, subject). This is well embodied in certain pre-modern understandings of the self which are currently enjoying something of a renaissance. Describing the thought of Thomas Aquinas, Denys Turner says, '[f]or Bonaventure we know the world and the self from the standpoint of God; for Descartes, we know the world and God from the standpoint of the self. For Thomas, we know both God and the self from the standpoint of the world. In this sense, then, Thomas is by a long way the more materialistically disposed by any measure, at any rate as to the mind's natural object. For Thomas that natural object is the material world.'⁷ The pre-Cartesian sense of individual

⁶ Horkheimer, *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, 43.

⁷ Denys Turner, *Thomas Aquinas: A Portrait* (USA: Yale University Press, 2013), 56.

contingency (as opposed to individual sovereignty) has made a necessary resurgence due to advances in our understanding from contemporary fields such as 4EA cognition ('Embodied, Embedded, Enactive, Extended, Affective') and second-person neuroscience. The term 'creatureliness' denotes this understanding but with the creatures contingency being explicitly upon a Creator who is known to them through the experienced world. This thought echoes the New Testament text Romans 1:19-20 which says of humankind, 'What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made'. Deleuze's perspective of the self, or selves, as thoroughly embedded in the world coheres with these turns whilst his naturalism obviously does not. On how the dynamic of being selves embedded in the world bears upon interpersonal ethical actions, theologian Oliver Davies states that the

extent to which acting ethically involves the renunciation of our own meaning-making, by which we "autopoietically" determine ourselves against the unmanageable, unpredictable complexity of the real, is also the extent to which we open ourselves up in life, in vulnerability, affectivity, and empathy for the other. It is here that we see the emergence of our relationality and embodied embeddedness in the materiality of the world as a place of sharing. The ethical act, in which we renounce our meaning-making, is not meaningless, therefore, but rather exhibits a different kind of meaning. Its meaning is intrinsic to the act itself. The act is its meaning. The meaning of the act is that at this moment I am in the world in this way. In a sense, in this moment, I am world.⁸

Whereas Deleuze advocates a type of immanent naturalism, Davies' project is concerned with a recovery of the 'immanent Christ' as the proper referent for reality. The need for reclamation is due to at least one significant historical turn: in pre-modern understandings it

⁸ Oliver Davies, *Theology of Transformation: Faith, Freedom, and the Christian Act* (UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 190.

was commonly accepted that we lived in an ‘enchanted universe’ with Christ reigning materially at its highest (and therefore holiest) extent. The paradigm shift from Ptolemaic to Copernican cosmology and the technical advances which afforded it ruptured the security with which this kind of reasoning had hitherto proceeded. ‘We can observe,’ says Davies, ‘that shift today in the simple fact that what was arguably the key scriptural doctrine of the early Church, which is to say the exaltation of Christ (understood in terms of the fact that he had “ascended to the right hand of the Father in heaven”), has become almost wholly redundant in the modern Church’⁹ The Christian faith underwent a centuries-long crisis and a silence in its ability to answer the previously simple question ‘Where is Jesus?’ This is not to say that people or communities lost the ability to experience Christ or to live out a religious reality, but rather that they lost the language and logic through which they had expressed this reality. Seeing us as currently living through a ‘second scientific revolution,’ Davies holds that:

[the] conviction that our new scientific self-understanding, which through its technology will surely soon come to shape us as deeply as did Newtonianism, has deep implications both for Christology and for our own self-understanding as agent in the world. It leads us to the view that it is when we act that we are most human (or created, as we would say theologically) and so, from a theological perspective, to act deliberately and freely in the name of Christ, through personal judgment in loving engagement, is the point too at which we are most in the world, or even most world.¹⁰

And sketching that current understanding he states that:

[h]ere it is presupposed that we are materiality “all the way down”. Neuroscience, genetics, and evolutionary biology show that mind and matter in us form a thoroughgoing continuity, each presupposing the other and each having causal effects upon the other within a continuum of human

⁹ Davies, *Theology of Transformation*, 7.

¹⁰ Davies, *Theology of Transformation*, 30.

life as “intelligent embodiment” in a material world. Quantum physics does so even more radically. Consequently, there is no point at which the mind can be “outside” matter. We are free “within” materiality and not beyond it.¹¹

All of which he sees as hugely promising for a new understanding of the ‘Where is Jesus?’ question being answered in the immanent material presence of Christ within the actions of his followers. Paul Janz describes the person operating under a ‘creaturely’ understanding as a creature in paradox. On one hand they are assured (with regards to their creatureliness over their autonomy) and on the other hand, they are disrupted as their interaction with an incomprehensible creator ‘places [their] own being in question’. He concludes that it is ‘only as the worldly, the natural, the secular and the rational are participated in and lived *in a certain way* – in creaturely directedness towards Christ...that the supernatural is given in the natural, the revelational in the rational.’¹²

A specifically Christian theological underpinning for public truth-telling requires that two points be made explicit. The most significant is that of Jesus’ own perception of truth and his relationship to it. In the dialogue in John 18:33-38 wherein Pilate poses the possibly rhetorical, and ultimately unanswered question, ‘What is truth?’ to Christ, in response to Christ’s statement that he had ‘come into the world to bear witness to the truth’, the ‘truth’ to which Christ is referring is ultimately found in Jesus’ self-identification as ‘the way, and the truth, and the life.’¹³ This declaration is the de facto answer to Pilate’s question which is posed four chapters later within the same text. On the basis of that, we might say that Christ’s conception of truth was strictly ontic; focused upon himself as definition, culmination and index of previous revelation which had occurred within the culture of his witnesses. Christ participated in a Jewish culture and society which believed in a creator God, radically separate from all that exists but nevertheless the source of all Being.

¹¹ Davies, *Theology of Transformation*, 14.

¹² Paul D. Janz, *God, the Mind’s Desire: Reference, Reason and Christian Thinking* (UK: Cambridge University Press), 216.

¹³ John, 14:16.

Paul Tillich offered a modern theological formulation of this with his idea of God as ‘ground-of-being.’¹⁴ It is worth noting that Tillich’s understanding veers into a very general sense of ‘Being’ which was close to a heterodox pantheism (thereby doing for Protestantism what Spinoza did for Judaism), whilst nevertheless seeking to explain something important about the proper ‘ontological’ relation of creator to creature. It is important to understand that the God posited by the Judeo-Christian heritage is wholly other, entirely separate from the being/non-being dialectic. It was this God who was understood to have miraculously spoken within human history to reveal (amongst other things) absolute ethical standards. These communications are recorded in the Jewish Torah, notably in the Decalogue,¹⁵ as well as the many prophetic announcements recorded by Scripture which take the common form of a sovereign edict (‘Thus says the LORD...’). These metrics were appropriated, affirmed and made more stringent in the teachings of Christ, specifically in the Sermon on the Mount in chapters five to seven of Matthew’s account of the Gospel. Christ understood himself to be Israel’s historic God made immanent. He therefore conceived of truth (as the disclosure of the ground-of-being) as embodied by himself.

The New Testament Letter to the Hebrews begins by outlining the Christian consciousness of this lineage: ‘long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.’¹⁶ It goes on to detail the relationship of the person of Jesus to the uncreated God in stating that he is ‘the exact imprint of his [God’s] nature.’¹⁷ Christ, therefore, is in the unique situation of being creator (and thus sovereign) and simultaneously being creature (and thus servant), thereby knowing experientially and sacrificially what submission to absolute truth entails. Firstly, despite communicated standards, it cannot entail encyclopedic reference to an index of rights and wrongs. Christ points to love of God and neighbour as the foremost commandments and says that the whole of morality and ethics are dependent upon these two principles.¹⁸ Secondly, therefore these must represent parameters

¹⁴ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol. 1* (USA: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

¹⁵ Exodus, 20:1–17, Deuteronomy, 5:4–21.

¹⁶ Hebrews, 1:1–2.

¹⁷ Hebrews, 1:3.

¹⁸ Matthew 22:37–40.

for truthful and just human behaviour consisting in sacrificial, other-orientated decision making. Thirdly, awareness of creaturely (as opposed to sovereign) standing introduces an allowance for failure and restoration; proud maintenance of innocence in the face of personal error is not necessary – practically outworking in a humility in leadership.

This brings us to the second issue arising for clarification between my position and Henry's; that of the status of the 'truth-teller' as an actor. In the theological configuration I have outlined, he or she would categorically not understand themselves to be 'the locus of the revelation of truth' but rather as recipient of and witness to the ethical and sacrificial standards affirmed and embodied by Christ. Because these are publicly revealed standards with empirically observable epistemic content in the form of commandments, covenants and promises, the truth-teller may be held accountable by the public to an agreed external standard and the quality of their hermeneutic application thereof. Therefore, the truth-teller cannot be 'self-proclaimed', but only recognised or rejected as such by the public. On this basis, truth should be as disruptive to the person of the truth-teller as to the public and to the status quo; quite the opposite of a theocratic legitimation by self-avowal. The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah furnishes a good example of this dynamic. Firstly his resistance and bewilderment at his call in Jeremiah chapter one and secondly in this description from Jeremiah 20:9 of him trying to resist the truth-telling which God has made incumbent upon him: 'If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot'. The truth-teller therefore, in addition to understanding themselves as in submission and subordination to their creator, would circumstantially understand themselves to be a servant of those they were charged to lead, in the mode of Christ outlined. 'This means,' writes Davies,

that the ethical act is based on a process of coming to personal judgment, in responsibility for the other, which knows that there can be no "right answer", in the midst of life's complexity, and understands that this knowledge is precisely part of what it is to act for and with another. The

self-sacrificial aspect of our good acts lies precisely in the recognition that we cannot in principle be sure that we are not going to do something which has precisely the opposite effect for others from that which we set out to achieve. The nature of complexity is that we can only reason in it openly and reflexively, acknowledging the risks we take upon ourselves, and that this knowledge itself forms part of our self-offering for the other.¹⁹

On this understanding, we observe the vulnerability of the truth-teller who understands themselves specifically *not* as sovereign but as answerable and under divine authority and thereby bound as a servant to their fellow humans. The truth is something for the ethical leader to bow before, being grounded in revealed personal deity.

My argument is that – regardless of religious conviction and on ontological grounds – the contingent, secondary nature of the human being (what Bonhoeffer terms the ‘penultimate’) places them in the position of servant as opposed to sovereign and requires their public speech to be conducted accordingly

¹⁹ Davies, *Theology of Transformation*, 190.