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Truthful Politics: Introduction

Chris Henry

For too long, critical theory has ignored, or worse disparaged, the idea of truth. Truthful political philosophy is often the target of a political philosophy which seeks to dismiss claims to truth as uncritical and dogmatic.¹ Yet, as Meillassoux has shown, casting the notion of truth aside out of hand constitutes a fideism akin to the same quasi-religious dogmatism that was the original target of critical thought. The claim that there is no truth carries the same metaphysical weight as a truth claim itself.² So, for example, when David Cameron told us in his 2015 New Year's speech that '2015 can promise to be a great year for our country - if we make the right choices together', a critical theorist might respond by pointing out that there is no 'right choice' in the first place. Yet how true is the claim that there is no 'right choice'? If we were to disparage the idea of truth, how could such a claim be valid, correct or significant?

The above problematic underpinned the Truthful Politics stream at the 2015 London Conference in Critical Thought. Starting from the premise that truth claims were, at the very least, of interest to political argumentation, participants were invited to explore issues regarding the conceptual, theoretical and practical-political nature of the idea of truth. Particularly against the background of post-foundational and post-structuralist theory, the stream explored how truth claims could justify politics or how, in turn, truth claims could be (politically) justified. The following passage from Misak neatly expresses the issue at stake:

We think that it is appropriate, or even required, that we give reasons and arguments for our beliefs, that 'rational' persuasion, not brow-beating or force, is the appropriate

¹ The author would like to thank the anonymous reviews for their important contributions to this introduction.

² Q. Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London and New York: Continuum, 2008), 28.

means of getting someone to agree with us. Indeed, we want people to *agree* with, or at least respect, our judgements, as opposed to merely mouthing them, or falling in line with them. And we criticise the beliefs, actions, and even the final ends and desires of others, as false, vicious, immoral, or irrational. The fact that our moral judgements come under such internal discipline is a mark of their objectivity. The above phenomena are indications that moral inquiry aims at truth.³

Henry and Jones both presented papers that investigated the legitimacy afforded to political arguments from their foundational truth claims. Dissatisfied with the four standard theories of truth (coherence, correspondence, pragmatic and deflationary), both Henry and Jones developed concepts of political truth, in the immanent tradition on the one hand, and the *aletheiatic* tradition on the other. Henry draws on a line of thought that runs from Machiavelli and Spinoza through to Nietzsche and Deleuze, to argue that truth claims can only be made of the sense by which we understand the world. According to this tradition, sense is constituted by the world *whilst* it senses the world and, as such, Henry's truth is immanent to both. Jones, on the other hand, draws on the *aletheiatic* tradition, where *aletheia* can be translated into 'un-hiddenness', or 'unveiling'. The *aletheiatic* tradition started in ancient Greek philosophy before being translated into early Christian and Gnostic texts as 'revelation' and finding its contemporary expression in the work of Heidegger and German mysticism. For these thinkers, the source of truth is often revealed by certain events from an otherwise inaccessible/unknowable domain. In this sense, individuals act as way of actualising a source of truth that is either greater than them (particularly within the Christian tradition), or that is held in an inaccessible void.

Yet why would one wish to move away from standard discourses on truth? In contemporary theories, the commitment to truth is no longer tied to either metaphysical absolutes or epistemic privileges, as it was in the pre-modern period. Rather, contemporary theories of truth bind individuals to a fidelity to the object and the practice of

³ C. Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality: Pragmatism and Deliberation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 3.

discourse that is open to challenge and criticism in light of how things stand, regardless of one's privileges. Yet it is not clear how this openness to challenge, often advocated in the name of resistance, the subaltern, or minority groups, strengthens the idea of truth as much as it relegates it to the realm of *doxa* (i.e. received wisdom). A political philosophy that sways with the tide of prevailing opinion can hardly be called truthful, and what is truthful may also not necessarily be preferable. Both Henry and Jones are therefore attempting to think an idea of truth that avoids, on the one hand, a purely pre-modern form of truth to which privileged access then sanctions authoritarian forms of domination and, on the other, a post-modern form which strips truth of any justificatory—and therefore political—weight whatsoever.

The key distinction between the two positions that follow is summed up by Jones in his contribution. Whilst he supports Henry's efforts to resist the oppression of truth claims 'on the basis of dogmatic theological or pseudo-theological truth claims', he locates oppression not in dogma itself, but in the lack of scrutiny bestowed on truth claims that *actually are dogmatic*. Jones asserts that there is an unavoidable authority that justifies political discourse, and that, in fact, it is pretence to the contrary which opens up the potential for political coercion. In other words, the problem is not the dogma inherent in truth claims, but the lack of interrogation when dogma is not fully exposed and embraced. Jones suggests that a turn to embedded cognitive neuroscience is one such mode by which we can scrutinise and hold to account claims that are founded upon a political theology. For Henry, the problem of coercive truth claims does indeed lie within dogmatism itself. It is precisely a recourse to the transcendental that constitutes the grounds for political coercion and oppression. He maintains that any theory which specifies where truth comes from creates a duality between 'truth as the truth of some-thing and anything else which is not that thing'. As a result of this specification, such a theory can only ever tell a partial truth, i.e. the truth of what it specifies. Crucially then, for Henry, such a theory cannot tell the truth of why the theory is itself truthful. The theological authority that Jones advocates as legitimising political action is secularised as soon as it is described, and we are left with the question: how true is the statement "the source of truth is God"? Henry suggests that, rather than a set of truthful claims revealed by human action from a theological realm,

truth is a *function* of our sense of the world. One literally *makes* sense of the world, and this sense is truthful to the extent that it is a product of the individual learning about themselves in the world.

Neither of these contributions should be read as full arguments in their own right; the purpose of them is instead to reinvigorate and provoke the discussion of truthful political philosophy. In this sense, neither purports to be as fleshed out as would be necessary to fully sustain the claims made within them. Yet what is clear from both provocations is that thinking the idea of truth remains a necessity for the justification of political philosophy, and that closer examination of pre-modern forms of truth are called for to do this. Intended as stimulation for further debate, Henry and Jones offer suggestions for countering what Meillassoux laments as the '*fideism of any belief whatsoever*'.⁴ In order to overcome the situation whereby the de-absolutisation of metaphysics threatens to blunt the critical edge of critical thought through the upholding of belief, perhaps a return to truth is exactly what is needed.

⁴ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 46.