

Word and World: the Imperium of Reason and the Possibility of Critique

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The reasonable, as I understand it here, would be a rationality that takes account of the incalculable so as to give an account of it, there where this appears impossible, so as to account for, or reckon *with* it, that is to say, with the event of *what* or *who* comes. (Derrida, 2005)

During the proceedings of a meeting considering the issues affecting the European Nations, Zebedeus spoke authoritatively to the question of the legality of war against infidels. Where there existed breaches in laws natural and divine, he argued, Christian nations had not just the right, but the duty to subdue ‘ . . . such routs and shoals of people, as have utterly degenerated from the laws of nature; as have in their very body and frame an estate of monstrosity’ and that such people “may be truly accounted . . . common enemies and grievances of mankind; or disgraces and reproaches to human nature” (Bacon, 1819, p. 491).

This fictional meeting, recounted by Sir Francis Bacon, speaks to an age in which a devastating imperial project was legitimised not only in the terms of glory and destiny, but also in terms of law founded on the modern ideals of truth and reason. While much has been said and written about the relationship between imperialism and Western rationality, it will specifically be the role of an inductive logic as a foundation for truth and which demands the *fusing* of word and world that will be critically examined here. This examination will begin with a consideration of Bacon’s work to excavate the nature of the spectre that haunts it; that is, his (and our) desire to overcome those obstacles that prevent us from obtaining correct knowledge of our material world, and the kind of logic enlisted to do so. The process of induction Bacon introduced was more than a corrective to the methodological preferences of the day:

it was a means by which mankind could finally discover the world in its singular and true form. The implications of this method extended beyond the natural sciences as, until we had correctly determined language (and words) to reflect these forms, we were doomed to reflect these imperfections in our reasoning. The spectre that haunts Bacon, culminating in the pursuit of a single determination (fusing) of word and world, constitutes an essential part of his imperial logic; and it is this spectre which has remained with us today, sustaining *imperium* at the heart of our attempts to think of justice in a global context.

The second part of this paper will consider precisely the way in which an imperial logic, that provides dominium and is 'grounded' upon a particular determination of the world cast as universal, persists. For fear of extinguishing normative questions altogether, arguments of incommensurability, cognitive relativism, or even the possibility of a *differend* (a notion developed by Lyotard) have been rejected (or ignored) in favour of discourse ethics, liberal constitutionalism, and other theoretical justifications for a universalistic thinking of justice. This rejection denies both descriptive accounts of the possibility of ontological plurality, as well as the normative challenges such a plurality present. Contrary to the supposition that we must discover the world in its singular form to save reason and critique and thus the capacity to respond to injustice, it will be advanced both that we may reason about, critique, and, think of justice without the fusing of word and world, and further, that it is precisely the task of justice to do so.

The Imperium of Induction

Forging his 'Great Instauration', a new start not just for natural philosophy but also for the pursuit of knowledge in general, Bacon opposes his method to both empiricist and rationalist schools of thought. Both of these schools of thought, Bacon argued, invariably suffered from the various 'idols of the mind'. The understanding, Bacon said, is like "an uneven mirror that cannot reflect truly the rays from objects, but distorts and corrupts the nature of things by mingling its own nature with it" (1994, p. 56). It 'mingled' with its awareness of nature, creating, for example, the false belief in the order and uniformity of things in the world. This resulted from what Bacon described as 'the idols of the tribe', those characteristics common to the human mind that prevented men from true and correct knowledge of the natural world. In addition to these were the idols of the *cave*, those idols specific to individual men. Each person had their "own private cave or den, which breaks up or falsifies the light of nature, either because of his own distinct and individual nature, or because of what he has been taught or gained in conversation with others" (1994, p. 54). This particular and individual kind of distortion resulted largely because of the idols of the market place, that is, from "... the dealings and associations which men have with one another ... for

speech is the means of association among men; but words are applied according to common understanding. And in consequence, a wrong and inappropriate application of words obstructs the mind to a remarkable extent" (1994, p. 55). This inappropriate application did "violence to the understanding", leading men to "innumerable empty controversies and fictions" (1994, p. 55).

Words, according to Bacon, were notions and if these basic notions were incorrect then however logically impressive the demonstration or argument that followed, it could only but sustain these initial flaws and misunderstandings (1994, p. 46). What was needed was a new effort to discover the nature of things, their 'form' from which we could then make more genuine progress. This could only be done by a thorough and meticulous comparison and analysis of extensive empirical data following an inductive methodology. The basis of this method involved comparing 'instances' of phenomena in relation to other phenomena to ascertain what, precisely, the phenomena was. For example, heat, Bacon noted from his extensive table of instances, often occurs with brightness, but brightness could occur without exhibiting qualities of heat, and heat also occurred as warmth from bodies without exhibiting qualities of brightness. From such observations Bacon could slowly conclude what the nature of heat actually was by observing its necessary qualities, and distinguishing from heat those qualities which were incidental to it. Thus, induction lay "in the process of exclusion, which . . . is not completed until it arrives at an affirmative" (1994, p. 173).

In this careful and systematic way, we could come to discover the nature of the world, bearing fruit in terms of technology, medicine, and commodities, but we could further the glory and *dominium* of man:

...it is worth noticing the great power and value and consequent discoveries, in none more obvious than those three that were unknown to the ancients, and whose beginnings, although recent, were obscure and unsung, namely, the arts of printing, gunpowder and the compass... Moreover, it is not irrelevant to distinguish three kinds, three stages as it were, in human ambition. The first is shown by those who seek to extend their power in their own country, which is a common and unworthy kind. The second, by those who strive to extend their country's power and dominion among mankind, which sort has certainly some dignity, but is no less covetous. But the man who labours to establish and extend the power and dominion of the human race itself over the whole universe displays an ambition (if ambition it can be called) that is without doubt healthier and more noble than others. But the dominion of man over things rests solely in the arts and sciences. For Nature is not ruled unless she is obeyed... (1994, p. 129).

Knowledge provided power, as Bacon had no qualms in emphasising. The examples of printing, gunpowder, and the compass as discoveries which distinguish the knowledge of his contemporaries from that of the 'ancients', allude to the relationship between knowledge and imperium in Bacon's thought. However, the potential for dominium over other men was only power in its infancy, and its glory was more than simple ambition. Nature provided not only material benefits but displayed God's own divine mind. Dismissive of attempts to map scriptural knowledge upon nature (and to limit genuine investigation as heretical), Bacon argued that nature in fact provided the clearest view of divine intention. "The Creator's true stamp upon created things", Bacon said, was "...printed and defined on . . . matter by true and precise lines . . . so works themselves are of greater value as pledges of truth than as comforts of life" (1994, p.124). For those who had attained such knowledge, the possession of truth, Bacon said, provided the greatest of pleasures, as:

...no pleasure is comparable to the standing upon the vantage ground of truth (a hill not to be commanded, and where the air is still and always clear and serene), and to see the errors, and wanderings, and mists, and tempests, in the vale below; so always that this prospect be with pity, and not with swelling or with pride. Certainly, it is heaven on earth, to have a man's mind move in charity, rest in providence, and turn upon the poles of truth (2007, p. 7).

Truth depended upon a fusing - a union of words and the world in a singular determination. Through the process of induction, we could come to correct knowledge of what things were; that is their 'form', or 'nature engendering nature'. Once things had been discovered in their true nature, our notions would no longer need to be based upon a vernacular. Words could become fixed to represent the world as it actually was - and it is here where Bacon's *particular* form of imperial logic lay. The kind of knowledge which Bacon sought was of a sort that positioned its adherents between the divine and the ignorant, between the face of God and "those routs and shoals of people, who have by their very nature monstrosity in their frame". This vantage point is possible not by revelation or scriptural interpretation, but by the ability to 'know' the material world and to settle those words and notions that confuse and muddle the understanding. The imperium displayed in such claims of knowledge is more elusive than that of dogmatism - it is the proposition that we can, and should, settle the world as a collection of objects defined and determined. It was a truth based in humility - a humility that simultaneously demanded authority. Although men needed 'to obey' nature so as to command her, the command of nature implied the command of justice. It was a reciprocal command. The command was not only 'over' something, implying knowledge of, or even a mastery over, but a command 'from'. It

was a command from the world, and thus from God. Its interpretation manifested as a war upon those who did not know, or would not follow this command.

It seems however, that those of us who call ourselves 'modern' no longer believe in laws 'Natural' and 'Divine' (for the most part). If secular notions of justice are steeped in the ideals of equality and democracy then we are clearly a long way away from the kind of holy war advocated by Francis Bacon's fictional character Zebedeus. Yet, in much of our discourse on justice, particularly justice globally conceived, we remain faithful to a union of word and world, a union that carries an imperial authority, remaining unresponsive to the injustices it perpetrates.

Word and World

Although often hailed as the father of the scientific method, the philosophy of science has long since given up trying to discover a method that could meaningfully arbitrate between competing theories that can equally explain a given phenomena. Advances in the philosophy of science and in analytic philosophy demonstrate not only the tautological nature of Bacon's quest for forms, but have in various incarnations dismantled the claims to a knowledge of things-in-themselves altogether. In the philosophy of science we may observe approaches ranging from the position that we come *closer* to truth by eliminating false theories (never to know for certain that any given theory is finally correct) to more radical instrumentalist theories of science in which the phenomena under consideration must always be understood as linguistically, socially, and cognitively conditioned (see for example: Kuhn 1962; and, Goodman 1978). In contemporary analytic philosophy these more radical notions are echoed in the idea of ontological pluralism (and other 'deflationary' theories of truth), which advance the possibility of multiple determinations of the world which are both incommensurable and valid (see for example, Putnam 1987).

Similarly, in the philosophy of language, Ludwig Wittgenstein advanced the possibility of heterogeneous and distinct language games. Moving away from his earlier work (which, although often thought as strictly positivist, had already advanced a notion of cognitive relativism), his later work emphasised the way in which language was *used* in different ways. As opposed to the conventional understanding of language which saw words applied to objects like labels (much in the same way that Bacon had sought to 'correctly' identify the forms in the world and attach words to them like labels), Wittgenstein (2001) proposed that there were distinct and separate 'language games' within which words could be enlisted not just to point to, or describe relations among objects, but used to *do* things with. E.P. Gallie (1955) and William Connelly (1973), for example, both explore the political relevance for how we define what they describe as 'evaluative' words. Words like 'democracy' or 'courage' are not only used descriptively, as labels to identify particular objects, but as ideal types. What, precisely,

these ideal types are becomes, in turn, fundamentally contestable. What counts as democracy depends on much more than a list of criteria prescribed by its definition, it depends on a meaning that remains open to political and social challenge. Those who would claim to discover a determinate meaning or final definition of such evaluative terms in fact attempt a *coup d'état* by relying upon its indeterminate quality to evoke normative force whilst simultaneously denying this incomplete nature. Their evaluative function in fact relies upon their contestable nature, and thus to fix a meaning would also mean to undermine its normative potential.

The plurality of possible ways we might experience and determine the world – cognitively, linguistically, socially or through our embodied experience – may be understood more generally than indicated by the above examples. The idea of ‘World’ implies not only the specific determined experience or representation of it, but something which remains inaccessible and beyond *any* such particular determination. Indeed, the use of the word ‘determination’ may imply an over-determinacy, as many of these ways of being in the world involve an *inexactness*, a space that allows us to transform, change our minds, even be at odds with ourselves. While the ‘World’ would always be a phenomenal world, our ability to conceive of its plurality implies the noumenal as that possibility of being otherwise. Temporally, this presents the possibility for *rupture* in our ontology - that is the possibility of an event which radically changes what truth is. Spatially, it is the possibility of the world simultaneously being determined in heterogeneous and non-commensurable ways. This does not imply an absence of determination, but rather multiple determinations – temporal and spatial. It also implies an ontological plurality – the always present possibility of determining (representing, experiencing, *knowing*) the world otherwise.

Such multiplicity has specific political and normative implications. Jean-François Lyotard, for example, asks how we may “save the honour of thinking” given “the absence of a universal genre of discourse to regulate conflicts” (1989, p. xii). Giving up on the possibility of finding a legitimate rule of judgement that can equitably be applied in a universal manner, Lyotard identifies that a ‘wrong’ results when “the genre of discourse by which one judges are not those of the judged genre or genres of discourse” (1989, p. xi). Thus Lyotard presents us with a problem and a task. The problem has been presented as the problem of judgement, to which we will return shortly. The task, however, concerns the honour of thinking, and by honour we may interpret a thinking which takes account of the kinds of wrongs done when a particular ‘genre of discourse’ is taken for a universal one.

Such a task however, has since been dismissed or declared as dangerous by many contemporary theorists. Seyla Benhabib, for example, has contended that “insisting upon the incommensurability of language games may generate moral and political indifference...[and amount to] a conservative plea to place the other, because of her otherness, outside the pale of our common humanity and mutual

responsibility" (1984, p. 122). The choice with which we are thus faced, Benhabib asserts, is one between "an uncritical polytheism" and the recognition "of the need for critical validity" (1984, p. 111). This critique intimates at the broad variety of reactions against what is taken to be a 'postmodern' or 'relativist' attack upon reason itself (with both postmodernism and relativism often ill-described and inappropriately assigned) (Geertz, 1984; Rajchman, 1988). A polemical engagement which received considerable attention around the same time that Benhabib was responding to the postmodern and similarly oriented movements in political and social theory was that presented by Jürgen Habermas (1987) in the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Here, Habermas engaged with what he described as a 'radical' or 'totalising' critique of reason. This work was of particular importance because it articulated the argument that those who challenged reason (as he understood it) entered into a performative contradiction; an idea that has since become something of an accepted wisdom, contributing the wholesale rejection of proposals which suggest an alternative to understanding the world as singularly determined. It is also the key step which has claimed that reason, critique, and justice can only be legitimately pursued if there is a universal language or criterion of validity.

In a *tour de force*, Habermas takes on a broad range of theorists whom he finds guilty of this particular kind of contradiction. In reference to the work of Horkheimer and Adorno, for example, Habermas (1987, p. 126) argued that their "description of the self-destruction of the critical capacity is paradoxical, because in the moment of description it still has to make use of the critique that has been declared dead". Similarly, according to Habermas, Foucault, in his effort to rise above the pseudo sciences to a "more rigorous objectivity", is "compelled to a relativist self-denial . . . [that] can give no account of the normative foundations of its own rhetoric" (1987, p. 294), and that Derrida, in expanding the "sovereignty of rhetoric above the logical", is still unable to escape the "totalizing self-critique [that] gets caught in a performative contradiction" (1987, p. 185). These 'totalising critiques' of reason, Habermas argued, rely upon reason for their criticism of reason, and in so doing destroy the foundations upon which they depend. Much like the theoretical 'grandfather paradox' of time travel (in which the paradox of time-travel is revealed in the possibility of the time traveller travelling back in time and killing her grandfather prior to the conception of her parents) so too is a paradox evoked when we destroy the foundations of our own reasoning, invalidating the very reason that would supposedly have validated that invalidity. Thus, if we were to apply this argument to the thesis that the 'world' might be validly determined in a multitude of ways then it would seem that the logical consequence would be the undermining of our capacity for reason.

Yet this 'undermining' depends upon conflating the conclusions drawn by 'reason' and the processes affiliated with it, such as critique and judgement. According

to Bacon's own distinction (and indeed the common distinction made in analytic philosophy since Hume) syllogism, logic, and *reason*, do not themselves give us knowledge of the things in the world. Reason provides a process with which to consider relations among variables, variables of which depend on particular determinations of the world. While reason has always been seen as limited in this way, this view of reason has also allowed for its independence from the given world that it reasons about. Reasoning, as a process, is not compromised by the possibility of a world that resist singular determination. The kind of ontological plurality suggested by Putnam, deflationary theories of truth, and instrumental views in the philosophy of science, have not hampered the possibility of drawing conclusions and exercising judgement in a given determination of the world precisely because of this division. What is compromised is the *singular* validity of the conclusions drawn. The challenge to 'valid criterion', then, is a challenge not to a process that allows for judgement and critique, but rather to its exclusive validity. We may then ask what it might mean to 'save the honour of thinking' in which thinking remains free to reason even in the absence of a reason understood as singular and universal.

Reason (beyond Imperium)

When scholars write about the relevance of Kant's *practical reason*, it is often remarked that while 'pure reason' may not give us knowledge of the world, we have to *behave* as if reason did culminate in unity (see for example: O'Neill, 2000), as if there really could be a God's eye perspective of the world. In one regard, this is precisely what we must do. We can only reason from a particular determination of the world in which the elements of that world are woven together in a meaningful way. That is to say, to engage in the practice of 'reasoning' is to evoke a world that yields to an understanding necessarily bound by categories of time, space, and causality – that any element of the world, for the sake of reasoning can be *understood in relation* to anything else. What Kant's analysis fails to consider, however, is the more subtle level of variance in human phenomenological experience. Times have changed. We know more than ever about the ways in which the phenomena of the world can be known, experienced, and represented differently. To wilfully ignore or dismiss the injustice that occurs when the world is fused with words in a singular determination is not only to shy away from a daunting task, it is to be complicit in an imperial logic. The obstacle with which we are presented does not arise from those idols of the mind that prevent us from true, properly inducted knowledge, but rather, by the false idol of having to singularly determine the world in order to make judgements. We can, and do, consider the possibility of determining the world otherwise – whether it is to embrace a politics of rupture, or the kinds of meaning and fulfilment only realised through aesthetic experience. This possibility is not the antithesis of reason, but is one of many ways of

understanding the world (*as plural*) that ought to be considered in any particular determination as relevant to questions of justice. To posit the ontological plurality of the world is not to posit a world *underdetermined*, but multiple worlds (spatial and temporal) in incomplete determinations. From each instance in whichever world we occupy, we have the capacity to reason about, and to critically engage not just with the theme of justice *per se*, but with the question of justice in relation to those worlds we do not (in that instance) occupy.

It is this possibility which Bacon could not conceive, and which those who continue seeking to establish a single and universal grounding for normative theory have missed. An admittedly polemical characterisation, as work in democratic theory, cosmopolitanism, and conceptions of justice globally conceived are complex and nuanced. Indeed, the charges of imperialism seem far less potent in a milieu where questions of power in relation to epistemological claims are regularly challenged; theories of deliberative democracy emphasise the need for conversations to be 'open' conceiving of the possibility for any or all participants to be transformed by the process; and constitutional arrangements are envisioned as inclusive, particularly of different cultural traditions. A thesis could plausibly be proposed that contemporary theory has moved beyond the polarised relationship between those on the side of reason and truth and those conceived as its enemy which characterised well known debates in the 1970s and 1980s. However, it has nevertheless remained a tacit assumption among many that justice demands the kind of singular fusing of word and world which must reject arguments for cognitive relativism, incommensurability, or the possibility of a *differend*. And yet, it is this logic which precisely puts us at war with a world already known, experienced, and represented in plurality, and with the possibility of a world known otherwise than it is.

Whether we are committed to ideals of democracy, peace, freedom, or love, their pursuit depends not only upon the recognition of the world known and understood differently (and in plurality), but upon the continual (re)discovery of what these words mean. Further, it is the task of justice which calls us to account for ourselves not only in relation to those with whom we are in conversation, with whom we can find common ground, or with those who are willing adhere to particular constitutional arrangements (for example), but to account for ourselves in relation to that over which we have no dominion.

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