

A Faith Without Foundation

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Abstract

Cornel West claims the biggest threat to the disadvantaged people of the West is *nihilism* – the lived experience of meaninglessness, hopelessness, and lovelessness, crushed under systems perpetuating the hardships at the heart of what makes nihilism so intractable. Adopting a position triangulated through Christianity, through historicism and moral non-absolutism, and through a desire to rationally justify moral progress in a world forged through historically contingent forces, West believes he's able to offer the meaning, hope, and love that those at the bottom of society lack, through undermining the privileged status of the social, economic, and political norms which he believes underpin nihilism. His motivation is Christian, his tools are historicism and non-absolutism.

I argue through close textual analysis that West's historicism is a broken tool, his position descends into unregulated moral relativism, and that it's of no use in combating the inequalities he targets. Where West contends that his non-absolutism challenges the grounding for inequality, I show that it equally undermines his own solutions. Where he asserts that Christianity provides a grounding for justice, I show that his historicism removes those grounds. However, I demonstrate that his critiques of unregulated relativism – and so, unwittingly, of his own position – are unsuccessful, and a non-absolutist historicist position can indeed be sustained, through hermeneutic, universalised, democratic discourse. I then highlight a danger of unequal power dynamics within such discourse, but by developing West's Christianity, reconstructed as a form of virtue ethics, these inequalities can be avoided. West's Christianity, I argue, can provide a universally available, culturally-neutral, regulative norm permitting the historicist to evade the power inequalities that could jeopardise moral progress, while maintaining a non-absolutist position. West may, through such a reconstruction, retain his historicism, Christianity, and desire for justifiable moral progress, without the internal contradictions that had previously plagued him.

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In memory of David Efir
~ my co-pilot and mentor ~

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Chapter One: A World Without Love

We begin with what matters. We begin by looking at human suffering, and how we can overcome it. We begin by looking at humans suffering at the expense of others, and by acknowledging that those at whose expense they suffer are not always cruel or malicious, they simply have the better part of the world's inequality.

Most of all, we begin not by looking for, but by looking at, an answer. This answer can be discovered by investigating the philosophical work of Cornel West, a man once called one of the US's leading public intellectuals,¹ described by *Time Magazine* as 'brilliant [...] he has become one of the most insightful and passionate analysts of America's racial dilemma to emerge in recent years',² who is said to have 'influenced millions of young black Americans',³ and who's been cited on Princeton University's website as a 'leader on issues of social justice, race, equality and cultural understanding'.⁴ As a thinker courted by politicians, civil rights movements, academic institutions and broadcasters,⁵ he is one of a relatively small number of academics whose ideas have crossed over into the public domain, are discussed outside colleges and universities, and exert influence on community leaders and, to some extent, policy makers. Both widely read and widely discussed, Cornel West cannot be ignored.

But while West's writings are discussed throughout, my aim is not primarily exegetical. It's a philosophical journey that reaches far beyond the ideas of just one man, embracing issues that are both acutely current and chronically longevous. And for many (including the author of this work) who struggle with the social and intellectual forces at play in the first quarter of the twentieth century, this journey becomes an intensely personal one. Forces, it should be noted, that include cultural

¹ <http://www.publishersweekly.com/9780807009185>

² *Time Magazine*, June 7th 1993.

³ Refer to Stephan Sackur, International TV Personality of the Year 2010 (Association of International Broadcasters), *BBC Hard Talk*, December 5th 2014.

⁴ <http://www.princeton.edu/main/news/archive/S27/23/21I04/index.xml?section=announcements>

⁵ West has been featured in over 25 documentaries and films, has been extensively interviewed around the world, and has over many years appeared as guest and co-host on television and radio programmes reaching out to hundreds of thousands of viewers and listeners. He has led rallies for social justice, spoken at numerous political events, and is widely discussed in both mainstream and social media. Such is the fame and influence that he carries with him that his dispute with the president of Harvard University and his subsequent indication that he wished to leave the faculty made news around the world, including in *The Economist*, *The New York Times*, and *The New Statesman* (see <http://www.economist.com/node/923104>, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/04/13/us/harvard-loses-a-2nd-black-scholar-to-princeton.html>, and <http://www.newstatesman.com/north-america/2012/01/west-obama-smiley-choose>, among other sources). As of January 2015, he has published 19 books (and edited many more), including the *Publishers' Weekly* best-seller *Race Matters* (which has to date sold over 400,000 copies) and *The New York Times* best-seller *Democracy Matters*. He is the recipient of the American Book Award, winner of the inaugural Fields Memorial Award for Social Justice, holds more than 20 honorary degrees, is a frequent guest debater at the Oxford Union, and has shared a public political platform with – and latterly famously attacked that same platform occupied by – President Barack Obama (see for instance the *New York Daily News* website: www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/cornel-west-decries-president-obama-counterfeit-article-1.1916726). As a supporter of Obama, he spoke to over 1,000 of the presidential candidate's supporters at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem, New York, in 2007 (see Parker, 2007).

pluralisation in the form of refugees and immigrants moving between countries with vastly different view of the world, economic systems, and social and ethical priorities;⁶ forces that include a (possibly consequent, although that's a question for another day) Western intellectual movement towards non-absolutism and rejections⁷ of objectivist positions on truth;⁸ and forces that include signs of a more widespread engagement with ethical issues⁹ due to the increased use of social media in political and moral discourse.¹⁰

For those engaged with these and similar forces who wish to find (or create) ways of rationally grounding moral claims¹¹ in a pluralising society, while acknowledging a retreat from (or perhaps a happy disrobing of) the trappings of moral absolutism, there are questions that must be asked. If a moral claim is intended to be universal (such as saying: preventable starvation in economically wealthy countries is an abomination; unnecessary and unconsenting female genital mutilation is wrong, non-consensual sexual intercourse is wrong, or equality between races and genders is morally desirable, regardless of the differing opinions of various cultural groups), yet moral absolutism is no longer on the table, then just how can any moral statement find guarantee of there being any transcultural and transgenerational rational grounding?

Then religion becomes a factor. Quite apart from the consideration that much of the force of pluralisation might be driven by the coming-together of different religious traditions, the billions of people around the world¹² who identify as religious and

⁶ In 2019 alone, 2.7 million immigrants entered the EU from non-EU countries. There are currently more than 654,000 refugees and asylum seekers coming from Libya, many of whom are trying to reach Europe; after nine years of war, there are nearly 5.6 million registered Syrian refugees; more than 4.5 million people have been forced from their homes in the Democratic Republic of Congo; nearly a million refugees live in Bangladesh's refugee camps, with roughly 125,000 Rohingya living in displacement camps; while the Afghan refugee population includes 2.7 million registered refugees and an estimated many millions more who are unregistered. This is just a small selection of figures, but the issue – and the cultural differences that accompany it – is heartrending and shows no signs of going away. For these statistics and more, visit *The New Humanitarian* at https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/migration?gclid=Cj0KCQiA2NaNBhDvARIsAEw55hhryJ2H0JIuk456ASoOnimXR_TzOxRmV85CoE-hUYTRegV6chEhD38aApq5EALw_wcB, and *Eurostat* at https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Migration_and_migrant_population_statistics.

⁷ New research from The Cultural Research Center (CRC) at Arizona Christian University shows that the majority of American citizens currently reject moral absolutes – even among traditional Christians. See Barna, 2020.

⁸ We'll begin with a tentative working understanding of 'objectively true' as referring to something that's true independent of individual or group beliefs about it, though this working understanding will become better furnished as our investigation progresses.

⁹ See Ward & Wasserman, 2010, Leppänen, *et al*, 2017.

¹⁰ As far back as 2011, 65% of adult internet users engaged in activities on social networking sites compared with 29% three years, and 8% six years previously. Longitudinal studies show that this figure is rising. In 2019 it was reported that the number of social media users was growing annually by 9% and that this trend was expected to continue. See Madden & Zickuhr, 2011, Wang, *et al*, 2012, Barrett-Maitland & Lynch, 2020.

¹¹ For instance, about the human suffering we referenced at the start of this chapter.

¹² According to the Pew Group's Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life, more than 80% of people identify with a religious group worldwide. The research estimated that there are 5.8 billion religiously affiliated adults and children around the globe, representing 84% of the 2010 world population. Around one third of these religiously affiliated people identify as Christian, although levels of practice and importance vary. See for instance <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>, <https://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>, and

whose moral judgements are influenced by their religions will (it's safe to assume) contain many millions of people for whom claims such as "God exists", "God created the universe", and "God is good", are held to be true regardless of whether one or another group accepts it. As with moral claims, religious positions such as these appear reliant, for much of their weight, on being "objectively true". God exists *for us but not them* rings remarkably hollow for many theists.

Indeed, the author of this work is just such a theist. The truth of claims such as "God exists" cannot, considering most Christian conceptions of the divine, be easily reconciled with the caveat "for us but not them". "Acting according to God's love is good" sits badly with the caveat "and also not good, depending on whom you affiliate with". Yet the suspicion is that a swing away from objectivism and absolutism risks logically adding just such a caveat.

The issue can (for simplicity) be visualised as a triangle. On one point of the triangle is the acknowledgement of suffering, and the desire to rationally ground moral claims that can alleviate this suffering, in the face of a pluralising world where many different groups disagree on different moral positions. The goal would be to create, in some way, from our position of moral deficiency, and notwithstanding the moral disagreements that exist in the world, moral *improvement*. On another point of this triangle is the ability to hold coherent religious (in this author's case, Christian) faith in a God who sits high and came low, who is intrinsically moral, and who – regardless of whether people accept it – exists (or doesn't).¹³ What's at stake is the ability to make God-claims that are consistent with most accepted conceptions of God: he exists or he doesn't, he's good or he isn't; but not both. The third point of the triangle is the acceptance of a philosophically non-absolutist, non-objectivist position,¹⁴ a position which turns out to sit comfortably with the American pragmatist tradition of Dewey, James, and others, and which, though by no means universally accepted, has gained much traction over the course of the 20th and early 21st century. Non-absolutist positions are not, generally, taken to be philosophical outliers.¹⁵

So we triangulate between the desire to rationally ground moral claims¹⁶ in a pluralising world, a religious (particularly here, Christian) faith shared by billions, and a non-absolutist position on ethics and other philosophical issues. Yet non-absolutism makes the claim "the monotheistic God exists, has always existed, and will always exist, regardless of what others say" difficult to make. And it makes the claim "unconsenting sex with minors is abhorrent, always and regardless of who agrees", equally difficult.¹⁷ And if one is a non-absolutist, one cannot simply *choose*

<https://www.pewforum.org/2018/06/13/how-religious-commitment-varies-by-country-among-people-of-all-ages/>.

¹³ This investigation is not about the existence of God. But theists and atheists alike may wish to be able to assert that God exists or doesn't exist irrespective of whether anybody else accepts that.

¹⁴ Especially with regards to ethics.

¹⁵ In various different areas, philosophers such as Rorty, Quine, Davidson, and Sartre (among many others) could be described as non-absolutists, and they are certainly not looked upon as eccentric.

¹⁶ Or: be able to rationally justify them.

¹⁷ For those curious as to why I say that non-absolutism makes these claims difficult to make, we'll explore it deeply in the opening few chapters of this work.

not to be. Taking this triangle, and mixing our metaphors of shape, we can ask: how can we square this circle?

This is where West comes in; where we can hitch-hike with him along his philosophical journey; and where we can use his own incisive arguments to ask our own incisive questions. West is a thoroughgoing moralist,¹⁸ a man who spends much of his life campaigning for equality and risking his own professional position and reputation for the sake of those he calls *the least among us*. As a moralist who refuses to discriminate between people, cultures and nations, and who wishes to reach out to – and rationally appeal to – as many interests as he can, we can say that he occupies the first point of our triangle. As a committed Christian, an avowed Christocentric, and even a Christian lay-preacher, we can assume that to some extent at least, he also occupies the second point of our triangle. And West is, by his own account, a Deweyan pragmatist, a *neopragmatist*, and a *prophetic pragmatist*.¹⁹ He is, as we shall discover soon, a non-absolutist, non-objectivist, historicist with self-asserted relativist proclivities. In other words, He sits squarely on the third point of our triangle. And beneficially for us, as we'll see, he attempts to tackle just the very questions we have raised: what does it mean to try to rationally justify moral claims in a pluralised world of difference? What does it mean to be a Christian in a pragmatist's skin? What are the relationships between non-absolutism and ethics? This is why it's possible for us to say 'we begin not by looking for, but by looking at, an answer [...] by investigating the philosophical work of Cornel West'. It's in asking – and answering – questions about rationally grounding Christocentric moral stances from a non-absolutist standpoint that West allows us to follow him along a voyage of discovery, in which we can explore the issues he raises ourselves.

Specifically, he analyses the problems of disenfranchisement and inequality in the Western world, especially racism, which he calls 'the most explosive issue in the country today' (West, 1997a, p301), from the standpoint of two stated traditions, the Christian tradition and the pragmatist tradition, arguing for the new insights he is able to give in the Afterword to *The House that Race Built* (West, 1997a) by saying that few scholars or social critics give sufficient weight to the discussion of modern racial constructs. Closely tied in with this is his analysis of the consequence of racial (and class) inequality: nihilism.

Nihilism is, in his view, the '*lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness*', as well as an 'absence of meaning' (West, 1993j, pp14-15, emphasis in original). It's a major theme in his work, at least in terms of volume. We find it in *Keeping Faith*, where 'nihilism is [...] parasitic on the failures of transcendental objectivism' (West, 1993i, p131). We see it throughout *Race Matters*, where it's associated with a cultural acceptance of inequality and poverty (both financial and otherwise: he says in *Breaking Bread*²⁰ that

¹⁸ In a positive way!

¹⁹ See for instance West, 1989a, Donovan, 1991.

²⁰ West, 1991d, p14, where West goes on to argue (pp95-99) that life has become diminished by market forces to competition such that winning involves objectifying others; others losing; self-worth becomes reduced to social status and accumulated wealth; where even morality is debased to the collection and consumption of fetishes such as crucifixes, slogans, and public charitable giving. In such a world, even morality can become

nihilism involves forms of despair and alienation even among black people with money), and self-loathing which permeate black America. We see his contention that nihilism is one of the most urgent problems for black people in the US, where its threat is not simply an economic or political one, although it certainly is that; it's rather, first and foremost, a deep sense of despair, insignificance, desolation and misery brought about by inequality. Worse yet, he believes that the black American underclass even *embraces* the kind of walking hopelessness that social nihilism embodies, involved as it is with drugs, crime and intra-cultural violence (West, *Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism*, 1993). In his own words,

[The threat] is primarily a question of speaking to the profound sense of psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair so widespread in black America...

(West, 1993j, pp12-13).

This nihilism is a consequence of economic and socio-political neglect and manipulation (West, 1993j, 1989c, and elsewhere) regulated by categories that mask manipulation, mastery and domination of peoples and nature (see West, 1981).²¹ The black underclass in America is, he urges, 'in a nihilism that is *lived*. We are talking about real obstacles to the sustaining of a *people*' (West, 1991, p173, emphases in original). This is what he poetically calls the 'ragged edges of the Real' (West, 1991, p161), where people cannot afford to find shelter, eat, or buy healthcare from the system that has driven them into poverty. And it's a world that's been slowly allowed to become entrenched in personal, interpersonal, and official structures throughout history, reinforced at every turn by historical influences, forming in effect existential wounds on those occupying the lowest rungs of society.²²

So that's what West's hoping to tackle. In critically examining his arguments, it's noticeable that there is (for such a well-known so-called public intellectual) surprisingly little serious literature offering a detailed engagement with his ideas.²³ In this chapter, I take one central and, it turns out, crucial notion of his philosophical, religious, and political thinking which we'll come to see he believes is intimately connected with his views on inequality and nihilism, and subject it to rigorous analysis.

competitive, and we find ourselves with "winners" and "losers". Where market forces have taught us to seek commodities and stimulation as the primary means of finding meaning, we shape our view of the world and even morality to fetishise such things. Pleasure becomes the marker of what is right; lack of pleasure of what is wrong. One might cynically observe that the morality closest to hedonism, utilitarianism, came about and gained in popularity as the industrial revolution commoditised people, and market forces started to take over society.

²¹ West notes that this has been permitted and accepted, not only endured and tolerated but tacitly consented to: intra-communal violence is rife, drugs are routinely bought and sold among the very people they destroy, and destructive crime within what could otherwise be close-knit neighbourhoods breeds within those very neighbourhoods fear, anger, and the belief among the ruling political classes that this is a demographic that cannot be trusted to better itself.

²² See West, 1991, 1993, 2012.

²³ While it would be laborious and time-consuming to list every commentary on the work of Cornel West and argue for the lack of critical engagement in each, it is enough at present to direct the reader's attention to Wood (2000), Howard (2001), Sholé Johnson (2003), Cowan (2003), and Gilyard (2008), authors who have made serious attempts to wrestle intellectually with West's ideas, have shown varying degrees of success in this endeavour, and who nevertheless stand in almost striking isolation from the vast majority of commentators.

This is the notion of *historicism*.²⁴ I highlight that, while West never consistently explains what he means by it, we can discern patterns such that we can rightly understand it as two separate, yet related, kinds of historicism. I believe it's useful for our understanding that we begin at least by trying to distinguish each from the other.

While other commentators have failed to draw this distinction,²⁵ we can follow West's often unclear arguments and find that in discussing historicism he talks (sometimes ambiguously) about what we can call "weak" and "strong" historicism. The former is essentially a way of interpreting what we and others say within a historical context, with the latter being a form of global²⁶ relativism concerning how we must justify our interpretations of the world relative to historical moment.

How will I achieve this? In making these claims, it helps to give a brief literature review – to look at where, and how often, West talks about historicism. This will give a sense not only of how talk of historicism informs his ideas, but of levels of *consistency* in his thinking and *coherence* in his application of the concept. Once this is done, I shall identify and explain what West means when talking about weak and strong historicism. This will be in the first instance heavily textual – sections of West's work will be quoted directly and examined – but it will also be interpretive, aiming to understand what's meant in the contexts of both the subjects West is discussing at the time and also his broader thought.

To do this, initially I provide basic, working definitions of weak and strong historicism, setting them side by side to compare and contrast them. Then I look more closely at weak historicism, providing textual evidence, and interpreting this evidence in light of both the articles and books they appeared in, and the larger body of philosophy we find in West's work. I produce examples to back up my interpretation, and finally compare the textual evidence, the interpretation, and the examples with our initial working definition. I follow the same procedure for strong historicism: initially I look at the textual evidence to support my working definition, subsequently interpreting it. I present examples, the textual evidence, and my interpretation of this evidence, and I then compare the examples with our initial working definition. The one noteworthy difference here is that I shall also attempt to show, through an examination of West's work, and a comparison with the work of Paul Boghossian (2006), that he specifically takes strong historicism to be a form of relativism.

First let's take note of the literature. The theme of historicism runs almost

²⁴ Historicism itself has a long and varied history. Philosophers as diverse as Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Ranke, Popper and many others have had *something* to say on the subject, although often, it may be said that the word "historicism" covers many very different ideas. The historicism of Hegel for instance should not be seen as the same as the historicism of biblical historicism or anthropological historicism, but this is a discussion best left for other days.

²⁵ A thorough search through the literature will corroborate this assertion.

²⁶ I define global relativism as a form of relativism that is applicable to an indefinite number of fields, from epistemology through to ethics, ontology and metaphysics among others; although in this chapter we will concentrate on historicism as moral and epistemic relativism.

ubiquitously through West's political, religious, and philosophical writing, and it'll provide some perspective as to its importance if we allow ourselves an overview of just how often it appears. Such is the consistency of his interest in historicism, from his first publications through to his more recent output, that it would be difficult for the reader to ignore its importance in his thinking.²⁷ From scholarly literature to interviews and television appearances as a "public intellectual", from his student days through his rise to academic acceptance, celebrity and even notoriety, to the present, West's historicism has been notable by its pervasiveness. The task is to focus on what these types of historicism are.

A word of caution to begin: West's language and written style are sometimes precise, sometimes less so. He's not always consistent with his vocabulary, writing here of historicism, there of historical consciousness, here of historicity, there of historical outlook, and so on. It's the job of the interpreter to read from context when the language he uses is relevant to the topic, and when not, and what he might mean on different occasions. This underlies the nature of the task ahead. I believe it's useful to begin by distinguishing West's two types of historicism, and examine each in turn. Initially I offer a brief side-by-side comparison to quickly and easily see the difference.

We start with weak historicism, the view that when examining cultural practices and truth claims, we should first try to understand the contexts and historical standpoints they're made within,²⁸ and second understand that we have our own contexts and historical standpoints from which we judge them. We must view ourselves as a part of a tradition while opening our minds to other traditions²⁹ at different historical moments, realising that different traditions are often inter-related and exert influences upon each other.

Strong historicism may be characterised with a bolder claim: that our cultural practices and moral and epistemic judgements should be seen as being justified *relative to* the prevailing views (as associated with historical moment) of a community, and that any judgement we make about anything is relative to our community's accepted frameworks.³⁰

²⁷ From the academic early passages of his doctoral dissertation, *Ethics, Historicism and the Marxist Tradition* (1980) through to recent interviews given to social interest media (see for instance West, 2010, in Gabriel Rockhill, and in 2014, to Questlove), from specific focus on historicism given in numerous scholarly articles reprinted in collected early- and middle-period compendia such as *Prophetic Fragments* (1988) and *Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism Volumes I & II* (1993) to historicist methodology being discussed and forming the basis of his arguments in major works such as *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (1989), *Keeping Faith* (1993), *Race Matters* (1993) and *Democracy Matters* (2004), some form of historicism has played some kind of role in most of his philosophically significant works. (One could go on, citing West, 1986, 1990, 1995, and elsewhere, among other examples.) Note should perhaps be made that the more interesting analyses of historicism typically appear in what we can call West's early and middle periods. From about 1996 onwards, West's public work has tended to concentrate more on popularising social issues, rather than engaging in rigorous philosophical argument.

²⁸ West often uses the pejorative word "prejudice" (see for instance 1987a, 1993i), but we need not steer into those particular waters. We notice also an echo of James, Lecture 7, stating that we 'plunge forward into the field of fresh experience with the beliefs our ancestors and we have made already' (James, 1907, p255).

²⁹ See for example West, 1993e, 1993i, 1993j.

³⁰ Specifically, the community's epistemic and moral frameworks.

These are the definitions I hope to defend. We need to see that they correspond with those used by West himself. It's to this that we now turn.

First, West's "Weak Historicism"

I'll begin with our working definition of weak historicism, then support it with textual evidence from West's work, citing passages where he discusses it in order to build a coherent picture. Third, I'll interpret this evidence in the light of West's writing. I'll then support this interpretation with West's examples and compare it with the initial working definition to build a thorough, understandable picture of weak historicism.

Let's remind ourselves of our working definition:

[weak historicism, edited] - the view that [...] we should try to understand the contexts and historical standpoints our claims are made within, and [...] that we have our own historical standpoints from which we judge them. We [are] part of a tradition while [...] realising that different traditions often exert influences upon each other.

What evidence within West do we have for this? We start with his assertion that at its basic level, historicism's not a particularly remarkable philosophical position, 'merely claiming that background prejudices, presuppositions, and prejudgements' are present in any philosophical³¹ reflections (West, 1986a, p267). Indeed, he tells us (see West, 1993, *Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism Volume I*) that nothing's context-free, and that historicism entails what he calls *contextualism*, the need to understand interpretations of the world within the contexts they were formulated in.³² He rephrases this notion of contextualism to note elsewhere how the historicist acknowledges human 'conditionedness' (West, 1993, p232), this being the notion that theories (and theory-makers) are conditioned by the contexts around them. History, he says, is 'operative and influential' (West, 2003, p255).

In West's eyes, being a historicist involves multiple strands: on the one hand, *historicity* requires that one take the biases of the interpreter seriously; while on the other, *history* requires that one take the contexts that theories were made in seriously. So for instance, West argues (1985c), that our moral outlook will be heavily influenced by contemporary socio-political views, and that we should avoid 'ahistorical justifications' (West, 1985c, p126). But it isn't only the theory / theory-maker that's conditioned; it's the interpretation / interpreter. One must 'dig into the depths of the cultural, political, and societal contexts of texts *and* interpreters' (*ibid*, my italics), he writes.

³¹ West uses "metaphysical" and "ontological" as his examples, although a broader reading of his work suggests that these are not the only philosophical disciplines he would include.

³² To put this into understandable terms, Clarence Sholé Johnson (2003) talks of West's historicism as being 'merely' understanding things such as racism within their historical contexts, and understanding the historical contexts that gave rise to it. It would be hard to make sense of the ill-treatment of black Americans and of their poor social status without being able to trace the origins, through the capitalist commodification, of slavery and the driving forces of 19th and 20th century American economics, he says.

Acknowledging the importance of 'the temporal situating of the interpreter and the illuminating potential of the interpreter's biases' is crucial to 'taking *historicity* seriously' (West, 1985a, p251, West's emphasis), as we shouldn't even attempt to 'remove ourselves from our own background assumptions and presuppositions' (West, 1986a, p268); while taking '*history* seriously' (West, 1985, p251) involves taking seriously the cultural contexts of texts and theories. Therefore, even when taking biblical texts, one must reject any 'ahistorical claim of revelational immediacy' (*ibid*), but see texts instead as records which 'represent the views of (and for?) the "historical winners."' (West, 2003, p253). On the historicist standpoint, West assures us, 'there can be no transcendental standpoint' (West, 2003, pp254-255), and the 'encounter of history with necessary and universal faith-claims' (West, 1980, p226) is the most important philosophical issue in contemporary theology.

Certainly, both the cultural practices and epistemic standpoints of theory-makers and interpreters are contingent and transitory (West, 1987). An engagement with historicism should convince those engaged with philosophy and theology that concepts, creeds, traditions and principles 'are provisional, tentative, and revisable human practices shot through with interests and prejudices, regulated by operations of power, and guided by [contingent or prejudicial] ideals' (West, 1987, p278). This doesn't make them meaningless, but in keeping with our definition of weak historicism, it helps 'render our methodological orientations more suspect, our interpretations more open-ended, and, most importantly, [our practical and interpretive lives] more humble' (*ibid*), while 'a proper historicizing [of ethics] results in [...] more self-conscious articulation' of theoretical issues (West, 1985, p129). One may think of weak historicism as a plea for reasonableness.³³

How do we construe this?

One may say that West's weak historicism is at base a recognition that our cultural practices and understanding of the world are contingent upon historical events, and revisable. They're both suffused with the suppositions of the times they were created in and interpreted through the preconceptions of the interpreters. Being a historicist of this temper means seeing interpretations of the world as responses to things happening at points in history, where the responses themselves are influenced by historically predominant social, economic, or ethical mores. Historicism asks us to see ourselves as part of the traditions that have created our society (West, 1991d, 1993a, 1993c, 1993d, and elsewhere).³⁴

³³ So for instance, in discussing Alasdair MacIntyre (West, 1985), West points out that MacIntyre's own moral outlook has been greatly influenced by the liberal Enlightenment, the political and social views of the day, and modern philosophical discourse, and MacIntyre would benefit by being more conscious of the fact, seeing his work as a response to such things. It is crucial that one attempts to avoid 'ahistorical justifications' (West, 1985, p126). The tenets of the Christian faith are interpreted 'in light of our present circumstances' (West, 1985, p130). It is advantageous (West calls it 'important') that social analysis puts forward viewpoints that are contemporary and take into account existing and past social structures. 'For the Christian, neo-Marxist social analyses and moral visions are to be judged in light of the interpretation of Christian faith *in our time*', we are told (*ibid*, my italics).

³⁴ West constantly informs us (1980a, 1985a, 1987a, and elsewhere) that historical analysis is crucial to a proper understanding of events, situations in the world, and ideas. And while religion is accused of often avoiding historicist solutions to problems, historicism is also (West, 1980a, 1984a, 1985a) crucial in West's eyes, to understanding religion, existential problems, and the problems of dispossessed peoples in the world.

Let's take a basic illustration to highlight this. One might say we'd be wrong to conclude that someone from a foreign culture at an earlier point in history, saying something is beautiful, is simply wrong or right (based on whether we share that view), for to make an informed judgement we'd need to look into the social norms and ideals of beauty which that person operated within, while considering that we have ourselves come to operate within a particular set of norms and ideals. The weak historicist is inclined to come up with a genealogical analysis of why a person believes what he does, while producing a similar genealogical and contextual analysis of why she disagrees. There's no absolute right and wrong here, no context-free perspective from which to judge context-free theories.

We can summarise West's weak historicism as being so unremarkable that nobody should have trouble accepting it: it's contextual, in that it looks at both the contexts that theories are made in and the contexts the interpreters live in. It recognises that the moral and epistemic standpoints of theory-makers and interpreters are contingent upon historical moment.

Contextualising Weak Historicism

Let's take an example from West. He argues (1985a, 1986b, 2003b, 2004a, and elsewhere) that as one cannot understand properly theories or situations without setting them within their genealogical contexts and the predominant preconceptions of the day, it's 'impossible to characterize adequately prophetic activity among Afro-Americans without understanding the specific circumstances under which these practices occur' (West, 2003b, p1037).¹⁶ Historical moments 'ought to inform our inquiry into African American religious life' (*ibid*), while 'historical accounts [informed] black theology' (West, 2003a, pxvii; see also West, 1993g).

So connected intimately with African-American Christianity, an analysis of how black Americans interpret, interact with, and are accepted (or otherwise) into American life requires a genealogical enquiry into the ideology and practice of racism (West, 1985b). The institutionalised nature of racism (which may remain hidden) can only be grasped once one understands its historical situatedness.³⁵ Similarly (see West,

³⁵ Yet during the actual development of racist institutions, any understanding of what was going on was itself both motivated by the ideas of the day, and motivational of subsequent attitudes and ideas. Societal hierarchical structures, state-institutionalised inequalities, and discriminatory practices were created, developed, hardened, and *not even noticed* (West, 1993g). West then critiques the way that black Americans are seen by white America, and themselves interact with white America, from the perspective of a nation that arose from what he calls the Age of Europe (West, 1993e). In general, the legacies of Europeanisation, post-colonialism, capitalist / communist polarisation, the commodification of people due to a rapidly expanding industrial sector and middle-class, and the associated acceptance of and subsumation of working class culture into academic structures, all have to be seen in the light of both the contributions to and the crimes against humanity of the people and the cultural, political, economic and academic structures of the pervading ruling societies and classes throughout history (see West, 1993e). For sure, the very concept of race itself is a European construction seeded in history, and should be seen as such in order to grapple with racial segregation (West, 1997a). He comments at one point that black people were 'made' by Eurocentric practices (1997, p302). Racism, the representation and the construction of black people by both whites and non-whites in literature and art as well as in society, the media and politics, and non-white responses to white attitudes in the western world, all have to be viewed from the perspective of such a historical consciousness.

2003a, pxiii), he talks of the importance of 'historical periodization', and the need to understand African-American religious life by understanding the historical circumstances that have informed it.³⁶

Applying the Evidence

It's become clear through both a reading and interpretation of text that weak historicism, as noted, is the view that when examining cultural practices and truth claims, we should try to understand the contexts and historical standpoints they're made within, while trying to understand that we have our own historical standpoints from which we judge them. Furthermore we can agree that on weak historicism we must see ourselves as being a part of a tradition while opening our minds to become aware of other traditions at different moments of history, realising that different traditions are inter-related. From what we've seen, West echoes and develops each of these sentiments at one time or another.

West urges his readers to realise that theories and practices are contextual (1993a, 1993i, 1993j).¹⁸ He impresses upon us that our beliefs and norms are suffused with the preconceptions of our cultures and that historical analysis is crucial to a proper understanding of ideas (1980b, 1985a, 1987a).

Moreover, regarding the notion that we should attempt to understand the contexts and historical standpoints from which *we* judge practices, theories, and interpretations of the world, we can again find enough evidence of this, for example that *historicity* requires that one take the biases of the interpreter seriously; and in his drawing our attention to the importance of 'the temporal situating of the interpreter and the illuminating potential of the interpreter's biases' being crucial to 'taking *historicity* seriously' (West, 1985a, p251, West's emphasis). West also notes that we as interpreters should not attempt to 'remove ourselves from our own background assumptions and presuppositions' (1986a, p268).

When we say that from a historicist perspective we must view ourselves as being a part of a tradition while opening our minds so as to become aware of other traditions, we see West articulating this (1985a), saying that we should take both the contexts that theories were made in and the biases of the interpreter seriously, and that historicism asks us to see ourselves as part of the traditions that have created our society (West, 1993e, 1993i).

He furthermore urges us to 'dig into the depths of the cultural, political, and societal contexts of texts and interpreters' (West, 1985a, p251) when attempting to appreciate theories, for everything from Christian faith to race and beyond contain concepts created from standpoints saturated with the concepts of the times. He

³⁶ Indeed, each of the historical epochs that informs African-American religious life needs itself to be understood against historical backdrops, such as the dissolution of colonialism in Europe, the institutionalisation of racist practices and the rise in power of the United States, and the political and economic growth of parts of the continent of Africa. Historical moments '*ought to inform our inquiry into African-American religious life*' (*ibid*), he argues, noting later how 'historical accounts [informed] black theology' (West, 2003, pxvii; see also West, 1993, *The New Cultural Politics of Difference*, in *Keeping Faith*).

(1985c, 1993e, 1997) says that to ask questions about theories of the world or social practices without attempting to grapple with the traditions they're a part of is not to fully engage with the subject matter. But the implication is more than this, that it's to not engage with it properly *at all*.

But West's weak historicism shows definite signs of 'strengthening'. We see this (1993i) where he specifically dismisses weaker forms of historicism as philosophically superficial when compared with the deeper philosophical analyses afforded by stronger forms which, he says critically, eluded those such as Rorty (West, 1993i, p127). He urges philosophers to 'deepen the historicist turn in philosophy by [...] "thickening" the "thin" historicism of Rorty's [...] neopragmatism' (West, 1993i, p130).³⁷

West counts himself explicitly as a 'thick' historicist (2010),³⁸ referring to his brand of historicism as 'full-blown' (1985a, p255), calling prophetic pragmatism, his own self-penned philosophy, 'radically historical' in outlook (West, 1989a, p237), and writing how he *loves* radical historicism (1993d, p66). These aren't isolated incidents among the large body of work he's produced: he visits the theme again and again, such as when discussing his 'full-fledged historicist orientation' (West, 1988b, p198).

So what does he mean when he talks about stronger forms of historicism?

"Strong" Historicism

I'll begin by reminding us of our working definition, supporting this with textual evidence from West's work, citing passages where he talks about it in order to build a coherent picture of what this is. I give prominence to West's belief that strong historicism comprises some forms of relativism, making use of Paul Boghossian to provide a clear framework for this. Third, I interpret this evidence, understanding strong historicism in the light of what West writes, showing how he believes it doesn't fall foul of potentially devastating philosophical critiques. I'll then back up this interpretation with West's examples and compare it with the initial working definition to build a thorough, easily understandable, picture of strong historicism.

We begin by recalling our working definition:

[strong historicism]: our cultural practices and epistemic judgements are justified *relative to* the prevailing historical views of a community, and any judgement we make is relative to our community's accepted (epistemic, moral) frameworks.

This is a far more ambitious philosophical assertion than weak historicism. If correct, the strong historicist is firmly on the path to laying out a distinct philosophical

³⁷ It is not unusual for West to be inconsistent in his use of language here, so we shouldn't be surprised when he uses words like 'thick' and 'thin' interchangeably with 'full-blown', or 'thoroughgoing' and 'weak'. Indeed, it would be difficult, taking the broader context of his writing into account, to build a more philosophically significant difference from this inconsistency.

³⁸ See, among other places, Rockhill, Gabriel and West, 2010.

standpoint. But to be so bold, we should follow the evidence in West. So what does he say?

It will help to repeat his own words directly. On this historicist view, he says, 'it's our social practices that *constitute the grounds and standards* from which we can adjudicate between conflicting theories and interpretations of the world' (West, 1986a, p267, my emphases). He repeats this theme a number of times with various slants, for instance when he argues (West, 1993a) that the perspective he accepts is one from which truth is not seen as ever copying an absolute reality but rather one from which we see truth as being a consensus between people in communities who agree upon certain common goals: 'when you talk about truth' he says, 'you are talking about the consensus forged by human beings who agree upon certain common ends and aims' (West, 1993a, p50).

The strong historicist refuses to 'fall prey to [...] Archimedean objectivism' (West, 1980b, p263), where there are 'description-free, version-free, theory-free' (*ibid*) standards enabling us to identify ahistorical, absolute truths. She instead holds that we're forced to acknowledge only *penultimate* courts of appeal, linked to particular societally-accepted descriptions, versions, or theories of the world. He goes further though: not only *are* there no transcendental standpoints, 'there can be no transcendental standpoint' (1985a, pp254-255). West insists again and again that 'contingent, power-laden, structured social practices – lie at the very center of knowledge', and 'the quest for truth continues with only human practice providing provisional closure' (1984a, p20).

What are we to understand by 'social practice'? West again: 'the historicism I promote [...] understands transient social practices, contingent cultural descriptions and revisable scientific theories [...] transcendental objectivism is precluded by rejecting all modes of philosophical reflection which invoke ahistorical quests for certainty and transhistorical searches for foundations' (West, 1993i, pp130-131). West sees social practice in terms of the contingent and revisable norms and behaviours of a community.³⁹

While West generally assumes people understand what he means by "social practices", he provides several clues (1977), saying they're culturally-given, historically evolved ways of navigating the world, emergent from the complex union of community, tradition, and institutions. Truth, justification, ethics, and the language games we play are not only *shaped by* forms of social practice, they *are* forms of social practice. Scientific method, truth searching, problem solving, even our modes of production, state bureaucracies, and religions count as social practices (1991a). They're inter-subjective, hammered out in practice (1981), but also regulative, governing our and others' behaviour (1991a). They shape our view of the world: for example, talking of thought as a manifestation of neural events, and talking of it as a manifestation of mental events, are two different conventions, but equally types of social practice (1981).⁴⁰

³⁹ We can see echoes of this in West, 1980b, 1982a, 1986a, 1991a, 2004a, and elsewhere.

⁴⁰ See also Davis, *et al.*, 1987.

This 'version of historicism acknowledges the unavoidable character and central role of tradition and prejudice, yet it takes seriously the notion of sound human judgment relative to the most rationally acceptable theories and descriptions of the day' (1993i, p131), for the 'historicist turn [...] helps us understand that we are forced to choose [...] some set of transient social practices, contingent cultural descriptions, and revisable scientific theories by which to live' (1993i, p134). It's clear that we're being urged to accept that the courts of appeal (as West puts it) which allow us to adjudicate between conflicting theories are, for the historicist thinker, those things a community allows and thinks acceptable, which are themselves transient, contingent and revisable. After all, one must retain 'a deep sense of historical contingency' (West, 1986d, p219) while rejecting any 'philosophical transcendentalism since we have no access to an Archimedean point which would permit us to adjudicate [between] perspectives' (*ibid*).

Metaphysics and ontologies are relative to non-absolute traditions (1986a, p267, 1991a, p87). West urges us to recognise that 'all truths have a small 't', [...] truth with a big 'T' is always a fish that stands outside our conceptual net' (1993e, p123), where "small 't' truth" means 'revisable' and non-absolute. And this is true for *all* knowledge claims 'across the board' (*ibid*).

The Small Matter of Vulgarly

Strong historicism means that metaphysics and ontologies are relative to specific traditions. It appears that West is positively identifying strong historicism with relativist philosophies,⁴¹ but in so doing, he becomes aware that he lays himself open to arguments against such standpoints. Here I show how West attempts to avoid charges of what he calls vulgar - or, less hyperbolically, unregulated - relativism. In keeping with the tone of this chapter, this won't be a defence of what West says but an investigation and explanation of his positions. We can see, he's alive to the possibility that his historicism may fall foul of attack, and moves to nullify this.

What he calls (1985a) the vulgar relativist⁴² holds that not only are there no rational standards by which agents can distinguish between different theories and interpretations of the world, but that no one view is any better than any other (regarding any particular topic). The worry for the vulgar relativist is that it becomes impossible to differentiate good from evil, truth from falsity, and even the reliability of reason and rationality themselves. Put succinctly, there will be no facts by virtue of which any judgement of right or wrong, rationality or irrationality, or good or evil,

⁴¹ It is of interest that Mark David Wood (Wood, 2000, particularly in the Introduction, p11) calls West a 'relativist', albeit a 'soft' one; but his reasoning for calling West's relativism soft appears to be little more than that on the one hand, West is not shy about claiming his point of view is better than the alternatives; while on the other hand he *grounds* the reasons for the analyses he gives (in his case in social practice and historical reasoning rather than realist grounds). West himself allows one to think that there is an overwhelming amount of evidence to demonstrate that he does indeed believe that thick historicism necessarily involves relativism of some sort. We have already seen, for instance, that sound human judgment is said to be relative to the most rationally acceptable theories and descriptions of the day (West, 1993i, and elsewhere).

⁴² He dislikes vulgar relativism.

shall be seen as correct over any other system⁴³.

This fits West's claim (1989a) that an 'unregulated' relativism is one which allows that all epistemic or moral claims have the same status. The one time he collocates 'vulgar' with 'relativism' here (West, 1989a, p187), at least in any sense in which we might find useful, it is tellingly used in conjunction with a passage on Dewey. We'll return to the significance of this shortly.

He writes about how historicists are often accused of vulgar relativism (West, 1986a, p269). After all, they 'reject reality' as being the ultimate standard against which they can judge truth claims; and this brings on the charge that they have no 'rational standards to distinguish better or worse interpretations' (*ibid*). And West agrees: whatever standards we have are relative to the aims and purposes of those applying them. So to make the standards acceptable and rational, he argues that a group requires common aims and purposes. It makes no sense in West's eyes to say that something can be rational, independent of the aims and purposes of the group deciding it.

More explicitly, however, West makes his appeal to Gadamer and Dewey when hoping to steer clear of the problems that relativism can bring. 'One can surely follow the historicism of Gadamer and Dewey', he writes, 'and sidestep vulgar relativistic traps' (1985a, p255). We saw (above) that the one time West collocated the words 'vulgar' and 'relativism' in *The American Evasion of Philosophy* was with reference to Dewey, and how Dewey could be used to avoid such traps. So we turn to this to discover what he meant.

He noted (1989a, p97) that Dewey accentuated the use of critical intelligence and a scientific attitude in his reasoning.⁴⁴ In Dewey's world, different areas of knowledge – scientific, religious, and others – which may potentially have different regulative procedures, are regulated by praxis. This praxis will have evolved in the relevant community. That is, the political community will have evolved its own norms and procedures regarding what counts as acceptable; as will the religious community, and so on. This makes the court of appeal for the truth of any claim within any community, the community itself. For example, one's scientific peers and betters will be the judges of whether one's scientific theories are acceptable, based on the rationality⁴⁵ of one's claims, one's methods and procedures, and other regulating measures they may have. West goes as far as to say directly (1989a), that the *predominant element* in Dewey's view of truth is social practice, and what that society deems acceptable as critical intelligence.

West's agrees with Dewey, that social practice is the measuring rod against which we gauge the rationality of what we do: not only in one field (such as science), but in others (such as morality), our thoughts about the right and wrong of our own actions, about the acceptability or otherwise of our deeds, and about our hidden

⁴³ - or, for those so inclined, "more correct" than any other system.

⁴⁴ This scientific attitude would not be the same as the scientific *grounds* West mentioned in *Race and Social Theory*, which have the character of indubitability; rather, this embraces doubt and is highly fallibilistic.

⁴⁵ This rationality is determined by the common aims and purposes of a community.

dispositions, are formed by, and appraised against, the ideas of those in society. This, West believes, is for Dewey how cultural solidarity, forged through democratic participation, gives meaning to our judgements and allows us to know what is acceptable or unacceptable. Moral judgement, we're advised, is given to us by the social environment.

The hope was that our beliefs could be grounded in the community, falsehoods could be rooted out through discourse, and sense could be made of our opinions through the conceptual frameworks shared by our peers. The more we shared those ideas, the more opportunity there was for the community to moderate, accept, or advise against them. So while there may be no absolute facts to confirm or disconfirm absolute judgements,⁴⁶ there would be a regulatory democratic community of engaged peers to find them acceptable or otherwise. One could still champion forms of relativism, but it wouldn't be unregulated. It would be regulated by a critically intelligent, democratically engaged society.

This society is made up of individuals who are neither constituted selfishly nor altruistically prior to their community life, but are formed by the type of community that they participate in. These members of the community will find that there isn't much disparity in their respective world views, as their world views are formed by immersion in the community. And the community acts as context, teacher and check on their judgements, and as a gauge, judge and jury, measuring the justifiability and the acceptability of the judgements.

But Dewey isn't the only voice West seeks out to show that his historicism doesn't collapse into vulgar relativism. He also turns to Gadamer. And as with Dewey, he detects solidarity between humans as providing the secure basis for our judgements being a theme in Gadamer's work.⁴⁷ He held, West argues, that solidarity is natural for us and that we discover it rather than create it, similarities that we have with others making such discoveries possible. For Gadamer, as for Dewey, there are different traditions within which we operate, setting the contexts for enquiry and interpretation. And as with Dewey, they determine which questions are worthwhile, which methods of deciding are acceptable, and what counts as a good answer.

He rejects the notion that each community's concepts of "truths" could be so radically different from one another that there couldn't be meaningful discourse between them. It seems intuitively plausible that he was right to reject such incommensurability (see Gadamer, 2001), for there being different traditions doesn't mean we can't reach out and find solidarities common to us all. The very fact that we can indeed communicate not only within our own cultures, but across cultures, to people we might imagine very different from ourselves, gives strong indication of this.

So instead of fashioning solidarities, we allow ourselves to become aware of them (Gadamer, 2001). And this doesn't presuppose a human essence: it simply notices the possibilities of fellowship that we already have. Our social and historical contexts are

⁴⁶ We shall see later that Boghossian calls this the thesis of *non-absolutism*.

⁴⁷ See Gadamer, 1975, 2001 to compare.

the measures against which our beliefs can be gauged, and it's this which stops them from becoming licentious.

We can see that when West appeals to Gadamer and Dewey, he's appealing to those things they have in common that are designed to prevent relativism becoming unregulated. The question of whether they truly had one and the same answer becomes secondary once West saw the same thing in them: that dynamic democratic interaction involving critical intelligence with checks and balances evolving out of the natural mechanics of democratic processes will impose an ingenerate, legitimate regulatory system upon the historical relativism they champion.⁴⁸

This is the regulation requirement that West seeks. How successful he is depends on what his relativism looks like, so it's helpful to have a clear formulation of what we *mean* by relativism, and the form that West adopts. For this, I turn to Paul Boghossian, whose *Fear of Knowledge* (2006) provides just that - a clear, structured, and critically well-received⁴⁹ definition. I'll then apply this understanding to West, showing that his thick historicism follows precisely the structure that Boghossian gives.

West, Boghossian, and Relativism

West states that metaphysics and ontologies are always relative to specific traditions, talks about judgment being relative to the most rationally acceptable theories of the day, and argues for our contingent social practices as constituting the standards by which we adjudicate between conflicting interpretations of the world. He spends time distancing himself not from relativism *per se*, but from the unregulated vulgarity that often accompanies it. West certainly looks like a relativist. But if he is, what sort is he?

Boghossian's (2006) clear account of relativism captures not only West's opinions, but what relativism is usually taken to be. With the same basic structure applying to epistemic relativism, he writes that on moral relativism:

1. There are no absolute moral facts which can confirm or disconfirm absolute moral judgements (Boghossian's first thesis, of moral non-absolutism).⁵⁰

⁴⁸ One is tempted to say that such ideas take hold in all sorts of fields, including economics, psychology and political sciences. See for instance James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds*, 2004.

⁴⁹ See for instance the review by Harvey Siegel (University of Miami), 2007, printed in *The University of Notre Dame: Philosophical Reviews – An Electronic Journal*; by John Searle, 2009, – *Why Should You Believe It?* – available in the New York Review of Books; by Aaron Zimmerman, 2007; and others.

⁵⁰ Non-absolutism is key to moral relativism, reading Boghossian, and is simply the denial of absolutism. But absolutism comes in two (related) forms. First, it's the belief in standards that exist independently (and, we're given to feel, universally and possibly unchangingly) of human knowledge and practice (Boghossian, 2006, 2007). These standards may cartoonishly be characterised as somehow metaphysically 'built into the fabric of the universe' (2007, p12), perhaps in the form of immutable moral laws. Second, an absolute fact is true *simpliciter* (Boghossian, 2007), rather than relative to something else (such as, "Jane is standing to the left"). "Absolute" is here assumed to be "non-relative" (*ibid*). Absolute claims are complete truth-evaluable propositions, according to Boghossian, which relativists can't hold, as they believe no non-relativised

2. If our moral judgement about an act is to have any prospect of being true, we must not construe
 'It was wrong of x to do y'
 as expressing the claim
 It was wrong of x to do y,
 but rather as expressing the claim:
 According to the moral framework that the speaker accepts, it was wrong of x to do y (Boghossian's second thesis, of moral relationism).
3. There are many alternative moral frameworks, but no facts by virtue of which one of them is more correct than any of the others (Boghossian's third thesis, of moral pluralism).

Simplified, then:

1. There are no absolute facts (epistemic or moral) which can confirm or disconfirm particular judgements (the first thesis of non-absolutism).
2. We must not construe utterances of the form
 'such-and-such is true'
 as expressing the claim
 such-and-such is true
 but rather as expressing the claim:
 according to the framework (epistemic or moral) that I accept, such-and-such is true (the second thesis of relationism).
3. There are many alternative frameworks (epistemic and moral), but no facts by virtue of which one of them is more correct than any of the others. I will call this the third thesis, of pluralism.

Relativism takes the form here of three theses: non-absolutism, relationism, and pluralism. Let's see whether West's strong historicism follows this pattern.

Applying Boghossian's Relativism to West's Strong Historicism

West talks (1980c) in glowing terms of Holmer's ideas, calling them wise, unpretentious, and refreshing. In doing so, he lets slip two things: *first*, he recognises that Holmer is, implicitly, a relativist, and in praising his work he is *by association* praising the wisdom of relativist thought; *second*, he detects Holmer's relativism within his *contextualism*. 'Is not contextualism a form of relativism?', he asks (p231). As we've seen above, West's already described historicism as 'contextualism'.⁵¹

Here, where the 'grand quest for truth is a thoroughly historical one' (West, 1984a, p20), West acknowledges that as social practices are contingent and revisable, there's no absolute way of measuring which social practices are better than others, for there 'indeed are standards of adjudication, but such historically constituted

statement is ever simply true. So, an absolutist can say it's simply (morally) wrong to steal my car, whereas a relativist must add "in relation to such-and-such a moral code" (Boghossian, 2006a).

⁵¹ See also West, *A Philosophical View of Easter*, 1980, as well as *Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism*, 1993.

standards include multiple viewpoints worthy of adoption' (*ibid*). There's a 'relativity of cultural products' (1993d, p56), where 'historicism' is likened synonymously with 'relativism' (1989a), where strong historicism amounts to moral relativism (West, 1980a), and where 'the theory-laden character of observations relativizes talk about the world [and that we] cannot isolate "the world" from theories of the world, then compare these theories of the world with a theory-free world. We cannot compare theories with anything that is not a product of another theory. So any talk about "the world" is relative to the theories available'. (1989a, p197). This matches Boghossian's thesis of non-absolutism perfectly.

West believes that 'ontology must give way to "our" histories, epistemology to "our" practices, transcendentalism to "our" politics' (1986e, p170).⁵² This hints strongly at Boghossian's second (relationism) thesis, where West appears to accept for any utterance: "according to the system I accept ...".

Moreover, in any society that moves away from models that highlight realism and ahistoricity, and towards models that highlight 'the clash of cultural traditions in history' (West, 1988a, p208), the result for West is always 'relativism, and a concomitant stress on practices [...] truth-production is a fully historical and political affair' (*ibid*). On the model⁵³ that stresses historicity, West argues that we reach 'historical relativism' (*ibid*).⁵⁴

Furthermore he describes his strong historicism as the refusal to accept moral absolutes (1991a, echoing again the thesis of non-absolutism), saying that *grounding* one's moral claims in changing communal practices and rationales is tacitly to *identify* oneself with some or other moral community,⁵⁵ and that this has commonalities with moral relativism. The moral relativist, he says, 'is on the right track [...] the radical historicist is a moral relativist' (1991a, p4). Attempts to relativise ideas to culture is courageous and intelligent, he says (1988a, pp208-9).

The strong historicist admits that truths 'are always relative to specific aims, goals, or objectives of particular groups, communities, cultures, or societies' (West, 1991a, p10, echoing the relationism thesis). In the end, says West (twice!), the 'radical historicist is a moral relativist' (1991a, p12). To put this in the firmest possible terms, 'refusing to posit a timeless, trans-historical standard against which to judge rival

⁵² We see similar in *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought, 1991, chapter 4*.

⁵³ This is the model put forward by Sharon D. Welch.

⁵⁴ Indeed, West argues (West, *The Political Intellectual*, interview by Anders Stephanson, in *Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism, Volume 2*, p81, as well as Mark David Wood, 2000, ppxxi,) that a turn towards historical consciousness is a turn towards 'anti-realism in ontology [and] anti-foundationalism in epistemology', where our truth claims shouldn't be judged against an absolute truth or any notion of objectivity, but instead they should be assessed relative to their function within given communities and groups. The problem, West argues, of trying to reconcile historicism with any kind of absolutism or universalism, is 'an insoluble one' (West, 1980, *On Paul Holmer's The Grammar of Faith*, in *Prophetic Fragments*, p226), such that the anti-foundationalist should not appeal to 'noninferential, intrinsically credible elements in experience to justify claims about experience' (West, 1986, p269), but recognise that appeal should instead be made to standards 'relative to our common aims and purposes' (*ibid*), where our aims, purposes and values are human, historically conditioned, and contingent. One might say they are 'mere [...] enactments' (West, 1985, p252) or 'responses to particular circumstances' (West, 1985, p253).

⁵⁵ See also West, *Prophecy Deliverance!*, and elsewhere.

ethical judgments unequivocally [...] endorses some form of relativism' (1991a, p105). And in fact, the historicist sense of there being many viewpoints, each worthy, and that our interpretations of the world may not express privileged representations, (West, 1981) echoes Boghossian's thesis of pluralism.

There are also many different historically conditioned responses and viewpoints. 'The problem is not that there's no public, the problem is that there's so many different publics', says West (1993b, p198, echoing once again the thesis of pluralism). Values are historically conditioned (West, 1985a). From Boghossian's standpoint, this all sounds very familiar.

So we see in West's historicism: first, a strong historicist moves from arguing that there are no description-free, theory-free descriptions of the world to the position that our social practices provide regulative force and are the *grounds and standards* from which we can judge between different theories and interpretations of the world. Second, when we talk about social practice, we are really talking about the norms of a community, which are historically conditioned. Third, West argues repeatedly for a relativistic philosophy, holding that truth, morality, and rationality are relative to a community's frameworks. Finally, there are many actual and possible communities in the world, each with worthy viewpoints, and no absolute, ahistorical court of appeal to turn to when judging which is better than the others. We can see West's historicism contains each of the three crucial elements of relativism we identified from Boghossian.⁵⁶

It'll be informative to see how this type of historicism works, for West, in the real world. We've seen the theory. Now we'll ask for something less abstract.

Contextualising Strong Historicism

In large part, West talks of the problems of slavery and post-slavery for the black people of America. While examining the plight of 18th or 19th century black people under colonial bondage may well be a right and useful thing to do, he says, we can never fully share their outlook on the world, and so we can never fully and properly understand their needs, social structures, emotional sensitivities, or indeed anything. The conclusions drawn by academics regarding black-white understanding, West writes, are unwarranted because non-black paradigms set the terms of the discourse (1993g). These paradigms are epistemic systems and moral frameworks.

Different societies have different 'regimes of truth' (1985c, pp142-4, 1985e, 1988b 1991c, p99), where all thought, theory and judgement is mediated by the conceptual schemes of the day (see 1986d). So non-black scholars will struggle to fully appreciate the cultural output of slavery-bound Afro-Americans; understanding

⁵⁶ This type of historicism espouses that there are transient social and cultural practices, transient social and cultural interpretations of the world, differing, and revisable, scientific conceptions of the world, differing epistemic, social and moral viewpoints from which to interpret contingent cultural practices and interpretations of the world, and no absolute or non-contingent standards or standpoints by which different theories and interpretations of the world can be judged (see for instance West, 1993i). Indeed we see (West, 1989a, pp98-99) that West's historicist anti-foundational, anti-realist philosophy means that the only authority the historicist *can* appeal to in judging a theory's veracity is the community in which it is made and utilised.

between people truly comes when people share 'cohesive tradition' (1980c, p233). Moral discourse between blacks and non-blacks in America suffers from being constructed by privileged European settlers within the terms of conceptual schemes that belong to – and were formulated in – the racially segregated past (see West, 1985c). West finds it both notable and regrettable here that the 'central terms, privileged notions, and key expressions in Western moral vocabularies constitute fragments of past conceptual schemes' (West, 1985c, p124).

It's important that we understand *regimes of truth*, as he talks of them repeatedly. We start our search with *The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual*, which sees West discussing the regimes alongside 'dominant discourses and traditions' (1985e, p80), explaining them to be the product of 'cultural matrices' (*ibid*). In West's opinion regimes of truth are 'inseparable from [...] cultural forms' (1985e, p82). We also know (from *Keeping Faith*) that regimes of truth are constituted historically, 'over space and time' (West, 1985e, p80, p83), and contingent upon community. West tells us specifically: *regimes of truth* are 'the various ways in which distinctions between true and false, and legitimate and illegitimate are put forward' (West, 1988b, p306). In all, he appears to be identifying regimes of truth with epistemic practices and systems, relativised to historical period, community and culture.

Further to this, because white post-European culture in America came to dominate intellectual life, a regime of truth may be called a *regime* because it can have 'repressive effects' (West, 1985e, p81, also 1988b), dictating from what has been a predominantly white point of view to young black disadvantaged people what is acceptable in discourse and what is not.

To contextualise this, West (1993g) argues that post-WWII, academic teaching became more widespread and dominant within intellectual life – in other words, more intellectually imperialistic: the academy became that which validated intellectual and cultural practice, to the exclusion of all else. Academia then became inaccessible to many young black people to whom the academy's modes of thinking felt alien, while at the same time it became restrictive in its practices. Forms of art or expression outside the sphere of academic acceptance became denigrated. Even in inviting in more and more young black intellectuals, the tacit claim was that it is always academia that validates, and in this way it has always maintained its imperialist grip on the world of ideas.

From this point West argues, the black intellectual should no longer see herself as having to toe the traditionally white academic line, but should recognise it as incompatible with her traditions. She should challenge accepted notions of truth and reject the old labels and methods of 'scientificity, civility and prophecy' (West, 1985e, p80) in favour of fighting over the very structures and understanding of truth itself (1985e, p81).

The historicist recognises that her views have been formed by historical contingency, and if she believes her views on rationality and morality can possibly be absolutely true, she is denying the alternative voices from alternative frameworks that could be provided by peoples with different histories and cultural backgrounds.

Historicism therefore becomes a vital tool for combating racist practices: by accepting the historicist premises of non-absolutism, relationism, and pluralism, West believes that views which exclude alternative histories and norms of rationality and morality can more easily be questioned. Taking the premises of relationism and pluralism, West believes that norms and practices which have previously been sidelined as mere anthropological curiosities can be accepted as being as valid as the practices and norms we currently live by. Historicism becomes a powerful weapon in the fight against racism, undermining the very grounds upon which oppressive institutions and pro-racist arguments are built.

Applying the Evidence

It is clear that strong historicism does indeed make a bolder claim than weak historicism, that moral judgements (for instance) should be seen as *relative to* context, where different communities have different contexts (see 1985a, 1986a, 1993i, and elsewhere).

It's also evident that West believes that for the strong historicist, *all truths* are relative to some or other accepted framework (1986a, 1989a, 1991a, 1993e, 1993f, 1993i, and elsewhere).

So when we recall that our initial definition of strong historicism, that any judgement we make about anything at all is relative to our community's accepted frameworks, we may say that the textual evidence, using an application of Boghossian's structure of epistemic and moral relativism – combined with our interpretation of this evidence – provides substantial backing for this claim.

Conclusion

It's not hard to see that in reading West, historicism occupies a central place in his non-absolutist thinking. This is something we ourselves can cautiously accept, although we note that his talk of historicism isn't always consistent, at times seeming to be an attempt to simply contextualise his thinking, at times reading like a form of moral or epistemic relativism; and only sometimes is this distinction properly drawn. The language used isn't always clear either: *historicism* gives way to *historical consciousness*, which gives way to *historical contingency*, or *historical analysis*, or *historical periodization*, none of which obviously refers to the same thing, though often there is a clear relationship in their use. And *full-blown* historicism gives way to *thick* historicism, giving way to *strong* historicism, giving way to *radical* historicism, and so on. A part of this chapter has aimed to disentangle where knotted, and clarify where opaque.

The general methodology employed has been to seek consistency within the text, and draw out a coherent view of historicism within both a 'local' setting (for instance, the paragraph a quotation was taken from, or the particular topic that was under discussion) and the broader context (that is, West's philosophy in general). West's

intended meaning has been sought throughout; context was taken as key to interpretation; weight was given to textual evidence; and clarification was sought in line with West's broader philosophy in general.

The result of this has been illuminating. We've seen that historicism of some kind has featured prominently in West's output throughout his career. We've also identified two types of historicism which West has found cause to distinguish between – *weak* and *strong*. Weak historicism is a recognition of the interplay of context and tradition for theory and interpreter; while strong historicism claims that any judgement we make about anything at all is relative to our historically conditioned community's accepted schemes. Weak and strong historicism nevertheless share a number of features – among them non-absolutist principles, and the idea that the standards we have to adjudicate between interpretations of the world are grounded in contingent social practice.

In the end, it's clear that West starts from a position of weak historicism but moves towards strong historicism as more thorough, certainly, but also more comprehensive and, he believes, more profound. He holds that thin historicism leads to thick historicism, but at least as important is his belief that the latter provides the proper route to solving many of the social problems he sees in America today. This particular belief is key to his (and our) quest for social justice.

But from our perspective, it's not enough for him to start in one place and end in another. Where two historicisms have been shown to be very different, it may be one thing to understand West initially taking such an easily acceptable stance as weak historicism, but quite another to see why he should think it's a gateway to strong historicism which, after all, is a form of relativism, which isn't known for being easily acceptable. So if West's use of historicism as a means of examining and tackling moral evil is to be of any use to us, it behoves us to examine closely why it is, precisely, that West believes it's right to move from weak to strong historicism. This is the purpose of the following chapter.

Chapter Two: Historicism Matters

In this chapter we will see that West wishes to argue that if we accept weak historicism, we *need to* then accept strong historicism. While he never specifically argues for the acceptance of weak historicism, we can forgive him this, for he takes the weak historicist position as not terribly hard to embrace. I'll allude to this shortly.

We can begin to see the challenges West needs to wrestle with,⁵⁷ and which we'll explore as this chapter develops. These are that if West believes that weak historicism is an unproblematic position to take (and it's evident that he does), and if he believes that once we accept weak historicism then we should accept strong historicism (which I will show he does), and, if we can see that strong historicism is a different sort of claim, as well as being a far less obvious one, from weak historicism (which we will certainly be able to do), then the question is, can - and how does - he justify his claim that if you accept weak historicism you must then accept strong historicism?

In the following sections, I do the following things to answer this. First, I explore West's arguments for moving from weak historicism to strong historicism. I do this by taking West's own words, within their proper context, and looking at where he directly addresses this very issue. While I certainly quote West's words, this section won't be very heavily textual, but it will provide a solid basis from which we can proceed with clarity and certainty.

I then set about interpreting these passages, and in doing so show that his arguments can be divided into what I call the "bottom-up" and the "top-down" arguments,⁵⁸ where the former attempt to show that weak historicism entails strong historicism while the latter attempt to show that strong historicism, far more than weak historicism, is the best tool to use to tackle the problems of inequality and nihilism in the world.

Once we've identified the arguments and examined them in detail, I'll critically dissect each one, concluding that the bottom-up side lacks logical validity, while the top-down side clearly fails to do the job West intends. From there, it's a simple job to conclude that West fails to support his claim that accepting weak historicism means that we need also accept strong historicism. It's of some interest here that West's lack of a deep exploration into the grounds and reasons for his adoption of strong historicism is one of the factors influencing how the conclusions offered at the very end of this investigation⁵⁹ diverge from anything West positively states himself. Where West accepts his own arguments for strong historicism, but our analysis shows his reasoning is flawed, then something new and creative will need to be

⁵⁷ It should be noted though that he doesn't always wrestle with them, and this lack of engagement with issues he *could* wrestle with is one point of departure we may take from him.

⁵⁸ I use these phrases merely as visual metaphors to indicate "stacking arguments to reach a conclusion (bottom-up)" and "the priority of historicism's importance to achieve specific goals (top-down)", two types of arguments for the same thing.

⁵⁹ See Chapter 7.

sought in order to solve the problems that West – along with the author of this work – identifies. But this is for later.

First, let's remind ourselves of our definitions:

[weak historicism] - the view that [...] we should try to understand the contexts and historical standpoints our claims are made within, and [...] that we have our own historical standpoints from which we judge them. We [are] part of a tradition while [...] realising that different traditions often exert influences upon each other.

I suggest this is uncontroversial enough that we can allow it without too much fuss, it being little more than a recognition that our theories and interpretations of the world are contingent upon historical events. So far so good.

His formulation of strong historicism is different however, involving a more controversial claim, the same claim made by [e.g. moral] relativists, summarised as:

[strong historicism]: our practices and judgements are justified *relative to* the prevailing historical views of a community, and any judgement we make is relative to our community's accepted (epistemic, moral) frameworks.

We recall, on West's strong historicism, when we say something's true, we mean it's true *according to a particular framework*, and while there are many alternative frameworks (epistemic and moral), there are no facts by virtue of which one of them is more correct⁶⁰ than the others. These claims correspond with the theses of non-absolutism, relationism, and pluralism. Together, they form the pillars of both relativism, and strong historicism.

So we see from this that weak and strong historicism are indeed *different*. And being different, West has work to do to persuade his reader that adopting the former means then adopting the latter. So we ask, how does he attempt to do this?

Part One: From the Weak to the Strong - Two Arguments

Following West's arguments, we find that he believes that when we go 'all the way down'⁶¹ from the position of weak historicism, we discover that philosophical historicism always becomes strong 'if logically consistent and theoretically coherent' (West, 1993i, p132).⁶² I take this to be the primary statement of the conclusion of the bottom-up argument. It's certainly his clearest. Strong historicism is the logically consistent, theoretically coherent outcome of the weak historicist perspective.

⁶⁰ "More correct" is Boghossian's (2006) phrase.

⁶¹ This is a phrase West uses on numerous occasions, most often associated with going as fully as one can into a theory or an idea. See for instance *On Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's In Memory of Her* and elsewhere.

⁶² We also note West saying that his own philosophy is contextual, not ahistorical 'all the way down' - See West, 2013, p292.

West isn't simply arguing that strong historicism *doesn't contradict* weak historicism. He doesn't mean "coherent" in that way. He's saying that in going 'all the way down', there's a "movement" of historicism from weak to strong. We shouldn't "stop" at weak historicism, we should go 'all the way down'. West wishes to guide us from one *indispensable* yet *insufficient* position through to what he sees as its logical consequence.

Turning towards West's top-down argument, the basic premise is that strong historicism, more than other positions, is the best way to analyse and offer solutions to the problems of social disenfranchisement and nihilism. He articulates this in a number of places. For instance that 'one cannot embark on a historicist project which demythologizes philosophy without dragging in the complexities of politics and culture' (West, 1989a, p208), while 'Rorty's historicist sense remains [...] too thin, devoid of the realities of power' (*ibid*, p207) and is 'limited' and 'truncated' (pp209-10).

In what way is Rorty's historicism limited? In West's eyes, while his historicism was both groundbreaking (West, 1993i) and 'music to my ears' (1999, p7), he unfortunately puts forward 'historical narratives that rarely dip into the complex world of politics and culture [...holding] at arm's length serious tools of social theory and cultural criticism' (1993i, p127). West finds Rorty's historicism confined to academic problems, not deepened nearly enough to be able to tackle societally-ingrained human problems. We should, if we're serious about fighting injustice, 'deepen the historicist turn in philosophy by [...] "thickening" the "thin" historicism of Rorty's [...] neopragmatism' (West, 1993i, p130, making our historicism 'full-blown' (1985a, p255), seeking a 'full-fledged historicist orientation' (West, 1988b, p198).

So West's top-down argument appears to be that strong historicism can fight, in ways that weak historicism can't, injustice and inequality. Strong historicism can provoke, utilise, and get to the bottom of many of the problems superficial analyses cannot.⁶³ Because of this, it's the ideal position to take to combat the social problems rooted in society and manifested in the lives of others.

Part Two: Concerning West's Bottom-Up Argument for Strong Historicism

So philosophical historicism should always become strong if consistent and coherent, and strong historicism is the logical development from weak historicism. So says West. This may be his position, but it is not immediately obvious how he reaches it. In this section I find and highlight his arguments, critically examining them to see whether they work.

We've seen that historicism is an important and often-present theme in West's writing. We've also seen that while he's often ambiguous in his language, West holds that there are two types of historicism, which we've called weak and strong. Furthermore, we've seen that weak historicism is the view that when examining

⁶³ I purposefully allude here to West's interpretation of Emerson as focusing on power, provocation and personality (see for instance, though not exclusively, West, 1989a, for more on this).

cultural practices and truth claims, both the contexts they are made within and the interpreter's preconceptions should be understood and taken into account; while strong historicism may be described differently, as the claim that our cultural practices and epistemic judgements should be seen as being justified relative to the preconceptions of a community's accepted frameworks.

But West wants us to see that once we accept weak historicism, we *should* accept strong historicism 'if logically consistent and theoretically coherent' (West, 1993i). In dealing with this claim, I show two things: first, that he attempts to make some kind of argument; but second, that his argument is not convincing. I'll do this by presenting two critiques of the bottom-up argument: that his reasoning is faulty and that having a plurality of contexts does not give him what he needs to make the logical connection he needs. It should be noted that remarkably little work has been done elsewhere to investigate whether West attempts to construct an argument and, if he does, explicate exactly what his arguments are.⁶⁴

At first glance, it's easy to be sceptical about his claim because weak and strong historicism look very different. Nevertheless I'll take West at face value and attempt to uncover whatever arguments he uses, finding where possible textual evidence for them.⁶⁵ Next, I'll interpret this evidence so that it represents a coherent line of thought. Only then will I turn to critiquing the argument.

So how does West justify the position that the weak historicist turns to strong historicism if logically consistent and theoretically coherent? Let's look at his reasoning, the main thrust of which appears in *Decentring Europe – The Contemporary Crisis in Culture* (1991).

West's Argument Revealed

His arguments run as follows: first, the act of (weak) historicising is the act of *contextualising*.⁶⁶ Second, the act of contextualising is the act of *de-privileging*.⁶⁷ Third, West tells us that the act of de-privileging *pluralises*. And finally, the act of contextualising and pluralising leads us ultimately to the act of *relativising*.⁶⁸ So we're presented with a four-step "conversion": first historicising takes us to

⁶⁴ Wieseltier (1995) for instance simply states that West offers no arguments at all for his position; while Yancy (2005) indicates there might be one but mentions that West *fails to clearly elucidate* how following the historicist route would entail arriving at some form of relativism (Yancy, 2005, see especially p29). Luban (1994), Steele (1997), Daveney (2000), Sholé Johnson (2003), Cowan (2003), Morrison (2004), Wood (2004), Gilyard (2008) and others spend no time at all discussing the issue.

⁶⁵ It should be noted that we never find this argument presented in one place as a complete chain of reasoning in West's writings, but I believe there is enough evidence throughout his work to justify the form of the argument I present.

⁶⁶ We know he believes this from reading West, 1993, throughout *Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism Vol II*. By 'contextualising', we must understand West as meaning that truth, justification and rationality are context-specific; and certainly, the contextualist holds that no universally applicable version of rationality is available to use (see particularly West, 1993j, 1998, 2012, and Luban, 1994, Sholé Johnson, 2003, Gilyard, 2008).

⁶⁷ We know this from a reading of West, 1993, *Decentring Europe*.

⁶⁸ Again, we may see this from a reading of West, 1991b, *Decentring Europe*, and also from the fact that strong historicism involves forms of relativism.

contextualism, then contextualism takes us to de-privileging, then de-privileging takes us to pluralising, and finally pluralising takes us to relativising. Let's look at how he attempts to show this.

It'll help to understand what he means when he talks about pluralising. As with many of West's concepts, this is never directly or fully explained and appears occasionally in his thoughts to mean more than one thing: for instance, he uses it to mean something akin to 'seen as many things' (1996c),⁶⁹ and at one point to mean 'having many different roots';⁷⁰ although he uses the word 'pluralistic' to describe Goodman (1981)⁷¹ and specifically links his version of pluralism with Bernstein (1993i).⁷² The overwhelming impression he gives throughout his work (see especially 1991b, 1991c, 1993i, and elsewhere) is that the pluralist accepts that there may be many ideas which contradict her own, but (following Boghossian, 2006, 2007) there are no absolute facts by virtue of which any one of them is more correct than any of the others, and that she mustn't reject these views out of hand.

Historicism,⁷³ which West claims is 'obligatory', will 'contextualize and pluralize', and 'trash the monolithic and the homogeneous in the name of heterogeneity and plurality and multiplicity', he tells us (1991b, p120).⁷⁴ Here we see the clear statement of West's belief that (presumably thin) historicism contextualises, which pluralizes. What's striking is that historicising is linked with contextualising and pluralising on numerous occasions in West's work.⁷⁵ We must see why he reaches this conclusion.

The tradition that historicists belong to 'has to be understood in light of [...] heterogeneity and plurality and academic dissensus, given the historical and social forces at work' (1991b, p141). The historicist in other words sees historical and social forces and contexts, sees a plurality of forces and contexts, and sees heterogeneity

⁶⁹ West says that as a Chekhovian, a Christian, a Californian, an Afro-American and more, his 'identities must be pluralized' (West, 1996c).

⁷⁰ He discusses Western thought as springing from more than one tradition and describes this as a 'pluralist' conception of things (West, 1984b).

⁷¹ One could see Goodman as arguing for a 'many interpretations are equally good' style of pluralism, with 'many different equally true versions of the world' (West, 1981).

⁷² Bernstein's pluralism involves the accepting as of equal worth other viewpoints and traditions no matter how much we may disagree with them (Bernstein, 2014, see also Bernstein, 2013). It is striking that West's own language (1994) echoes Bernstein's extremely closely on this issue. Elsewhere, he alludes to the theme, though specifically with an emphasis on literature rather than philosophical standpoints, in *Minority Discourse and Canon Formation* (1993h).

⁷³ Here, I suspect West "flip-flops" between implied uses of the word "historicism". At once he appears to mean "weak historicism", while at the same time, through the back door as it were, leaving space for a "stronger" interpretation.

⁷⁴ Again, we notice him saying that to talk about a crisis in culture, and so a crisis gripping *people*, one *must* begin by historicising and therefore contextualising and pluralising: 'What I want to argue, in fact, is that when we talk about contemporary crisis in culture, *the one way* of beginning to come to terms with this is having to historicize and pluralize and contextualize', he specifically says (1991b, p121, my emphasis).

⁷⁵ 'Historicizing, contextualizing, and pluralizing our catastrophic-laden moments in space and time' (West, 2011, p1) is vital, we are told; while he argues 'that the disciplines of history, or the process of historicizing and contextualizing and pluralizing are at the very center of our inquiry and conversation' (West, 1994, p6). Again (West, 1993g, p1) West wishes to 'trash the monolithic and homogenous [...] and to historicize, contextualize, and pluralize by highlighting the contingent, provisional, variable, tentative, shifting, and changing'. We should note that sometimes, historicising is simply set alongside contextualising and pluralising; but sometimes pluralising somehow comes from historicising and contextualising.

and plurality resulting from this.

Articulated more prosaically, West believes that taking a historicist position, and hence contextualising moments of history, forces us to see that the cultures which became dominant in these moments (such as ours) were / are contingent, which 'de-privileges' things.⁷⁶ We know his view that 'historicism results in a radical de-privileging' (1985a, p255). We know also (1989a, p203) that being 'but one voice' among many 'results in equalizing (or deprivileging) the voice'. This opens the floodgates for other cultural traditions and ideologies to contribute to the intellectual, moral and cultural landscape, and drive debate. This, West believes, 'trash[es] the homogeneous in the name of heterogeneity and plurality' (1991b, p120, also 1993g).

This perspective sees the contingent power-laden forces of history at work, allowing previously silenced people to have their voice, and, 'hence, new kinds of unprecedented opportunities - [discursive, intellectual, moral, political, ideological, existential, and more] - begin to present themselves' which focus on society's unnecessary 'cultural homogeneity' (1991b, p137). Other voices enter the cultural conversation, creating 'heterogeneity as a matter of concrete embodiment in a certain political direction' (1991b, p138). That is, there's a movement towards plurality as more groups find their voice and these voices are heard and accepted. The historicist sees this having impacts 'structurally, [where the historicist is] talking about ways in which persons are inscribed within certain structures' (1991b, p141). A plurality of voices becomes heard. Societal structures change accordingly. West believes that these societal structures somehow, therefore, become pluralised.

This leaves the historicist to talk about contingent traditions interplaying with each other to produce 'social movement' (1991b, p141) and pluralisation so that histories are 'read dialectically' (1991b, p142). Even talk 'about diversity [is linked to talking] about identity [for we have] a lot of identities' such that the more diverse we are, the more 'pluralized' (*ibid*) we become.⁷⁷

So we can see that in West's argument, the act of historicising is the act of contextualising. This becomes the act of de-privileging and equalising. This allows for pluralising. And this is the deepening of the act of historicising, by which he means 'the notion of explanation now comes back beyond simple description [...it] begins to come back in relation to the mobilization of meanings, and structures of domination' (1991b, pp120-121).⁷⁸ Put simply, it becomes a historicism that West thinks can engage with and tackle ingrained social concerns, the kind of historicism which accepts a plurality of alternative frameworks for understanding the world coming from a plurality of different cultures where none of them is seen as any more rationally justifiable than any of the others, which he has called *strong, deep, or full-*

⁷⁶ We must not look upon our culture as being special when compared with often under-appreciated African cultures, for example.

⁷⁷ This comes from a keynote speech given in 1996a, available online at <http://www.lesley.edu/journal-pedagogy-pluralism-practice/cornel-west/diversity-keynote/>

⁷⁸ This is partly because with a plurality of equally valid frameworks, society's refusal to accept alternatives to the prevailing ones amounts to a form of unfair discrimination.

blown historicism. And as we've seen, accepting this means accepting Boghossian's relativism.

Now we've discerned the argument, we can discern where it stands or falls. I contend that two problems with West's argument are apparent.

First counter-argument

The first counter-argument concentrates on the logical steps West attempts to take when building his bottom-up case. We'll examine how he gets from "weak historicising" to contextualising, from contextualising to de-privileging, from de-privileging to pluralising, and from pluralising to relativising. Each of these steps must be seen separately, because where weak links are found, the entire chain of reasoning may break.

Initially there's little difficulty: it's unproblematic to accept that the "weak historicist" is really engaged in contextualising. Again and again, West links these notions as though they're the same. West's fashioned and used weak historicism as he sees fit, so it needn't surprise us that he's done so such that it incorporates the act of contextualising. A quick recollection of our working definition of weak historicism reminds us that when examining claims, weak historicists understand the contexts they were made within, understanding also that they have their own contexts from which they judge them.

Once we go beyond this however, the difficulties begin to show. West never explains what he means by *de-privileging*. And without any clear articulation of the concept, the reader might well struggle to accept that it's the consequence of contextualising. *What*, we have to ask, is the consequence precisely?

And what sort of logical step could it be which goes from something explained to something unexplained? *A* may lead to *B*, but where *B* is a mystery we're left wondering what it is we've unearthed. West seems concerned with showing us a logical development which 'consistently' and 'coherently' gets us not only from *A* to *B*, but from *A* to *B* to *C* to *D*. With unexplained, unclear concepts forming the stones upon which the reader is invited to step, it is hard to see how he can achieve this.⁷⁹

Perhaps West is simply asking us to take it on trust. But the response might well be: "take what on trust, exactly?". *At some point*, he needs to nail his colours to the mast and come clean. If *A* leads to *B*, and from *B* we are supposed to get *C*, we will need to know what *B* is before we can take the argument seriously.

Is that which has been de-privileged no longer of any importance? Is it that which has been democratised somehow, and so *in some way* increased in value? The concept of de-privileging might be one thing in one culture, but something quite different in another.

⁷⁹ In a subsequent chapter, we will examine the question: what sort of logical relation can hold between incomplete propositions?

Another option is that de-privileging isn't *different* from contextualising or pluralising, but *the same thing* as either or both. But if this is the line he takes, he gives no compelling reason to suppose that de-privileging can act as either a synonym for both contextualising and pluralising (so that the act of one *is* the act of the other), or a synonym for only one of the two. If the former, he's offering a definition of de-privileging that is *prima facie* false.⁸⁰ And if the latter, and he is trying to say that it is a synonym for *either* contextualising *or* pluralising (but not both), then he should either abandon this part of the argument as redundant, or recognise that he needs to tell us which it is! There's nothing obvious to indicate that de-privileging is the same as contextualising⁸¹, or the same as pluralising.⁸²

It could be that de-privileging is simply "levelling up" and removing an unfair, privileged claim to truth (presumably, by showing that as the Eurocentric, historically contingent tradition is but one among many, it's "no better than" any other). This would be a way of historically contextualising to "equalise" traditions. But if this is the case, he's risking falling foul of the genetic fallacy, arguing that the genesis of a position is what gives it its importance, or the origins of holding a set of claims are important to their truth. It's certainly the case that something can still be important

⁸⁰ And indeed West appears to recognise this, for he writes (1991b) that the historicising process *both* contextualises *and* pluralises, because there is a plurality of contexts (if he truly believes this, then he himself draws a distinction between contextualising and pluralising, such that the act of one is *not* the act of the other).

⁸¹ Sholé Johnson (2003) mentions that West's intention in *The American Evasion of Philosophy* is to contextualise prophetic pragmatism so that it becomes 'authentic' (Sholé Johnson, p20), indicating that contextualising may be seen as something closer to the *opposite* of de-privileging. González and Fernández (1994) draw on West (1992) to show that West believes that contextualisation can 'advance efforts towards a multicultural history' (González and Fernández, p349), which again doesn't sound like de-privileging anything at all. Rosi Braidotti (2011) points out that West concerns himself with contextualising important issues in race and social theory, which would make little sense from a Westian point of view if 'contextualising' meant 'de-privileging' (see Braidotti, p84). We can even find the (badly referenced) webpage: <http://racematters.weebly.com/introduction.html>, dedicated to West's most famous work, arguing similarly, that 'West provides the reader invaluable information which helps to not only frame the recent and current events within a larger meaning, but also helps contextualize the problems', where we can presume that these problems are not intended to be 'de-privileged'. As if this were not enough, Gilyard (2008), in writing on West, talks of contextualising 'the Ebonics question' (Gilyard, p33) in relation to his own work but related to that of West, and Gilyard certainly did not have de-privileging this question in his mind.

⁸² When West talks (1993g) of *contextualizing* and pluralising, he is clearly contrasting each with different concepts. The context is uncomplicated: West is listing different concepts and contrasting one with another. His use of the concepts of contextualising and pluralising fits seamlessly into this pattern, suggesting that he does not look at them as the same thing. One can certainly use context *to* de-privilege (see for instance West, 1989a, p208) in a way that is not necessarily tied to pluralising, but rather to lend perspective; and privileging can be done not *solely* by ignoring heterogeneity (see West, 1989a, p200). Indeed, it is spoken of in precisely the same way as 'equalizing' (West, 1989a, p203), that is, not holding something in higher esteem than its alternatives. One does not need to pluralise in order to do this, one simply needs to recognise that something or other should not be lauded more than necessary (one might say, for instance, that a mother privileges her child over that of her friend, but it would be unusual to say that on resolving not to do this, she somehow pluralises the children). On a similar note, when talking further of de-privileging, it is interesting to note how he talks of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza not radically de-privileging Jesus Christ (see West, 1985e), something which is not about pluralising him surely, at least not in the way we are looking at his concept of pluralising here, but which is about keeping him in high esteem. It is also interesting to note William James's view of the subject (see James, 1891), where moral fundamentalism was seen as the absolute privileging of any moral value or claim, privileging setting the demands or the claims of one group over and above the demands or claims of other groups. We can detect an apparent link between de-privileging and pluralising here, but it would be a great leap of hope, not to say invalid logic, to conclude that they are the same. West, writing in *Keeping Faith*, attempts to de-privilege *by pluralising* (or perhaps, pluralise by de-privileging, depending on one's reading). And as one is a means to the other, it would be difficult to argue that they are identical concepts.

or true once it's undergone this sort of de-privileging; and such de-privileging would still not be identical with historicising or pluralising, while the links between them would be no clearer. Furthermore, a position *arising from* a historical context is not the same as that position being *relative to* that context. So, we still don't arrive at strong historicism.

Nor does he give any compelling reason to suppose that de-privileging can act as a component of an argument that shows us that if we contextualise, then we must pluralise. If indeed he *is* assuming that de-privileging acts as a component part of his argument, then the most charitable we can be is that he hasn't yet explicated it. In what way, he needs to tell us, does de-privileging something pluralise it? He indicates (1985e) that he's happy to privilege Jesus Christ (meaning, we presume, think of him as special in some important way). But what if he lost his faith? One could well imagine that a reformed, stoutly secular Cornel West might well not privilege Jesus Christ nearly as much, if at all. But need this entail pluralising? It's hard to see that it would. This part of the argument doesn't seem to stand up to scrutiny.

But it's the final step of the argument where West gets it most obviously wrong. Arguing that the act of pluralising is the act of strong historicising, is simply a mistaken thing to do - tantamount to arguing that pluralising is relativising, which it isn't.⁸³ Having a 'heterogeneous heritage' (West, 1994, p8)⁸⁴ means that no group has a 'monopoly on truth or wisdom', according to West; but this needn't mean that relativism's on the table. There are all sorts of possibilities open to the theorist at this point, the obvious being that lots of different groups are each in possession of some truths, or even the same truths. And this doesn't sound like relativism at all (it just sounds like a commonsensical view of how the world is).

Even where Boghossian's articulation of (moral) relativism involves the thesis of pluralism, this doesn't mean that the act of pluralising is the act of relativising. It may be argued that on Boghossian, one cannot relativise without pluralising,⁸⁵ but there's nothing in that which says that pluralising *is* relativising. From saying that one cannot do *Y* without doing *X*, it doesn't follow that doing *X* gives you (or in any way is) *Y*. No one can win the world heavyweight boxing championship without training, but the act of training is not the act of winning the world heavyweight boxing championship (nor can it guarantee that the championship will be yours, unfortunately).⁸⁶

⁸³ See for instance Boghossian, 2007. Even accepting West's often vague argumentation and his ambiguous modes of expression, we cannot interpret him much more charitably if he means, alternatively, not that pluralising *is* relativising but that it either somehow *entails* or *involves* relativising, for neither of these interpretations seems correct either.

⁸⁴ A 'heterogeneous heritage' sounds very much like the kind of thing West has in mind when talking about pluralism. After all, it was said in response to his own question of how we 'we pluralize and diversify in such a way that we don't trump conversation' (West, 1994, p6).

⁸⁵ - that is, accepting the thesis of pluralism.

⁸⁶ It's of some interest to turn once again to William James, who had many interesting things to say about pluralism, but none of them that it should be looked at as epistemic or moral relativism (see especially James, 1902, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, where he described pluralism as three doctrines, which certainly do not together or separately describe any kind of relativism as we have understood it, and 1909, *A Pluralistic Universe*).

Any such argument⁸⁷ fails.⁸⁸ Not only is there no support given for it anywhere in West, but all the evidence is against it. We can perhaps put this down to West's method of argumentation: instead of rigorously and logically building his arguments, he relies on rhetorical flourishes and impassioned references to the broad thrust of his general worldview, as though the overall point of what he's trying to say takes precedence over the painstaking work of demonstrating it. This is both the temptation and the trap of his writing style.

The act of historicising may well be the act of contextualising, but it's nowhere near convincing that contextualising is the act of de-privileging, or that de-privileging is the act of pluralising. Far from it, for in taking a closer look at the arguments, we've found them badly wanting. And regardless of the merits or demerits of these steps, the act of pluralising most certainly does not result in the act of relativising (strong historicising). West has effectively presented us with a chain of weak links, one after the other, each ready to break as soon as it's subjected to even the simplest stress test. Even on a sympathetic reading that says there might be some truth to what he says if only he could spend time explaining himself, his reasoning appears fallacious, or at best incomplete. But his troubles don't stop there, for there's one other counter-argument to West's bottom-up argument that we should look at.

Second counter-argument

This counter-argument needn't be used as an alternative to the first, it may stand alongside it to build a stronger attack on West's bottom-up argument. It's also a simple argument, and subtly, but importantly, different from the one that says that the act of pluralising is not the act of relativising.

Put simply, it's that accepting that there's a plurality of contexts doesn't mean accepting pluralist or even relativist notions. So, we can accept for the sake of the argument that it's true that it's contingent that I have the beliefs that I do, since there's a plurality of cultures I could have been born into, and I could quite easily have been born in a very different country and brought up believing very different things. So far so good, there's nothing particularly controversial about this. But the point is that this plurality of contexts and beliefs in the world, and the contingency of my own beliefs, *says absolutely nothing about the absolute truth or falsity of these beliefs*. If West's trying to argue - as he appears to be⁸⁹ - that a plurality of beliefs provides good reason to conclude that my beliefs can only be true relative to cultural and historic context, then he's mistaken.

⁸⁷ For instance: "if you historicise, you contextualise; if you contextualise, you de-privilege; if you de-privilege you pluralise; and if you pluralise you relativise; so, if you contextualise, you relativise".

⁸⁸ Boghossian (2007) also echoes this, being quite clear in his agreement that pluralising and relativising are altogether different acts.

⁸⁹ Remember, West's view is that our cultural practices and epistemic judgements should be seen as being justified relative to the prevailing norms of a community, and that any judgement we make about anything at all is relative to our community's accepted frameworks. Elements of this standpoint can be found explored with some sophistication in West, 1984a, 1986a, 1991a, 1993a, 1993i, and elsewhere. See also Chapter 1 of this thesis for a development of this idea.

Of course, *some* of our beliefs may be true relative to cultural context,⁹⁰ but these aren't representative of all our beliefs, and saying that some beliefs are true relative to culture says nothing about the relativity of truth. West's application of strong historicism is far wider-ranging than that, and far less selective in its options for what *could* count as relative to cultural context. For him, as we have seen, everything from rationality to epistemology and *regimes of truth* should be seen as relative to culture and to historical moment.⁹¹ And he bases this conclusion on there being a plurality of contexts.⁹² It has to be said, this is simply invalid.

Similarly, accepting that there's a plurality of contexts doesn't mean we must accept pluralist or even relativist notions of morality. Again, it may well be true that there are many different cultures with many different moral norms, and that it's contingent that I accept the moral norms that I do because it's contingent that I was born and brought up in a culture such as mine, accepting the moral norms that it does. But the contingency of my own moral outlook and a plurality of moral norms and moral beliefs in the world says nothing about whether killing children is immoral absolutely, or only immoral relative to a culture.⁹³ It may well be contingent that I accept something as right, but that contingency has no bearing on whether it is right.

So West has attempted to provide some logically-driven route from weak to strong historicism, but his reasoning collapses from two sides. First, he cannot provide any convincing argument from contextualising through de-privileging and pluralising to forms of relativism; and second, he's certainly mistaken in saying that a plurality of contexts provides good reason to suppose that truth, or morality, must be seen to be pluralistic (or culturally relativistic).⁹⁴

⁹⁰ We may say for instance: "the culture I'm a part of is kind and welcoming to foreigners".

⁹¹ West's full-blown strong historicism, we recall, has it that there are differing scientific conceptions of the world, differing epistemic, social and moral viewpoints from which we interpret differing cultural practices and interpretations of the world, and no absolute standards by which we can judge any of these (see for instance West, 1993i, and Chapter 1 of this thesis).

⁹² To reiterate, his argument goes that first, the act of (weak) historicising is the act of *contextualising*; that second, the act of contextualising is the act of *de-privileging*; that third, the act of de-privileging *pluralises*; and finally, the act of pluralising leads us ultimately to the act of *relativising* (see West, 1991b for more on this).

⁹³ Any number of examples can illustrate this. A plurality of religions and religious contexts does not mean that we have to have a pluralistic notion of God, or that our religious beliefs are only true relative to a culture. A plurality of crimes or of criminal justice systems across the world does not on its own mean that we must accept a pluralist or a relativist notion of justice. A plurality of contexts and philosophical interpretations doesn't appear to force us to accept that West's own philosophical conclusions must only be justified on pluralist grounds, or that he is only right relative to some or other context. So we can repeat: *a plurality of contexts does not entail the need for a pluralist or relativist notion of truth*. This is a simple logical point that West seems to have ignored or overlooked, but it seems crucial to his case, for he is insistent that *because* the historicising process recognises that there is a plurality of contexts, then truth and morality themselves become pluralised and, somehow by that very act, relativised. So while the thin historicist position might well help interpreters understand a claim, theory or interpretation of the world more sympathetically, this in itself has nothing to do with whether that claim, theory or interpretation is true or false absolutely or relatively.

⁹⁴ The two counter-arguments are subtly, yet significantly, different. The first calls into question the logical steps West makes in moving from weak historicism to strong historicism, that contextualism entails or even is de-privileging and pluralising; the second focuses on his invalid inference that if you have a plurality of contexts, then you must conclude in favour of a pluralistic (or even relativistic) notion of truth, that somehow the nature of truth itself is determined by the fact that there are many differing viewpoints in the world. There may even be hints here of the genetic fallacy: that because there is more than one context in the world, and we

These two arguments offer powerful reasons to dismiss the bottom-up case for strong historicism. But this in itself doesn't mean that we shouldn't accept West's suit for it, for he has a second argument which we haven't examined. In fact, West puts more store in this than in the bottom-up argument. We'll turn to this now.

Part Three: Concerning West's Top-Down Argument for Strong Historicism

What I want to argue, in fact, is that when we talk about contemporary crisis in culture, the one way of beginning to come to terms with this is having to historicize and pluralize and contextualize ...

(West, 1991b, p121)

West's second argument for strong historicism is based on the good he says comes from it, and the shelter it offers to society's needy. His argument is that it compels us to see that truth is (in his rather cryptic re-rendering of William James's words) a 'species of the good' (1993a), and that the strong historicist cannot help but engage in socially valuable philosophy which helps the downtrodden. On this view, the strong historicist never simply theorises, she *engages* in socially constructive activity, generating at all times "species of the good". In this argument, he hopes to show that ethics actually go hand in hand with epistemic claims, and that every truth we hold has an ethical significance.

I'll first put this in the broader context of West's philosophy. I'll also show where he contrasts his view with that of philosophies he wishes to set himself against.⁹⁵ I'll then take relevant quotations from West to show how he tries to make his case.

After doing that, I'll begin the task of critiquing his argument. This will come in five parts, each separate from, yet able to stand alongside, the others. These critiques will be, in turn: that strong historicism falls foul of the unregulated vulgarity West fights strongly to avoid, that strong historicism does not have any exclusive claims on seeing truth as affective like West believes it does, that nowhere is it shown that truth and value cannot be separated as West wishes it to be, that there is no clear connection between truth and a species of the good as he hopes to show, and that anyway, West's argument is circular. These arguments contra West will show that he has no good basis for championing strong historicism.

West's Argument Revealed

come to our views because of the historical moment we occupy, we must conclude that nothing is absolutely true.

⁹⁵ As West does not mention what these philosophies are, I will take it that they are convenient "straw men" he wishes to use to highlight the beneficial properties of historicism (again, this contains an echo of James's tactics in his *Lectures on Pragmatism*, 1907). It's not at all necessary for our purposes that he's right when making this contrast.

We know (from 1985a, 1986a, 1989a, 1991a, 1993a, and elsewhere) that West classes himself as an anti-realist.⁹⁶ We also know (from 1989a, 1991a, 1993a, and elsewhere) that he describes himself as a voluntarist.⁹⁷ We know too (from 1980, 1985a, 1986a, 1989a, 1990a, 1993i, and elsewhere) of his deeply-held historicist beliefs.⁹⁸ These come together in this part of his argument.

He argues (1988a, 1993a) that the self-reflective historicist does not merely look at the world, she becomes aware of how she *affects* it. The anti-realism we've mentioned (see 1989a) convinces West that when searching for truth, we shouldn't try to represent a reality that's absolute or non-contingent, we shouldn't appeal to ahistorical standards when deciding on the veracity of our theories, there are no description-free or theory-free descriptions of the world, and our rational standards for determining what is true are to be found within our communities and are relative to our common aims and purposes (West, 1985a, 1986a, 1989a, 1993i, and elsewhere).

In fact, West's of the opinion that any society which moves away from models of knowledge that highlight realism and what he calls ahistoricity (1988a), and towards models that highlight what he calls historicity, will find that the 'crucial intellectual battles of the day [...] are no longer over Truth but rather over the production of truths' (1988a, p208). West believes that 'dispensing with old-style metaphysics' becomes 'a crucial step towards more legitimate modes' (1986a, p270) of thinking that can make a difference in the world. As the historicist accepts anti-realism⁹⁹ West argues that she accepts also that truths are produced rather than discovered (1986a, 1988a, and elsewhere).

As truths are produced, not discovered, West argues that previously ignored peoples can produce truths from their own perspectives, and with that, may find 'new kinds of unprecedented opportunities' (1991b, p137). He talks about feminists, African Americans, the LGBTQ community, and cultures quite different from our own, and from this we can find 'heterogeneity' as opposed to homogeneity and oppression of others (1991b, p138). The more voices are heard and accepted, the freer the people whose voices they are. When we take a strong historicist position, this allows us to break down the idea that *our* way is *the* way, and stop looking at other subcultures - for instance Afro-American sub-cultures - as simply 'wrong'. An important step in the equalising of peoples may be taken.

⁹⁶ West's anti-realism is not always easy to pin down, but evidence shows us that while for the realist, objects, things, or states of affairs exist independently of us, and that it is these things that somehow determine what is true, West's kind of anti-realist rejects this (West, 1981, 1989b). While he happily accepts the first claim of the realist, that things exist independently of us, he believes that the second part is little more than a form of correspondence theory, which he says the anti-realist rejects (West, 1981, 1989a, 1989b). For the anti-realist, descriptions and versions of the world do not mirror the world or correspond to subject-independent states of affairs. Nor can we appeal to subject-independent reality when arbitrating disputes about theories of the world (West, 1989b). Rather, our descriptions of the world evolve as responses to challenges people face in life, such that our ideas and our language do not reflect reality, whatever that might mean, but are instead 'tools with which to cope with "our" world' (West, 1989a, p201).

⁹⁷ We shall have a quick word about voluntarism presently.

⁹⁸ See also Chapter 1 of this thesis.

⁹⁹ And, he often argues, also anti-foundationalism.

Moreover, the production rather than the discovery of truths means that each truth may become a 'strategy in the quest for power' (1988a, p208), where power is key to rescuing the dispossessed from nihilism. We're not passive when it comes to truths, we construct them, and so find that with truth comes responsibility. What we produce, we're responsible for.

The next step is West's *voluntarism* (1989a, 1991a, 1993a, 1999b) where, quoting C.I. Lewis, he says approvingly (1993a) that all problems are problems of conduct, all judgments are judgments of value, and, as there can't ultimately be any valid distinction between theory and practice, there can't be any final separation of questions of truth *of any kind* from questions of the justifiable ends of action; and where, quoting Royce, he agrees that 'no truth is a truth at all unless it guides and directs life' (*ibid*). Indeed, 'the voluntaristic impulse', he says (1993a, p38), 'leads to two basic notions: first, that truth is a species of the good; and second, that the conception of the good is defined in relation to temporal consequences' (it not being ahistorical).

His voluntarism and historicism may give us enough reason to see why he thinks that truths are seen in relation to future consequences (at the very least, they guide action, which happens in time and has consequences that succeed it).¹⁰⁰ But what does he mean by truth being a *species of the good*?

Knowledge isn't only key, it's *a key*, he says (1988a), with the ability to unlock the social chains people have found themselves constrained by. For West, every truth held, every opinion, becomes a disposition or a guide to action. So the truths we produce can't be separated from the world we live in. Truths actually, and always (see 1993a), have a bearing on the future of the people around us.

West¹⁰¹ argues (rightly or wrongly) that philosophers have always been obsessed with 'representing'. But he rejects this model: 'Truth [becomes] a species of the good and the conception of the good has to do with defining it in relation to temporal consequences' (1993a, p40). Calling truth a species of the good defines it 'in relation to temporal consequences', so that 'the future has ethical significance' (1993a, p41). In other words, all truths guide action, affect people, and impact on the way we behave and the world around us. They have consequences on the lives of us all and because of this, *ethical significance*. Truths become affective forces in the world. His conclusion is that truth is a species of the good.

Critiquing West's Top-Down Argument

So in West's view, if strong historicism is true, then it's the best position to take in order to analyse and counter the social problems of the world, and philosophy necessarily becomes an affective, ethically significant enterprise. If this is right, strong

¹⁰⁰ The reference to another of James's thoughts here may not be as direct as the acknowledgement of the phrase '*one species of good*', but it is striking nonetheless. James foreshadows two of the ideas West uses in this argument in one simple sentence: 'Then, just as pragmatism faces forward to the future, so does rationalism here again face backward to a past eternity' (James, 1907, p227).

¹⁰¹ Again, echoing James (1907).

historicism is a powerful and important tool not only for thinking about the world but for bringing about social betterment.

There are however two separate categories of argument I wish to level against this top-down case, forming five distinct arguments in total, with one argument in the first category, and four arguments in the second. The first category concentrates on a worry West himself voiced,¹⁰² concerning what he feared about unregulated forms of relativism,¹⁰³ something he wishes strongly to avoid. The second category focuses on West's 'species of the good' argument. As this is key to seeing strong historicism as an important contributor to ethically affective philosophy, it's important to subject it to critical analysis.

I'll present four counter-arguments to his position concerning truth being a species of the good. Broadly speaking, they can be introduced as: *one*, historicism isn't the only philosophical viewpoint that can claim that truth is a species of the good, so saying that it sees truth as a species of the good does not necessarily make it the best position to take; *two*, West fails to show that truth and value cannot be separated; *three*, West fails to show that truth is connected with *goodness*; and *four*, he gets caught in a vicious circularity. Together, and coupled with the argument about unregulated forms of relativism, these counterarguments show clearly that West has no case to make if pinning his hopes on his top-down argument for strong historicism.

The First Category: Unregulated Relativism

We recall from Chapter 1 that West attempted to pre-empt and counter charges of *unregulated* (or *vulgar*) relativism, by appealing to Gadamer and Dewey, unambiguously distancing himself from ethical relativism as anathema to what he would like his philosophy to be (West, 1982a; see also Meili Steele, p107),¹⁰⁴ and while he's alive to the dangers that relativistic philosophies can pose,¹⁰⁵ his understanding of what can make relativism undesirable - broadly speaking, that vulgar relativism forms 'anything goes' philosophies that provide no rational standards (1986a, 1999) for adjudicating between competing viewpoints - is precisely the sort of thing that Boghossian describes but which West himself signs up to with strong historicism.

Merely stating that the rational standards he wishes for are found within democratic communities does nothing to allay fears that various and different democratic communities can be imagined - formed differently through the contingent forces of unshared histories and different cultural contexts - each with completely different practices, views, and moral / epistemic frameworks, disagreeing strongly with each

¹⁰² See Chapter 1.

¹⁰³ See West talking about his fears (1985a, 1989a p98, 1991a, 1999 pxvii, and elsewhere).

¹⁰⁴ We see him quote Martin Luther King junior, saying that insofar as 'Marx posited a metaphysical materialism, an ethical relativism, and a strangulating totalitarianism, I responded with an unambiguous "no"...' (West, 1982a, p93).

¹⁰⁵ For instance, he can be found saying that 'to give in to sophomoric relativism ("Anything goes" or "All views are equally valid") is a failure of nerve' (West, *The Cornel West Reader*, 1999, p.xvii), although many other examples of his wariness of the dangers of relativism can be found throughout his philosophical work.

other on even the most basic propositions, and with no rational standards available for anybody to judge which is correct. In short, while West provides some pathway towards finding *intra*-communal rational standards, this doesn't translate into finding *inter*-communal rational standards. The suspicion is that West has replaced the troublesome maxim "man is the measure of all things" with the equally troublesome maxim "communities are the measure of all things". The problems of unregulated relativism have merely been transferred from individuals to communities.

Where there are no absolutes to decide which individual's "small t" truths are more correct than anybody else's,¹⁰⁶ West condemns relativistic philosophies as vulgar.¹⁰⁷ It would feel consistent if those who agreed with him on this also condemned as vulgar those philosophies that provided no absolutes to decide which community's "small t" truths were more correct than which other communities'. It becomes very difficult indeed to see how West could offer strong historicism as a philosophy capable of providing the answers he wishes it to do.¹⁰⁸

But perhaps his own confused position in arguing both for and against the tenets of strong historicism is not enough for us to dismiss it out of hand. So we'll turn to our second category of counter-argument, that which concentrates on West's assertion that on strong historicism, truth is a 'species of the good'.

The Second Category: The Species of the Good

We concern ourselves here with West's argument concerning truth, on strong historicism, being a 'species of the good'. The four previously stated counterarguments will be presented here, beginning with the point that strong historicism isn't the only viewpoint that can accept truth as a species of the good.

This is a simple point. West attempts to show (1988a, 1989a, 1991a, 1993a) that on strong historicism, there really is no great distinction between the truths that we hold and our actions, there's no significant divide between the theoretical and the practical, and that the truths that we hold, guide and direct our actions. For West, this can help us see that philosophy is affective, can better the world, and that strong historicism grasps this in a way that other worldviews fail to do. So, accepting strong historicism, rather than accepting less socially focused philosophies, can help us involve ourselves in social struggles, consciously engaging with our environments.

But if West truly believes this, he seems to be blinding himself to what non-historicism involves. For surely *everybody* believes (or could be persuaded to accept) that our beliefs have an effect on our behaviour, and so the world. And these people

¹⁰⁶ We should note that West uses the notion of "small t truths" a number of times, for instance in his interview in *The Examined Life* (West, 2009), where he backs away from realist interpretations of the truth and heads firmly towards anti-realist ("small t") understandings of truths, contextually situated and communally understood (see his interview at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xfD3X3f5C_w, see also West, 2004b, West, 2013, Judaken and Geddes, 2007, Morrison, 2004, Whitehead, 2015, p5).

¹⁰⁷ Also, unregulated, and sophomoric.

¹⁰⁸ This argument will be developed further in the next chapter. For now, however, it is enough to show that strong historicism, *by West's own standards*, is unsatisfactory. In effect, West is offering, as the best tool to tackle social problems, something that he himself says is to be avoided.

need have nothing to do with strong historicism. To draw conclusions involving anti-realism, or more - *relativism* - from this seems absurd. There's certainly little to show an exclusive relationship between anti-realism and the idea that our beliefs influence what we do, and nowhere does West attempt to do this; nor is there any attempt to refute the opposite view. Indeed, a good measure of this would be that if we wanted to convince somebody that the things we hold to be true affect our actions, we wouldn't have to refer to historicism at all.

West seems to have confused his own belief that truth is a species of the good with his anti-realist, anti-foundationalist standpoint, and provided no adequate argument to justify an exclusive connection. And while not incompatible with truth being a species of the good, it becomes very difficult to see how he can use this species of the good to promote his strong historicism over other positions. Merely saying that in the old days philosophers were 'obsessed with representing' (1993a), which appears to be his only attempt at rationalising his position, doesn't make his case any stronger. If anything, it demonstrates a lack of rigour in how he frames the terms of the debate.

West seems either to misunderstand or misrepresent the distinctive place of strong historicism among other philosophies. He certainly fails to make a case for strong historicism having any kind of exclusive claim on our beliefs affecting how we behave. In light of this, we must conclude that he's wrong to feature this as part of his top-down argument.

The second point to bring up against West is that, while he states that, on strong historicism, epistemic claims and ethics go hand in hand (1993a), he fails to show any necessity for this. With no necessary connection, he might as well say that while epistemic claims and ethics *can* go hand in hand, they just as easily might not.¹⁰⁹ His reasoning for saying that they do is simple, if unsophisticated: he argues that our truths and our actions cannot be separated, and our actions affect those around us and so have ethical value. Further, as truth and value cannot be separated, truth promotes the flourishing of everyone (West, 1993a).

But this isn't obvious at all. It may be that some truths and value are not separated, but he's unjustified in deducing from this - if this is what he is doing - that no truths can be separated from value. It's difficult not to suspect that his conclusions, such as they are, are anything more than wishful thinking.

Just a little imagination might highlight this. We need only come up with a single example where it's hard to see the ethical significance of truths, truth claims or beliefs, to undermine the force of West's argument. So we can say it would be hard to argue that the abstract truths of mathematics are inseparable from ethics. It may be that such abstract mathematical truths have got nothing at all to do with ethics, and West nowhere gives any indication that his historicist views could really counter these. In fact, where such truths were concerned, it would be difficult to see how they

¹⁰⁹ There may be hints of fallacy here, for West's opponents may well argue that statements of fact (in some way that even West could accept describing how the world is), and statements of value, are actually two very different kinds of thing.

could be inseparable from ethics. The burden of proof would appear to lie on West's shoulders.

But there may be other, less abstract truths that are separable from ethics. Our arguments need not dwell on abstruse academic plains for our counter-claims. I'll give just a few examples of trivial truths which, not having obvious ethical consequences, would put more burden of proof on West.

- I believe this nail should be knocked in before that nail.
- I think to myself that the nail I'm bashing is a particular shade of rusty-brown.
- I'm convinced of the truth of the proposition: "the sun's 93 million miles from the earth, not 94 million".
- I accept as probably true that all observable stars have a name.
- It's my opinion that it's possible to notate lists numerically, and in bullet points.
- I think this list contains bullet points.

We can imagine that the person believing all this is old, perhaps dying; or completely alone; or simply unconcerned about whether anybody agrees with him, and equally unconcerned about talking about such things. Perhaps he cares so little about them that he barely thinks of them. In these circumstances it looks unlikely that anyone could make a case for the ethical entailments of all truths that people hold, and saying that truths cannot be separated from ethics begins to look unconvincing. In these cases, the idea that epistemic claims and ethics go hand in hand needs to be *argued for*, yet West gives no argument. Again, he seems to have cherry-picked empowering ideas, yet provided no solid arguments to back up the connection. As it stands, we have little option than to be highly sceptical.

The third point is that West fails to show that truth is connected with *goodness* (see West, 1988a, 1993a). This point shares similarities with the previous point, in that it seems to display more wishful thinking than strong reasoning. West's point, which he assumes without question, is that historicists such as he recognise that if truth has value, then it becomes a species of the *good*.

But the response is simple: there are no pressing reasons to infer that truths that have real-world consequences will be used for the general betterment of humanity rather than the exclusive betterment of those who hold the truths. Assuming he's right that truths always affect behaviour and that behaviour always has ethical value, West still has to show that this ethical value is always positive. All we see is a hope that the ethical value is a positive one, yet this seems to run counter to the very heart of his social observations.

The motivation for his entire social philosophy¹¹⁰ is that elites have used their power to secure and increase their own positions to the detriment of those living in desperation. In doing so, they've hardened those social structures which grew out of Eurocentric, racist, mercantile practices to such a point that the people on the lowest

¹¹⁰ If there could be any doubt about this, one need only turn to his most significant works (see for instance West, 1982a, 1989a, 1991a, 1993j, 2004).

rung of society have fallen into a life of nihilistic hopelessness. Arguing that truths are affective rather than simply representational is itself not enough to change that. On the contrary, saying that truth guides and directs life, and concluding from this that truth promotes the flourishing of everyone, appears to blur any distinction between what truth does, and what he would like it to do. One wonders whether he confuses what is the case with what he thinks ought to be the case.¹¹¹ West starts off saying that people making use of 'regimes of truth' oppress the vulnerable, and then appears to forget this important pillar of his social thought, saying that constructed truths are a species of the "good". He cannot have it both ways.

It may be true that truth is affective; but it needn't be that any good must come of this. History is littered with examples of people realising the affective power of truths and not using truths as a species of the good (certainly not in any way West would recognise the good).¹¹² So it's hard to see how truth, on the model West pushes, is in any way a species of the good at all, more than a species of the bad. West offers no answer to this.

Fourth in this category, it's possible to detect a deep and problematic circularity in West's thinking: if, on strong historicism, truths are somehow 'chosen', or produced (1986a, 1988a), or judged acceptable based on their beneficial consequences, and these beneficial consequences are judged beneficial according to the ethical frameworks of the truth-holder (where, we remember, truths and ethics are inseparable), then these truths become simply examples of the very ethical frameworks they've been chosen within.

In other words, in calling a truth a species of the good, we judge it to be so based on a moral framework that's made up of just those truths which are being called species of the good. When looked at like this, calling truths species of the good does little more than draw our attention to the moral frameworks that make them species of the good in the first place, and these moral frameworks are composed of the truths we produce. Moreover, the moral frameworks West has in mind are not absolute, and are themselves constructed of moral judgements and moral truths.¹¹³

We find ourselves at a loss to explain why we should even accept the 'species of the good' argument. It has the characteristics of a problematic circularity about it and as such, it seems that its important constituents are justified only relative to itself. What West has effectively presented us with is a reason to accept something *only if you already accept it to begin with*. And this isn't good enough, not for the reflective and critical audience he hopes to reach. It also provides no reason to accept strong historicism as a better philosophy for dealing with social problems than its rivals, which is what West was hoping to do.

So we see that his argument that strong historicism, above other philosophical positions, is a tool to be used for social betterment because on strong historicism

¹¹¹ Truth may be "affective", but always in the way he would like it to be?

¹¹² One could refer to the darker days of some of history's theocracies, or the excesses of communism, which he himself recognises (see West, 1987b, especially pp257-258).

¹¹³ These are themselves held to be true, based on the ethical frameworks of the truth producers.

truth becomes a species of the good falls down in four chief areas. First, there's little to show that historicism alone sees truth as a species of the good and that the things we believe influence what we do, and nowhere does West attempt to demonstrate that no other viewpoint shares that position. Second, it may well be that truth and value *are* not separated, but it's hard to conclude that they *cannot* be separated. Third, West confuses the "is" with the "ought" in saying that as truth guides and directs life, it promotes everybody's betterment.¹¹⁴ There's no reason to suppose that the opposite isn't true and oppressive institutional systems won't be strengthened at the expense of the poor. And finally, we see West's view mired in hopeless circularity.

So we recall, West argues that if strong historicism is true, then philosophy necessarily becomes an affective, ethically significant enterprise. He further argues that this is because if strong historicism is true then truth becomes a species of the good. If he's right about this, he has a very good point that thick historicism is a powerful and important tool for engineering social improvement, more powerful (perhaps) than other philosophical positions. But we've examined all his arguments for this and concluded that he cannot make the case for truth being a species of the good, or at least, for the species of the good having any more connection with the historicist position than any of its opposites.

So what can we say, in conclusion?

Conclusion

This chapter had four broad sections – the first short and introductory, and the second introducing and summarising West's two arguments for strong historicism. Thereafter, the subsequent two sections each took a deeper look at one of these arguments, found textual evidence for it, put it into context, attempted to look at it sympathetically, and then rigorously critiqued it. In each case, the argument failed for not one but a number of reasons. The first argument fell for two reasons.¹¹⁵ The second fell for five, split into two distinct categories.¹¹⁶

We can say that we've found a point of departure between West's philosophy and potential routes our investigation chooses to take. While still able to follow his arguments, seeing how they shine a light on the important questions of ethics, faith, and non-absolutism, it becomes hard for us to accept the necessity of the kinds of relativism that strong historicism appears to instantiate, and which he therefore embraces so wholeheartedly. This avoidance of potentially vulgar forms of relativism

¹¹⁴ While Putnam (2004) may have disputed the fact / value distinction, we can at least offer this up as one possible powerful criticism of West among others. Time can be spent in a later paper exploring issues such as this.

¹¹⁵ The first being that West fails to provide a series of logical connections; the second being that he fails to show that a plurality of contexts means that we need a pluralist - or relativist - notion of truth.

¹¹⁶ These being that first West is offering something which he himself believes to be 'unregulated', 'anything goes', 'sophomoric' and 'vulgar'; something where we become unable to offer and prefer any single solution to any single problem; and that second, historicism has no exclusive claim to seeing truth as affective, that West fails to show that truth and value cannot be separated, that there is no necessary connection between truth and a species of the 'good', and that West's argument is viciously circular.

is something we return to later, in Chapter 5, and will allow us, as we shall see in that chapter, to dodge what West calls (1985a, p255) the 'relativistic traps' I argue he himself fails to sidestep.

We've seen West's position, we've seen the arguments he's given, and we've seen that these arguments fail. What he's constructed turns out to be insufficiently supported and unable to provide the social and philosophical solutions he demands. If he thought he'd provided good reasons to accept strong historicism, it transpires that he hadn't.

Chapter Three: Inequality Matters

For all that's gone before, the goal is still an important one, and one which I, as the author of this work, still share with West. There's equality to be won, hopelessness to be overcome, and structural oppression to be conquered. An incisive analysis such as West's is a powerful tool to get to the bottom of social and political problems, even if we are not to follow West uncritically, in an absolutely pure and unqualified fashion. Historicism still offers solutions. Or so we're told.

We've already seen West's arguments, and noted his conviction, that strong¹¹⁷ historicism is an indispensable weapon for tackling social injustice. But we've also seen that he fails to make the case for moving from weak to strong historicism, and that he fails to convince that strong historicism is the best tool for tackling the problems he claims are so pressing. We've also seen that strong historicism echoes vulgar relativism. Bearing in mind how important he feels strong historicism is, we should find this a cause for serious concern.

I now argue, further to this, for something even more problematic: that strong historicism *is of no use* in either identifying or alleviating social injustices. I present three lines of attack: that first, on strong historicism there can be no rational standards for distinguishing between different interpretations of the problems of the world; that second, the interpretations and solutions offered by strong historicism can be seen as false; that third, alternatively, the interpretations and solutions offered by strong historicism can be seen as *untrue* by virtue of being incomplete.

These attacks should each be questioned, however. In the second part of the chapter, I present, in turn, counter-arguments to each of them, each designed to show that the initial objections to strong historicism do not succeed. They challenge, one by one, the conclusions of the initial arguments and offer West's strong historicism a defence against the charges. I'll show, though, that from our point of view none of these counter-arguments succeeds in overturning the original objections. This being so, I'll show that strong historicism in the form that West has provided fails to tackle hardships, inequalities and hopelessness. In fact, it makes such things worse.

I conclude that therefore, that on this reading of West he is backed into a corner and he – along with anybody following him unquestioningly – must either give up his ambitions for social justice, or radically question strong historicism as his means of achieving it, for strong historicism cannot give him what he wants. To do this, I divide the chapter into two broad sections: the first involving our arguments against strong historicism; and the second involving the debate around these arguments. Finally I'll provide a conclusion summarising this work.

¹¹⁷ Sometimes called “thick”, sometimes “thoroughgoing”, sometimes “radical”... but always representing the same line of thought.

Let's now turn to the first of these sections, examining the arguments against strong historicism's claim to be the best standpoint to tackle social problems.

Part One: Against Strong Historicism

In this section I'll critically explore why historicism, which West relies on so heavily, isn't able to do the job he wants it to do, and therefore cannot do the job *we* need it to do. To remind ourselves: West wants people to take up strong historicism to enable them to analyse the problems of inequality and nihilism in the world, and find solutions to them.

I'll level three arguments against strong historicism being the right tool for the job. *First*, it can offer no rational standards for choosing between competing judgements of different communities, and therefore the historicist can't show why one possible analysis or solution to the problems of nihilism is better than its negation. This leaves people living a nihilistic existence no rational reason to choose one escape route over another. *Second*, I argue (using Boghossian, 2006, 2007) that not only are people offered choices with no rational standards to choose between them, but the truth-evaluable propositions offered by the strong historicist which might help people living lives of hopelessness and oppression, or which might help those in danger of falling into such life situations, are actually false, and therefore counter-productive and dangerous, offering only misleading solutions. *Third* and finally, I use Boghossian's work to show that even if one argued that the solutions offered by the strong historicist were not *false*, they're certainly incomplete, and therefore *untrue*. This would mean that the solutions were wholly inadequate.

We turn to the first argument, that strong historicism can offer no rational standards for choosing between competing analyses and solutions to the problems of nihilism in the world.

No Rational Standards

We've seen (West 1986a, and from both our previous chapters) that West recognises how rational standards are required if we're to be able to choose between different interpretations of the world, and analyses and solutions to social problems. Without these there's no regulation, relativism becomes vulgar¹¹⁸ and there'll be no rational judgements between competing viewpoints, only taste, fashion or prejudice (West, 1987b, 1999b, p253). He also argues that to have rational standards, common aims and purposes are necessary (see specifically 1986a, p269).

The problem is, we already know from reading West¹¹⁹ that he doesn't accept there are rational standards that could always be accepted by everybody in every culture, and whatever standards we use are relative to whatever operations of power have won out, those operations of power being the products of social, economic, racial and historical practices (West, 1987b). Any appeal to standards is effectively an act of

¹¹⁸ Remember, this is West's (1985a) word.

¹¹⁹ See West, 1980b, 1981, 1984a, 1985a, 1986a, 1989a, 1989c, 1998, and elsewhere.

politics. As he acknowledges (1980b), every time we make any claims about the world, we are – tacitly or openly – identifying ourselves with a particular historically conditioned community (West, 1988a, 1989a, 2004a). Standards need not be shared between communities, or even within the same community across historical epochs.

Strong historicism is, according to West's own definitions, unregulated: where different communities have different aims and purposes, and differing interpretations of the world around them, there can be no rational standards for choosing between these different theories and interpretations (West, 1985a, 1986a, 1991a, 1993b). Where the courts of appeal for what a community believes are the members of that community itself, there's nothing they can say to members of a different community to convince them that they're *right*, outside their being right *according to their particular framework*.

This becomes problematic for West. Let's imagine a world where people are currently living in a state of hopelessness, lovelessness, meaninglessness, desperation and crushing poverty (as West would argue many of the black community of the United States are). Or a world where people are heading towards such a state unless they can see what is happening and make choices to avoid it (such as, potentially, today's immigrants into Europe). Or a community where their choices could send them into poverty and hopelessness. What then? How would a strong historicist deal with this?

Being unable to offer rational standards for deciding which community's analyses or solutions are right, or even better than the competition, the strong historicist would be unable to rationally justify any of her analyses or solutions. Where the strong historicist can provide no rational standards for choosing between different judgements, and being unable to guarantee that one group's judgements are better than another group's, she can offer no help to the needy or desperate. If West's serious about addressing nihilism, then we should ask him what rational standards he can offer to show that his understanding of the issues, and his answers to them, are preferable to any others.

West tells us that America's riven by 'fundamental forms of social misery' (1993hh, p235), that it's a 'brute fact' (1993hh, p236) that widening inequalities are deeply ingrained into society (1993c, p284), and that it's *impossible* for a black person in modern America to avoid hardship and oppression. So problems already exist. People need solutions to the desperate straits they find themselves in, yet the critic is tempted to say that they cannot possibly believe in any solutions which come with the caveat that there's no way of telling whether they're better than any other solutions, or even any good at all.

To be faced with such a choice may well feel hopeless! It certainly offers no route out of despair that anybody would feel rationally justified in taking. To be in a society so fundamentally rent, as West (1987b, 1993j) argues it is, by hopelessness and nihilism, with a profound sense of 'psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair' (1993j, pp12-13), and then to be offered solutions with no rational standards to adjudicate between those and other options, could only add pressure to an already impossible situation, making it worse.

So by West's admission there can be no rational standards of adjudication between competing communities' solutions, and where, by the very structure of strong historicism (from the third thesis, of pluralism) there can be no way of judging which solutions are better than others, then West has a problem. For on the one hand, the strong historicist can offer no rational standards for judging between competing solutions to any given problem; while on the other, society's already riddled with problems of poverty and inequality. Where West wants to offer help to the hopeless, he's also be forced to admit that he can't rationally justify his solutions over anyone else's.

But one might argue that while offering no rational grounds for choosing between options, the historicist is still able to offer solutions. This is surely better, one might think, than no solutions at all.

False Solutions

Our next step accepts the first, but assumes that even so, arguments can be given – such as that the strong historicist can offer solutions, even if she offers no rational grounds for choosing between them – that undermine its force. What then? Can we assume that West's historicism does indeed sidestep the vulgar traps of forms of relativism? I suggest, on the reading I present here, not.

We recall that West's strong historicism can be mapped directly onto Boghossian's relativism, so we'll now apply some of Boghossian's arguments against relativism and show that strong historicism fails to sidestep them. Here, I'll focus on an argument demonstrating that a relativist's propositions will always be false.

The first step is to look upon the solutions to social problems that a relativist could offer as *truth-evaluable propositions*. This is unproblematic, as the solutions will certainly be propositions (or frameable as propositions), and will, if they're to be of use, be truth-evaluable.

We now remind ourselves of the thesis of relationism, which is both integral to moral and epistemic relativism, and to strong historicism. This that when the relativist says 'E justifies belief B' she's not to be understood as expressing the claim *E justifies belief B*, but as expressing the claim: *according to the system C, that I, S, accept, information E justifies belief B*. In the background of every relativist's assertion, she's saying: *it's not simply the case that E justifies belief B, because there are cases where it doesn't*. Such cases are where they're judged relative to different epistemic systems.

Let's take a moment to think about this. If it's correct, it becomes difficult to see how we can avoid making *any* judgements at all which don't come in some form akin to: *this is the case according to the epistemic or moral system I accept*. Taking the third thesis of pluralism, which West accepts, we're left with alternative systems, according to which, whatever is the case according to one system needn't be the case according to another. So our judgement becomes: *this is true according to the*

system I accept, but is false according to countless other systems which cannot be rationally justified as worse. In more natural language, the strong historicist is compelled to admit that her solutions to social problems will look something along the following lines:

Racism should be tackled at its very heart if we wish to combat inequality; and at the same time, this is also false.

What we see is that strong historicism (as relativism) commits us to saying that whatever our truth-evaluable propositions are, they're false. This being so, how can West expect anybody to take his solutions seriously, if hidden within them is the addendum "and this is false"?

If this analysis of relativism is correct, and the strong historicist can only come up with solutions that are false, this is enormously problematic. It's highly unlikely that false answers can provide any workable solution to the problems of nihilism, any more than they can provide solutions to mathematical problems or engineering challenges. False solutions are no solutions at all, and so nobody would want to turn to the historicist to seek pathways towards a better life.

A false solution to a problem is never *guaranteed* to work, and is indeed *likely* to fail. Accepting that the truth-evaluable propositions of the strong historicist are false means accepting that they'll probably fail. We should also consider that people who need to rely on answers to social challenges would be *prudent* to not trust answers given by the strong historicist, and where trust is absent, so too surely is hope. Doubt and uncertainty should accompany any solution offered, with such attitudes hindering any course of action.

Moreover, if the conclusions reached by the strong historicist are false, then no one can be justified in believing anything at all that she says. Suspension of belief would be the appropriate attitude to every proposition offered. From this, we should concede that we shouldn't believe any solution offered by the strong historicist whatsoever.

So if Boghossian's right, and the propositions of relativism are false, then the relativist would be forced to admit that her very analysis of the problem of inequality and nihilism was false too, which would run counter to the experiences of those people already living lives of meaningless and hopelessness. Not only the historicist's solutions, but her entire analysis of the problem, would collapse.

But it gets worse for West: the argument can be developed further still, for the frameworks within which the judgements are made are themselves sets of propositions or judgements. In effect, the frameworks are constructed out of general propositions. But if this is true, and they've been created from false truth-evaluable propositions, then these frameworks must also be false. It would be irrational for anyone to turn to such frameworks when looking for answers to important questions.

Boghossian gives an example illustrating this, writing of an epistemic system we can take to be false - a 'pre-scientific' framework unable to provide reliable scientific predictions.¹²⁰ Would anybody use such a system to build a cosmology, knowing it was false? Could that cosmology be relied upon? Would they attempt to find a cure for cancer using a system they knew to be false? Or to engineer a tall building in an earthquake zone? It seems equally unlikely that falsely grounded frameworks could provide any workable solutions to social and philosophical problems, to issues of racial inequality, or to problems of sexual violence. Where epistemic or moral frameworks are false, no one can be justified in believing anything that the adherents of such frameworks say. And where strong historicists are just those Boghossian-type relativists, no one is justified in believing anything that the strong historicist says.

It's finally worth considering that among the primary duties of social commentators (among whom West counts himself), social scientists and political activists (and West is certainly one of those), there has traditionally been the duty of *getting social reality right*, otherwise their advice can only lead to confusions, misdirections and potential misery. But strong historicists such as West don't count among their strengths the ability to *get reality right*, only offering sets of views of realities according to different frameworks; and where they offer false solutions, their ability to get reality right is clearly undermined. Those in need would be well advised to look elsewhere for help.

Untrue Solutions

There's a problem with the criticism we've just levelled at West's position, however. This is that it's not necessary to see relativists as offering *only* false truth-evaluable propositions. In other words, while saying that the truth-evaluable propositions of strong historicists are necessarily false would be a devastating critique of West's position, merely saying that they *can* be looked upon as false makes a far less damaging claim.

So how else can we look at the truth-evaluable propositions of Boghossian's relativist? Again, drawing on Boghossian (2006), we may look at them not as *false*, but as *incomplete*. Incomplete propositions need not be false (it may not be false to say that to drive a car you need to release the clutch, but it's still an incomplete description of how to drive a car) but they're still problematic.

First, let's see why the propositions of the relativist might be incomplete. We begin by recalling the structure of relativism as provided by Boghossian, particularly what we called the second thesis, of relationism.

If a person, S's, judgments are to have any prospect of being true, we must not construe her utterances of the form
'E justifies belief B'
as expressing the claim

¹²⁰ The story Boghossian relates is that of Bellarmine's quarrel with Galileo over whether the Copernican understanding of the solar system was correct on the one hand, or a pre-scientific religious understanding on the other.

E justifies belief B
but rather as expressing the claim
According to the system that I accept, information E justifies belief B (the
thesis of relationism)

So, in plain English, if West were to say:

'Racism should be tackled at its very heart if we wish to combat inequality'

we must really construe this as saying

*According to the system that I accept, racism should be tackled at its very
heart if we wish to combat inequality.*

Where a truth-evaluable proposition is incomplete, that is, it doesn't express a complete thought, it need not be false, but that still doesn't mean that it's true. Taking our car driving example, somebody learning to drive may well learn that she needs to release the clutch, but following such incomplete advice wouldn't mean she could begin her journey. It's *untrue* that "releasing the clutch means you can drive". So we see that when furnishing us with sets of incomplete truth-evaluable propositions, relativism cannot guarantee correct solutions to difficult questions, any more than someone could guarantee giving correct solutions to the problems of getting out of a minefield by only supplying half a map.

It becomes hard to see how anybody could accept a set of propositions she knew to be incomplete and untrue. Indeed, it's hard to see how anybody could accept a set of propositions designed to help them avoid nihilism when such propositions are untrue. Where propositions are offered as solutions to poverty, alienation, and inequality, asking anybody to accept them on the assumption that they're not true would be an act of desperation commensurate with the lowest forms of helplessness and nihilism. It would offer no hope, only adding to a sense of meaninglessness. Boghossian asks, what could possibly cause anybody to accept untrue solutions? From this, the relativist is faced with the realisation that nobody has any *good reason* to accept what she suggests.

But the point isn't simply that propositions such as "racism should be tackled at its heart if we wish to combat inequality" are incomplete. It's that they need to be completed, but completed with reference to a system that one accepts.¹²¹ Yet the systems within which the propositions or judgements are made are themselves sets of epistemic propositions or judgements. In effect, the systems are constructed out of general propositions. But if this is the case, these systems must also be incomplete, for where they've been created from incomplete truth-evaluable propositions (as we've seen, above), it's inevitable that they will themselves be incomplete. Therefore the propositions offered by the relativist are not only incomplete but cannot be complete if the attempt to complete them appeals to a system that's itself incomplete. The question of what would cause anybody to accept such solutions runs deeper than ever.

Furthermore, we see a dangerous regression, for if propositions which make up an epistemic or moral system are incomplete, they wouldn't actually constitute a conception of anything at all, and would need to be complete in order to do this job adequately; but in order to

¹²¹ *According to the moral system that I accept, E justifies B.*

complete them, the relativist would have to enter a seemingly infinite regression, for they'd have to be completed with reference to systems, which being made up of judgements and propositions, would themselves be incomplete and so need to be completed, presumably with reference to more systems... This would be inadequate for one hoping to offer help to the helpless and guidance to the lost. It's hard not to conclude that offering a solution to the dangers of nihilism that's not really anything at all is offering no solution.

This may seem bad for West, but there's more to be faced. For as the propositions that make up a system on the one hand, and the system itself on the other, are each incomplete, the phrase 'in relation to system C' becomes problematic. What sort of logical relation can we understand as holding between an incomplete proposition and an incomplete system? Where the relationship's unclear, statements like 'in relation to (or relative to) the [moral] system I accept, racism must be tackled if we're to combat inequality' become problematic and issues of confidence can arise when asking for the trust of those most in need. This is especially so accepting that being incomplete, something can be untrue, for saying 'relative to a moral system that's untrue...' gets us nowhere. And we're plunged into deeper trouble when we realise that our truth-evaluable proposition is also incorrect. Justifying an incorrect proposition with reference to an incorrect system cannot be any way out of social despair.

So where discussing the truth-evaluable propositions of the strong historicist, we find problems of trust; we find that solutions to nihilism and inequality shouldn't be based on theoretical ideas that we're not bound to accept; we find that if the truth-evaluable propositions of relativism are untrue, then the relativist should admit that her very analysis of the problem of nihilism was incomplete and untrue; and finally, as before, there remains the problem that among the primary duties of the social commentator is *getting social reality right*, which the relativist whose propositions are untrue and uncompleted certainly doesn't. Even assuming that people didn't *feel* that the solutions they were being asked to accept were incomplete and untrue, one has not to feel or know that a map is incomplete for the map to provide inadequate directions out of a forest. Incomplete moral, political or social solutions would fare no better.

I suggest that where propositions are incomplete, they guarantee no routes (and no confidence in routes) out of an existence of despair and hopelessness.

Initial Conclusions

We should conclude that as strong historicism is an articulation of Boghossian's relativism, and that such relativists can offer no rational standards for why one theory is better than another, and further, that West holds that it's community and participation that constitute the standards by which we adjudicate conflicting interpretations of the world, then strong historicism fails to be a reliable way of judging between analyses of society's problems and possible solutions to those problems, and that further, it fails to mitigate against further social ills or provide routes out of them.

We should also conclude that having examined the arguments, the strong historicist could only provide answers to society's problems that were in some way untrue, being either false or incomplete. Given this, it would be ill-advised for anybody to listen to anything the strong historicist says at all.

So our arguments *should* provide good reason to reject strong historicism as being equipped to tackle the social problems West believes are so pressing. This should motivate us to consider rejecting it as the tool West claims it to be: the tool most useful to permit the rational justification of moral claims in a world of inequality. However, we should guard against being so quick to judge, for while these arguments may well appear sound, each has a counter that must be examined. In the next section, I'll look at these counter-arguments, and examine whether they can rescue strong historicism's claim to be a philosophy that can help the helpless.

Part Two: Rescuing Historicism?

If what we've seen in the previous section is correct, it would appear to damage strong historicism beyond the point of usefulness, at least, as far as West wishes to use it, as the crucial tool in tackling inequality. If it's not, then there's still hope and West may be justified in promoting it, while we may be justified in directly following him.

In what follows, I intend first to lay out a strong objection to the "no rational standards" argument. I'll find this objection insufficient, however, and provide reasons not to accept it. I'll then outline a strong objection to the "false solutions" argument. Again, I'll show how this objection also fails, and suggest that we should reject it also. Thirdly I'll look at what I consider to be the strongest objections to the "untrue solutions" argument. I will, again, find these objections wanting, and reject them, leading me to conclude that even after the strongest objections have been raised to the arguments presented against strong historicism, strong historicism indeed looks like the wrong philosophy to adopt if we want to understand and tackle the problems of social injustice in the world. This being the case, at some point we would need to consider taking our leave of West's stated philosophy and come up with some novel ideas to augment his own important analysis.

So let's now examine the objections, and the responses to these objections, one by one.

Countering "No Rational Standards"

The first step is to find objections to the "no rational standards" argument against strong historicism, which said that while we need rational standards to adjudicate between competing theories or interpretations of the world, strong historicism can't provide them.

West himself is conscious of this argument, and attempts to deal with it when he writes:

Nor is my historicism reducible to vulgar relativism. There are rational standards to adjudicate between better and worse theories or interpretations, yet these standards are relative to our common aims and purposes.

Intersubjective agreement is requisite for feasible and effective standards. This does not mean that Reality is simply what people can agree on. Rather, it means that common aims and purposes are required if there are to be rational standards which help determine acceptable and unacceptable theories and interpretations.
(1986, p405)

Here we see two things: first, that West recognises that a failure to provide rational standards for adjudication would be a serious blow to his philosophy. It would lead, in his words, to 'vulgar relativism', something he sees (West, 1985a, 1986a, 1987b) as an "anything goes", unregulated view of the world, providing no rational grounds for deciding between effective or ineffective solutions to social problems. Second, we see that he believes he has an answer to the charge of unregulated relativism: intersubjective agreement, where common aims and purposes are required for finding rational standards to decide between competing theories.

The charge that we have laid against strong historicism is that it's unable to provide the rational grounds needed. West disputes this, saying that it does. So what's his thinking?

He's certainly conscious of the dangers of hopelessness, and inequality being 'parasitic on the failures of transcendental objectivism' (1993i, p131), believing that where 'vulgar' relativism allows no rational standards for choosing between options, hopelessness and other ills can easily follow. He argues (1986a) that rational standards are indeed required if we're to choose between different interpretations of the world, for without them, all that can be used to discriminate between competing viewpoints is taste and prejudice (1999, p253). To avoid this, he proposes that common aims and purposes within communities can provide the rational standards needed.

The question is: *where can we find these standards if no absolute standards exist?* The answer he suggests is that, whatever standards we do have are relative to the common aims and purposes of those applying them.

Here's where West appeals to Gadamer and Dewey. 'One can surely follow the historicism of Gadamer and Dewey and sidestep vulgar relativistic traps', he writes (1985a, p255), arguing that both Gadamer and Dewey focus on shared communal values which allow for common aims and purposes. For Dewey, he argues, social practice is the true measure we gauge the rationality of what we do against, with a form of cultural solidarity giving meaning to our judgements, allowing us to know right from wrong. Moral judgement, we're advised, is measured against the social environment (see Dewey, 1922a, 1922b), the hope being that falsehoods are rooted out through discourse and sense can be made of our opinions through the conceptual frameworks shared by us and our peers. The more we share ideas, the more opportunity there is for the community to moderate, accept, or advise against them.

Put in the vocabulary of Boghossian's relativism, while there are no absolute facts to

confirm or disconfirm absolute judgements, there would instead be a participatory democratic community to confirm or disconfirm them. One could still champion some form of moral or epistemic relativism, but it wouldn't be unregulated, because it would be regulated by a critically intelligent society.

For Dewey (1922b), this society is made up of individuals who are neither constituted selfishly nor altruistically prior to their community life, but whose characters, moral dispositions and sensibilities are in large part formed by the type of community they participate in. These members of the community find that there's not much disparity between their respective worldviews, as these worldviews are formed by participation and immersion in the community.

Gadamer, also, in West's view, believes there's a solidarity between people which provides the secure basis for our judgements (Gadamer, 1975, 2001). He holds that solidarity is natural (Gadamer, 2001). For him, as for Dewey, there are different traditions within which we operate; and these set the contexts for enquiry and interpretation. As with Dewey, they determine which questions are worthwhile, which methods of deciding are acceptable, and what counts as a good answer (Gadamer, 1975, see also Wachterhauser, 2002). Since different communities obviously communicate with each other, Gadamer (2001) rejects the notion that each community could differ so radically that there could be no meaningful discourse between them.

It seems plausible that he was right to reject such incommensurability, for the fact that there are different traditions doesn't mean we can't reach out to them, communicate with them, and find solidarities common to all. The fact that we can communicate across cultures with people we might imagine very different from ourselves gives strong indication of this. We don't need to *invent* solidarities between peoples, we become aware of them. It's these solidarities, alongside shared social and historical contexts and environments, that West (1988a) believes provide the common aims and purposes that stop relativism becoming vulgar.

So rational standards are important, and on the view that West supports, they can be located within the common aims and purposes of a participatory community. But to accept this uncritically would be to miss the force of the original argument against relativism, for there are many possible communities, and many different demographics within them (see West, 1986a). What's more, regardless of the fact that they can theoretically communicate with each other, there's nothing in West's writings that shows him seriously considering whether every community shares the same sets of common aims or purposes. The ability to communicate with each other says nothing about the potential for regulating against vulgar relativism.¹²²

¹²² After all, many peoples – and more than just people – can communicate with each other. Humans can communicate with animals, as can different species of animal communicate with one another. Certain species of plant, according to some theories, can communicate with each other. One might say that a piece of music “communicates” with us. This ability to communicate seems irrelevant to the bigger philosophical point of whether communication can guard against unregulated epistemic relativism. One feels that West has focused on a red herring.

Not only is it intuitively implausible that they do have the same common aims and purposes, but evidence shows us that the opposite is true.¹²³ West himself gives his own examples: the predominant concepts, he tells us, of secular scientific communities 'are inseparable from the aims and purposes' (West, 1986a, p268) of these communities; just as the predominant concepts of religious realists are 'inseparable from the aims and purposes of those communities' (West, 1986a, p269); and these aims and purposes are categorically different.

Where West believes that rational standards are found in common aims and purposes, the strong historicist must accept that there are different communities with different aims and purposes. She must also remember Boghossian's thesis of pluralism and accept that there are no rational standards to show that one community's epistemic or moral claim is better than another community's. In short, she must accept that she's unable to produce any rational standards others would be bound to accept for choosing one set of interpretations over another, and that she's left with precisely the same problem as the vulgar relativist West was trying to differentiate himself from. The fact that the regulation comes from within a community doesn't mean that any of the significant difficulties associated with the "no rational standards" problem has been circumvented. West is left vulnerable.

Countering "False Solutions"

The charge laid against strong historicism was, broadly speaking, that as any analysis or solution that the strong historicist came up with would only be true according to one or other framework, it would also, relative to other frameworks, be false. The strong historicist would have therefore to admit that her truth-evaluable propositions were all false. False solutions being unacceptable ones.

The objection I find most powerful to this argument was raised by Ram Neta (2007), who grants that relativism fails if it consists of sets of untrue propositions. Where he objects, is whether it does consist of false propositions.

According to the argument against strong historicism, if the historicist is compelled to accept that that her judgements are each false, she must also hold that the frameworks are also false, being constructed of general judgements. The chain looks like this:

¹²³ We see traditional religious states in some parts of the Arab world having completely different aims and purposes when it comes to investigating the origins of life on earth (should they wish to do this) from those of secular Western scientific bodies (where as an uninformed guess, we could say that one may wish to offer a categorised taxonomy of some sort; the other may wish to offer praise for good works performed and gifts given); we see some religious fundamentalist schools in Europe and the United States teaching that scientific evidence is not to be accepted over Creationist accounts (given through experiences of the word of God) in science lessons; we see some Catholics choosing dogma over scientific enquiry where secular scientists choose scientific enquiry over dogma when asking questions of what constitutes life when issues of abortion are at stake. In choosing these examples I have deliberately echoed Boghossian's (2006) example of the religious man Bellarmine, coming to epistemic blows with the scientifically-minded Galileo, for in telling this story, Boghossian was keen to use it as an example of, among other things, different epistemic systems coming into contact.

Where the particular judgements are false, the general judgements are false.
Where the general judgements are false, the systems are false.

Here we are asked, *how could the strong historicist accept one framework to the exclusion of alternatives*, accepting that she believes them to be composed of judgements which are, seen from an observer's point of view at least, false? Neta's answer is simple and appealing.

The solution he proposes is that just as a grammar has normative authority only for those people who speak it,¹²⁴ indeed does so *by virtue of* their speaking it, then so could a moral relativist make a similar point about moral systems. A moral system has normative authority for those who use it. Indeed, it has such authority by virtue of being used.

In other words, in a world of grammatical relativism, our grammar has normative force for us because we use it (and it works). We justify our grammatical judgements (Neta, 2007) according to the grammatical system they're constructed within. By the same token, we already use a moral system, it works well for us, and it allows us to justify the moral judgements we make within it. One can sum Neta's position up as:

According to this very judgement: p

Simply put, we have all the normative grounds we need for accepting our truth-evaluable propositions because they're relative to systems which we use and which work. Successfully using our system in a way that's effective for us, is what gives the system its normative appeal. We can add that such an outlook would appeal on an intuitive level to anyone with a pragmatist inclination; our judgements would effectively be self-verifying, and they'd avoid the traps of the thesis of absolutism.

This looks promising as a counter to the "false solutions" argument against strong historicism. Boghossian, whose epistemic relativism was used by Neta as the basis for his paper, agrees. Such a judgement is certain to be true, he admits (Boghossian, 2007), because it is indeed self-verifying. Furthermore, it avoids falling foul of the thesis of non-absolutism, and has normative force for us. In these ways, it certainly looks like it has value.

But Boghossian asks an interesting question. Accepting that such self-verifying judgements are true, and that they don't contravene the thesis of non-absolutism, accepting that they have normative force for the relativist, and then accepting that they don't violate the thesis of pluralism: what is it that would stop someone accepting more than just the one framework? Why couldn't somebody accept them *all*?

It turns out that Neta's strategy works for an unlimited number of propositions. That being so, an unlimited number of propositions, regardless of how much one contradicts another, should also be acceptable, and accepted, as true. Effectively,

¹²⁴ He also argues that grammatical relativity is correct.

Neta has replaced “vulgar relativism” with “vulgar pluralism”: he’s unable to say why we shouldn’t accept each and every possible system available.¹²⁵

We must ask, if the historicist is unable to give an account of why one shouldn’t accept each and every possible system available, how can she offer any kind of answer to the problems of hopelessness and misery that exist in the ghettos West wishes to help? For in offering one solution, she’d have to admit that any solution that negates hers is equally valid. In offering solutions based on love, she’d have to admit that solutions based on hate could be equally justified. This would be worse than offering no solutions at all, leading to confusion and new levels of distress.

But she’d also need to accept that her very analysis of the problems of nihilism was no more justified than the analyses of others with contradictory ideas. The response Neta gives to the “false solutions” argument seems to do nothing but make relativism so promiscuous¹²⁶ that it becomes disastrous.

Countering “Untrue Solutions”

In order to understand a particularly interesting counter to Boghossian's charge that epistemic relativism generates untrue (rather than false) solutions, we turn to Gideon Rosen (2007). Rosen's response to Boghossian's attacks on epistemic¹²⁷ relativism differ from Neta's, and are intriguing in different ways. Rosen takes seriously the question: *what could cause us to accept an incomplete proposition or system?*

One of his more interesting strategies is to suggest that while it’s impossible to explain the acceptance of an epistemic system in terms of beliefs,¹²⁸ or on epistemic grounds, there are other ways that accepting such a thing can be understood. Rosen believes that we can say: ‘saying West accepts an epistemic system says that we mean he’s *ipso facto* committed to the system of rules for belief formation and revision which goes hand-in-hand with the epistemic system’.

In an attempt to circumvent any potential vicious regress, one needn’t commit to epistemic imperatives as the only reason to accept the rules, as that would risk having to explain away the problems associated with them before any progress could be made. There can be many different reasons for accepting an imperative, he suggests. For instance:

Every first-order doxastic imperative of the form

If for some e,f(e,h), then believe h

¹²⁵ I don’t wish to enter into a technical discussion of pluralism here. It’s enough to sketch a very simple outline of epistemic and moral pluralism, such that the pluralist might say: “All of these propositions – indeed all of the frameworks they are made within – are correct”. As Boghossian (2007) says, ‘on Neta’s view, the puzzle is [...] to explain why someone wouldn’t have to accept all possible epistemic systems’ (see James, 1909, Turkle and Papert, 1991, Boghossian, 2007, Shaffer, 2009).

¹²⁶ This is West's (1985a) word.

¹²⁷ Broadly the same arguments work with moral relativism.

¹²⁸ - which Boghossian pointed out, might become regressive.

Is associated with a *reliability claim*. This might be a simple conditional

If for some $e, f(e, h)$, then h ,

Or some hedged generic or probabilistic variant thereof [...] A doxastic imperative is epistemic for a given agent when it is grounded in its corresponding reliability claim for that agent, or in other words, when the agent is committed, by his acceptance of a higher-order imperative, to rejecting the doxastic imperative should he discover the corresponding reliability claim to be false.

(Rosen, 2007, p20).

So there may be, on this view, non-epistemic imperatival commitments lurking within the epistemic claims. This way, Rosen attempts to avoid the difficulties associated with epistemic claims and provide an answer to the question of why anybody should accept an incomplete epistemic proposition.

He then says that in any case, where an epistemic relativist says that we have reason to choose one set of propositions over another because we can locate normativity within them, he may be able to justify this by appealing to the first-personal nature of a judgement or proposition. As he says, he wishes to 'vindicate the normativity of [some kinds of] epistemic judgment' (Rosen, 2007, p25).

He takes as an example where

E justifies H relative to C

tacitly expresses the proposition

E justifies H relative to the system *that I (or we) accept*.

This, he argues, is essentially first-personal (2007, p26). Being such, it contains some sort of 'normative "force"' (*ibid*), although he admits that he's not quite sure how to formulate this.

But it turns out that the answer isn't quite so simple. Boghossian understands what's being said, but takes Rosen's earlier point first, replying that in saying that the agent – the one who accepts a particular epistemic system in question – is *committed* by an acceptance of a higher-order imperative to rejecting a doxastic imperative 'should he discover that the corresponding reliability claim is false', Rosen means, in Boghossian's (2007) view, that he is *rationally* committed to that course of action. And this rational commitment runs dangerously (possibly inseparably) close to requiring some form of absolute standards (or, perhaps, the standards would be relativised to some or other system, generating a vicious regress). To make matters worse, rationality certainly appears to look for an epistemic system against which we judge something to be rational or otherwise.

There's also the issue of a potential confusion over the phrase 'should he discover

that the corresponding reliability claim is false'. It's unlikely Rosen means anything other than false "from an epistemic standpoint", which simply begs the question.¹²⁹

There's also another problem raised by Rosen's answer, which concerns Boghossian's thesis of pluralism. If we remember, this states that

There are many fundamentally different, genuinely alternative [epistemic / moral / grammatical ...] systems, but no facts by virtue of which one of these systems is more correct than any of the others.

Once the thesis of pluralism is accepted, we need to stand it next to the requirement for a reliability claim, and ask whether they're compatible. For if Rosen's epistemic relativist accepts a particular epistemic system because it delivers reliable beliefs, then we should ask whether other systems also deliver reliable beliefs, because if they do, Rosen's relativist is left with the problem of being unable to recommend one system over another, and if they don't, he's fallen foul of the thesis of pluralism.

Furthermore, turning to Rosen's discussion of first-personal claims, Boghossian argues that where Rosen tries to locate normativity¹³⁰ in the relativist's epistemic statements, he fails. So where Rosen argues that the relativist saying

According to the epistemic system, *C*, that I accept, *E* justifies *H*

makes neither a psychological nor a logical claim but a normative one, he needs to say something more. Because that type of first-personal statement looks far from normative, but simply *descriptive*. Boghossian points out:

A really clear case of a judgement's being normative is that its content *analytically* implies an ought statement or a reason statement. And [the kind of judgement Rosen has given us] doesn't do that (Boghossian, 2007, p57, emphasis in original).

To beef out what he means, Boghossian adds:

The proposition that 'It's raining', along with the proposition that 'If it's raining, then I have reason to take an umbrella,' entails that I have reason to take an umbrella. But it would be absurd to say that the judgement that it's raining is normative.

¹²⁹ Even where the standpoint might be other than an epistemic one, a global relativist of the type exemplified by West would find any relativisation problematic.

¹³⁰ If there were any doubt that Rosen wishes to discover normativity in the epistemic relativist's propositions, we need only turn to his paper for evidence: 'of course there is a real problem. It is a problem about *what a speaker says or thinks* when he makes an epistemic remark or thinks an epistemic thought. When Galileo says '*E* justifies *H*', this is not merely a psychological remark [...] It is a *normative* remark' (Rosen, p21, emphases in original); and he asserts that 'Claims about epistemic justification are paradigmatic normative claims' (*ibid*), saying that this is undeniable; and 'in the mouth of someone who accepts those imperatives, the remark has an unmistakably normative flavor' (*ibid*). The examples go on. Rosen indisputably wants normativity in the claims of the epistemic relativist.

Boghossian is right in this. Try as he might, and ingeniously as he does, Rosen fails to show any meaningful normativity. In fact, while Rosen's discussion of the problems Boghossian identified with epistemic relativism was fascinating, it's difficult to agree that he counteracted them.

In all, we've identified powerful arguments against West's strong historicism, and seen how they'd undermine it if successful; and while they're not without criticism, such criticisms do nothing to significantly damage these arguments. The upshot of this is that the *untrue solutions* charge against strong historicism holds, and West – or any strong historicist – must provide some answer.

Conclusion

After raising our three broad and extremely damaging arguments against the viability of West's strong historicism, West needed to be able to provide strong objections to these arguments. These arguments were either not forthcoming or not strong enough. Let's very briefly recap what they were.

First, the charge was that strong historicism could provide no rational standards for choosing between competing interpretations of the world. The objection to this was that there could indeed be rational standards, but that these standards were not absolute, they were agreed upon by members of a democratic community. But as we saw, West himself recognises that there could be any number of such communities, each with completely differing views, standards and frameworks. And this - taking Boghossian's thesis of pluralism - shows that there are no rational standards for choosing between each of these communities' frameworks. As such, West is back at square one.

The second charge was that the truth-evaluable propositions of the strong historicist could be looked upon as false. This being the case, she'd be unable to offer any compelling solutions to anything. The response to this was that just as we can accept our grammatical systems have normative force for us *because we use them and they work*, so will our epistemic or moral systems have normative force for us because we use them and they work. The judgement

According to this very judgement: p

would be true because it's self-verifying, and would have normative force for those who use it. But it turns out that this isn't a sufficiently good solution, because the same could be said within *any* system. There seems nothing to stop someone accepting more than just the one framework, because there could be an unlimited number of equally acceptable frameworks. Again, the strong historicist is left unable to persuade the doubter that her understandings of and solutions to society's problems are the ones to choose.

The third of the three indictments was that the truth-evaluable propositions of the strong historicist are incomplete. The question is asked, 'why on earth would

anybody accept an incomplete proposition or system?' The reply came from Gideon Rosen, who responded that there could be non-epistemic normativity lurking within the epistemic claims, circumventing problems associated with incomplete epistemic systems. But the problem with Rosen's suggestion is that first, the normativity doesn't really turn out to be non-epistemic, and second, Rosen's desired first-personal "non-epistemic normativity" turns out not to be normative at all. So fascinating as it is, Rosen's reply failed to address the charge laid at the strong historicist's door.

Overall, there are three basic categories of argument against West's position, which, if correct, are strong enough to undermine it. We examined each of them, and then turned to the counterarguments against them. However, in looking at these counterarguments, we saw that they weren't strong enough to rescue West's position. The conclusion is that the original arguments do indeed combine to undermine his stance (at least, as far as we've been able to examine them). And while it may be that West himself doesn't find these arguments problematic – one gets the feeling he may simply brush past them because of his commitment to what he sees as the ethical efficacy of historicism¹³¹ – they're still challenging to those of us who recognise that if we're to tackle ethical problems from a non-absolutist position, we have to be able to secure this position against those who attack it.

But this isn't the worst of it. At least, West's able to contribute significantly to the political conversation around social disenfranchisement and nihilism, and while his analysis may ultimately be incorrect it nevertheless reminds us powerfully of the structural inequalities in the world we occupy. But we'll now see that one of the three points of the triangle we discussed at the beginning of our investigation, one of the core perspectives which we're looking to accommodate in our worldview, and one of the existentially- and ethically-important positions which is dearly shared by billions of people around the world, itself now seems to become fragile when seen through a historicist lens.

Indeed, one of the main pillars grounding not only this author's, but West's, ethical thought – which I referenced towards the very beginning of Chapter 1 – and which is so dear not only to his social thinking but to his entire life, and which he locates as central to his project of offering hope to the hopeless, appears to collapse when viewed from a strong historicism perspective. I show that the very reason for West's social concerns dissolves when subjected to philosophical investigation. What follows are matters of grave concern for Cornel West, and also for those following – and trying to work with – his arguments.

¹³¹ This is merely a personal observation, prompted in part by West's passionate commitment to historicism in the face of the potential for the kinds of problems identified in this investigation, and a conversation with Mark David Wood.

Chapter Four: Faith Matters

This chapter gets to the very heart of this author's – and indeed West's – philosophy of love and equality, but it also identifies, investigates and exposes the major flaws in his thinking. I argue that his religious faith underpins his desire for social justice, just as it does for the author of this work, and that God, especially God in the person of Jesus Christ, acts as the lens through which he views the problems, but also the possibility of *hope*, in the world. Without that, his philosophy of social justice loses its firmest grounding, and his social hope loses its optimism. As a Christian who believes in redemption, West calls himself, over and over again, a 'prisoner of hope'.¹³² For West, and so for our own investigation, faith really does matter. In fact it's central for West, as we'll learn during the course of this chapter.

The chapter builds as follows. In Part One, I examine West's religious position with two areas of interest. Initially I seek to show why religion is important to him (and the critical place it takes among his other views); then I show what shape his religious faith takes. In Part Two, I raise objections to this brand of religious faith. Using the critiques of Yancy (2001) and Wieseltier (2001), I show that West's historicist view of religion is riddled with problems. So much so, in fact, that the historicism he grounds it in is the very thing that undermines it. In effect, West's strong historicism weakens his religious faith to such an extent that this religious faith cannot act as the basis for anything at all. In the third and final part of the chapter, I draw upon remarks West makes with a view to examining a possible response he might give to Yancy and Wieseltier, but conclude that this response is neither sufficient, nor properly grounded in West's own published work. In fact, I show that he should recognise it as *idolatrous*.

The sections dealing with West's views will be heavily textual, to ensure that the reader has a full grasp of the issues we're dealing with, but they'll also act as a platform for discussion as the chapter progresses. Throughout, it will be of the utmost importance that we understand all matters of concern as comprehensively as possible, notwithstanding West's sometimes rhetorical language. To add weight to my interpretations, I call upon other commentators on West's religious work, concluding that my own criticisms are not at all idiosyncratic, supported by the majority of analysts. The textual nature of this inquiry gives way, early enough, to philosophical investigations.

I share a Christian faith with West. This investigation is, to some extent, rooted in questions of how Christianity can retain its integrity¹³³ from a non-absolutist standpoint. That faith matters to a Christian is normally taken or granted. But what that faith looks like is less often examined. If we're to take West seriously, we have to

¹³² Cornel West, commencement address at Wesleyan College, 1993. See for instance West, 2013a for a reference on this hard-to-pin-down quotation. Alternatively versions of it can be found on his Facebook page (e.g. <https://www.facebook.com/drcornelwest/posts/124970737520086>).

¹³³ I use this word loosely. 'Integrity' can be taken to mean, variously, 'internal coherence', 'importance as a worldview', and even 'personal satisfaction'. Remember, few Christians – this author among them – would feel wholly comfortable arguing for example that "God is good... and yet he also isn't".

take seriously what he takes seriously. Matters of faith, as we'll see, are central. So let's first ask why this is so, and fill in the important details.

Part One – A Matter of Faith

First, Why Faith Matters

If we ask why faith matters to West, the natural place to begin is with West himself. So, accepting as we have, his heartfelt focus on helping improve the lives of the downtrodden, we see (West, 1984a) how insistent he is that to properly understand and tackle political issues, and to participate in political discourse, we must engage in a serious way with religion and religious thought. Indeed, the relationships that hold between 'religion and politics [are] now at center stage in [...] public discourse' (West, 1984c, p22). And 'to be religious, especially Christian, is to be political', he adds (1984c, p24).

At the very least, Christianity 'provides invaluable resources for' taking seriously 'Marxism, feminism, Garveyism, ecologism, and antimilitarism' he asserts, to name but a few of the issues important to his heart (West, 1983, p29). A Christian worldview and analysis is 'unique', (1986b, p120), containing intellectual resources more secular worldviews cannot, namely, of hope, of an all-inclusive distinct valuing of every one of us, and of a going-beyond-the-present.¹³⁴ Human dignity isn't just a matter of personal judgement, it's 'God-given', (1986b, p112),¹³⁵ indicating that there's something special to Christian thinking about it. To be a Christian is to look at the world through the eyes of its victims and the lens of the Cross and take suffering as primary. On the other hand, the hope of the coming kingdom of Christ helps ward off the despair of nihilism; but its historical view, highlighting 'critical, historical, and universal consciousness', with its 'processive view of life and history' (*ibid*), allows Christians to have a profound platform from which they can understand world historical events.

One of the identifying features of Christian intellectualism is that its thinking often (although he admits, not exclusively) consists of accenting 'ethical accountability and political fruition' (1984e, p271), as it deals with the unavoidably social message of Jesus. As he sees it, there's an 'inescapable and intimate relation between Christian reflection and [...] systemic social analysis', he writes (1986b, p112). This isn't an observation that should be restricted to intellectuals alone. Any Christian who reflects upon the world from a Christian perspective deals in some way with social analysis. One of the aspects of the crisis that West sees besetting the lives of black Americans stems from a spiritual and religious crisis, as church leaders have failed to respond adequately to societal influences and religion becomes less relevant (and less immediate) to the man and woman in the street (sometimes literally, living on the streets). To muster a proper response, the spiritual needs of the people must be addressed, he argues. The black church can offer insights secular thought cannot grasp, contributing uniquely to the conversation on nihilism (1984d, 1984f). And we

¹³⁴ As we will see in Chapter 7, this is a sentiment echoed by Williams (1998).

¹³⁵ He adds that we're all created in the image of God.

can even say, following West, that 'there's a sense in which our secular brothers and sisters are building on our religious capital' (2011b).¹³⁶

I should point out here that I'm not the only one to notice this overriding characteristic of West's view. Copeland notes that West shared a 'black theology' where the 'earliest conceptions of black theology had thematized three basic claims: that God sides with and acts on behalf of the poor and oppressed; that religion possesses subversive as well as opiate potential in the struggle for liberation; and that white racism is at the core of an exploitative capitalist society' (Copeland, 2001, p161). Copeland notes that while West believes black theology doesn't have all the answers, he agrees that it asks the right questions. As such, West accepts the challenge of black theology, to critique structures that oppress the poor and vulnerable, indeed all those on the underside of society. For West, what marks religion out is what it does, how it does it, and the unparalleled frames of reference it approaches its questions from.

Second, What Matters

So religion matters, at least in one respect, because it addresses the pressing concerns of social and economic deprivation. By its very nature, it engages with social and political issues, demands that religious people stare straight into the 'filthy, fallen world' we inhabit,¹³⁷ offers perspectives that secular standpoints can't. All very impressive, we might agree. Even those religiously uninclined might think that West has a point about this.¹³⁸

But there's a question that remains unanswered: *just what is it that West is talking about when he discusses religion, faith, and God?* Until we know this, it's difficult to judge what it is he thinks makes a contribution to social and political dialogue, let alone gauge how much of a contribution, if indeed any, it does make. It's also difficult for us to judge just how far we can follow him in his religious views. For West, religion – involving a belief in and engagement with God, and especially Jesus Christ – is an invaluable position from which we can tackle our ills. As we'll see shortly, it's also important to him on a personal level. We need to know more than simply that it's *religion*, or *seeing the world from the perspective of the Cross*, which is so important. We need to understand what this *means* for him. To do this, we'll occasionally turn for support (and a fresh pair of eyes) to others who've researched these subjects, notably Anderson (2001), Young (2001), and Cowan (2003). These are each authorities on their subjects and provide invaluable insights into our own considerations.

Religion Matters?

West's religion is a "worldview", he writes (1982a, p16) more than a personal practice, where underlying everything is that *everyone*, regardless of social status, creed,

¹³⁶ West doesn't say which sense exactly.

¹³⁷ This is a phrase he uses more than once. See for instance 1980b.

¹³⁸ Even where we note religion's hand in oppression and slavery, it's hard to argue that religion doesn't offer a different perspective on life's difficulties from areligious viewpoints.

colour or sexual / gender orientation 'should have the opportunity to fulfil his or her potentialities' (*ibid*). This version of Christianity needs contextualising. For him, truth in religious discourse is about making sense of human life and providing answers to deep-seated existential questions in the context of personal and collective hardship.¹³⁹ Religious narratives provide tools for the faithful to do this. A religious attitude becomes an ethical attitude, such that the world is seen through the eyes of the victim, because of the story of Jesus Christ.

West's faith 'shores [him] up against the ruins in our world' (West, 1988c, pxi). Religious experience – West doesn't explicitly explain what this is – illuminates 'the most basic feature of human existence, namely, the need to cope with powerlessness, helplessness, weakness, and frailty' (1986d, p217). He writes here that what's at stake is our sanity. Religion helps us cope with being flawed and powerless in the face of crisis, or failures in the face of injustice. Faith, for West, is more than a disposition, or a feeling of trust or love or commitment; and far more (if at all) than an acceptance of propositions; it has a purpose. God may well save us ultimately, but it's religion which saves us in the here-and-now.

We might even note that truth in religious discourse for West is 'not a question of epistemic justification' (Anderson, 2001, p143), rather, theological descriptions are true as far as they make sense of life, sustaining us against the crises that describe the broken world around us. Anderson echoes a theme we've touched upon: theological truth is measured by the existential satisfaction it provides, where theological and religious claims are 'responses to discrete religious communities' (*ibid*).¹⁴⁰ Consistent with his strong historicism, Anderson notes West's minimalist conception of transcendence which comes very close to reducing transcendence to immanence and Christian faith to radical democracy (see Anderson). Here, West's Christianity is an ethical disposition towards humility and kindness, a working towards ethical norms of equality and inclusiveness, and an identification with the weak.¹⁴¹

Cowan (2003) agrees. On her interpretation, West's Christianity takes political activism in the name of truth, humility, and love, as central. God's kingdom is equated with the quest for social justice, where Christianity is a social critique. Here - God identifies with, loves, and wants to liberate the downtrodden – any Christian interpretation which doesn't include a social critique at its heart is simply not biblical, authentic to the nature of Christ, or "Godly". On the one hand, God identifies with social justice; while on the other, we're asked to identify, in some way, social justice *with* God.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ We'll see presently that both West (1980b, 1985a, 1986a, 1986d, 1988c) and Anderson (2001) write how the truth of a theological statement is judged in terms of the comfort and existential satisfaction that it provides.

¹⁴⁰ Compare with West, 1985a, p253.

¹⁴¹ West explains that "evil" means nothing outside the existential suffering of those caught up in poverty, political upheaval, and other crises.

¹⁴² This theme is repeated over and over again in West. See for instance his interview with Craig Ferguson (2010a): 'It's not about dogma and doctrine, it's about the love and all the rest is just sounding brass and tinkling cymbal [...] And it's the quality of your service to the least of these... [Look at the] twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew [The] religion that I'm talking about is maladjusted to greed, [...] it's maladjusted to indifference' –

This said, it's not yet clear what West means when he talks about God.¹⁴³ And where his faith is unequivocally theistic,¹⁴⁴ it'll be illuminating to see what he means when he discusses God. So it's to this that we now turn.

God Matters?

West actually makes several attempts to convey his conception of God to his readers.¹⁴⁵ It's interesting that he finds modern¹⁴⁶ theological claims about the reality of God problematic. Most of them fail, in his opinion, to provide any convincing answers to any important questions at all.

For him, the historicist turn in theological thought highlights the notion that the propositions we make about God are less interesting than the processes we go through, and the influences which operate on those processes, to *produce* those propositions.

Concepts like "God" are neither transcendent nor non-historical. Indeed, once strong historicism is adopted, we find that 'the historicist / transcendentalist controversy [in the philosophy of religion] is [...] quite possibly an insoluble one' (West, 1980c, p226 – see also p232), and transcendentalism should be discarded. Ontological considerations also become distracting, and theology shouldn't be grounded in them. Instead, theology and reflections on God's nature should stick closely to first-personal religious experience – something we'll return to later in our investigation, and which will emerge as key to unlocking one of the thorniest problems the ethical non-absolutist faces.¹⁴⁷ Put simply,¹⁴⁸ theology should be more concerned with the subjective than the objective.¹⁴⁹ Consistent with strong historicism, West also holds that we should be anti-foundationalists in our God-talk.¹⁵⁰ After all, there is, for him, no indisputable, irreducible, elemental fact from which our theologising proceeds. All discussions come laced with first-personal viewpoints, shared assumptions, cultural preconceptions, subjective curiosities, and concept-laden ideas (see 1980c and 1981).

interview available online at <http://www.onlinefellowship.org/2010/11/06/dr-cornel-west-discusses-christianity-with-craig-ferguson-late-show-11052010/>

¹⁴³ Whatever else he would say here, West certainly deconstructs metaphysics and ontologies in religious discourse, as we can see in West, 1986a, and Anderson, 2001, as just two examples.

¹⁴⁴ It clearly is (see for instance West, 1980b, 1982a, 1986a, and elsewhere).

¹⁴⁵ We only need to peruse the literature to confirm this: for instance, we see him writing about how to understand our concept of God in a number of places (see West, 1980b, 1980c, 1986d, 1988a, and elsewhere).

¹⁴⁶ We must be careful with this word when we read a person's back-catalogue. In this case, we're referring to his piece On Sharon D Welch (West 1988a).

¹⁴⁷ More on this in Chapter 7.

¹⁴⁸ Hopefully not too cartoonishly though.

¹⁴⁹ It should be noted that West isn't entirely unambiguous about this, notwithstanding his generally consistent view. In *Critical Theory and Christian Faith* (1986b) he says that human dignity is 'God-given' (1986b, p12), indicating that perhaps there is something extra-social about his conception of God. In this piece, he views Christianity as involving at its heart an all-inclusive moral outlook, seeing morality as universal, and acknowledging that all human beings have equal status, being endowed with such by God. Elsewhere, in *Prophetic Thought and Progressive Marxism*, he writes tantalisingly about 'the reality of Jesus Christ' and that 'Jesus Christ is literally the Truth, that Truth which cannot be intellectually reified but rather existentially appropriated by finite human beings' (West, 1982aa, p98 - note the "large T" truths here). Whatever he means by this, his normally single-mindedly strong historicism isn't unequivocally obvious.

¹⁵⁰ Compare with West 1980c.

Hence, West's inclined towards understanding the Bible, and consequently all descriptions of God within it, as narrative, on a par with all other texts, and hence open to literary critical analysis. Descriptions of God become radically indeterminate; the first-personal interpretive aspect of *reading* the Bible is highlighted over any biblical descriptions themselves; and philosophical realism is dispensed with (see 1982c and 1986a), along with a casting aside of any form of supernaturalism and non-naturalism. One must remember that whatever the Bible tells us, rather than being divinely inspired, is simply so many particular communities' responses to events of their historical, geographic, and political contexts, remembering that such communities had their own preconceptions, prejudices, interests, and ideas of what is and is not of more or less importance (see West, 1982c, 1985a).

This applies to any description of God, Christ, Christ's divinity, the Passion narrative, miracles, and indeed everything else besides. And we know from Chapter One that West believes that any interpretation we have of any of this is grounded in the frameworks of those doing the interpreting. This does mean, and West admits as much, that following the historicist route¹⁵¹ ultimately sacrifices 'the Christian locus of truth and justification' (West, 1985a, p255). God and Christ become suffused with the constructs of the communities writing about them, and any propositions about them are formed from the concepts of the communities thinking about them. The Bible doesn't give us anything 'Objective' (1985a, p253), but is filled with 'pastorally engaged responses to particular circumstances' (*ibid*) – although why pastorally engaged responses to circumstances can't give us anything objective isn't clarified. We can safely assume, however, that they're the same reasons explored in Chapter Two.

Instead of accessing what West seemingly derisively calls "Large T Truths" (2004b, 2009, 2013), when discussing the truth of God claims, West's Christianity has descriptions of God which provide existential insights or tools to confront life's vicissitudes with. Whatever insights and tools these are will be different for different communities at different historical moments. As communities are constructed of people who influence each other and each other's needs, then as these communities evolve, then so do the needs of the individuals within them. Because of this, the most existentially efficacious descriptions must evolve to meet the needs of the evolving community. So in West's understanding, the *true* descriptions of God and religious events will change as the community changes.

From this West concludes that

'there is no true description [of] God [but rather] particular descriptions [...] put forward by various [...] traditions in order (usually) to make such views attractive to us' (West, 1980b, p263).

All God-talk is 'related to human aims'; and Christian talk is true when 'sufficient for [Christian] aims' (1980, p264). As such, this is consistent with historicism. Quite so, we

¹⁵¹ It seems redundant to say "following the *strong* historicist route", because we've already seen West's contention that following *any* historicism route entails following strong historicism.

might think, as the historicist turn is 'indispensable' when talking about God (1986a, p267).

We can see this elsewhere: he speaks highly (though not uncritically) of Leszek Kolakowski's work (West, 1986d), saying that it preserves the irreducibility of religious experience, while building on the pragmatist and historicist traditions, which he finds 'highly attractive' (1986d). But he criticises Kolakowski, arguing that all we can have as historically situated beings is communal convergence as our regulative ideal when saying who God is, dependent on perspective, so that contra Kolakowski, we 'stop [...] short of any sort of ontology' (*ibid*).

West and Kolakowski agree that religious experience furnishes us with valuable insights into world historical events. But God-talk isn't grounded in rational proof or empirical evidence.¹⁵² Philosophical enquiry of a rationalist sort isn't enlightening where religion is concerned.

For West, there are no philosophical grounds (1986d) for believing in or trusting God, but instead a Pascalian leap of hope.¹⁵³ Here it isn't inconsistent at all to be a sceptic about God while nevertheless remaining a Christian, because one doesn't look to demonstrate God's existence outside one's own religious experiences.

This kind of attitude 'possesses a deep sense of historical contingency' (1986d, p219), and rejects 'philosophical transcendentalism' (*ibid*), building rather in Kolakowski's vision on scepticism, and grounding whatever ontology it can muster in a hope for some form of cultural convergence for any agreement. But it's here – in this hope for a pan-human rational agreement – where West gets out of Kolakowski's boat. All West feels able to hope for are projections of 'possible kinds of convergence and unity' (1986d, p221), where community, to repeat one of the central tenets of strong historicism, is contingent and contextually situated. There can't be, in his words, 'ontological assurance of convergence and unity' (*ibid*). All views and hopes for unity are 'ideals [...] dependent on our own perspectives' (*ibid*). This allows us to avoid ontology while (he professes) avoiding also vulgar relativism.¹⁵⁴

Discussions about the being and nature of God become not about what, or in what way,

¹⁵² This isn't to say that talk of God is always grounded in such things from a non-Westian perspective, for this is clearly not the case. But West uses such perspectives to draw out his own model rather than to comprehensively describe all other views.

¹⁵³ We see references to a kind of Pascalian leap in much of West's output, for instance in *A Philosophical View of Easter*, in *Prophetic Christian as Organic Intellectual*, in *Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud*, and in *Democracy Matters*, where West famously wrote that to be a Christian is life-enhancing, and is furthermore 'to live dangerously, honestly, freely - to step in the name of love as if you may land on nothing, yet to keep on stepping because the something that sustains you no empire can give you and no empire can take away' (West, 2004a, p172 – see also his Twitter feed); and further in *Prophetic Thought and Progressive Marxism*, where Christianity encourages 'the putting oneself on the line [and] going to the edge of life's abyss and finding out whether the reality of Jesus Christ [...] yields life sustenance, self-formation, self-maturation, and societal amelioration' (West, 1982aa, p98).

¹⁵⁴ We needn't go over old ground here. Suffice it to say that the arguments against West's assertions that he has avoided vulgar relativism are strong, and his reliance on Dewey and Gadamer to get him out of that particular corner does not seem to be enough. Where 'structured social practices' (West, 1986a, p267) provide the grounds and standards for deciding what we can say is right and wrong about the nature of God, appeals to Dewey and Gadamer do not appear to be enough to rescue West against charges of vulgarity.

God *is*, but about how 'self-critical interlocutors (as bearers of particular traditions) [...] project and preserve regulative self-images and guiding vocabularies that promote various aims and purposes' (West, 1986a, p268). In less opaque language, we're not talking about the *reality* of God anymore, we're talking about echoing, developing, and applying the norms and rational (and non-rational) standards of our communities for communally efficacious reasons. So discussions about God's nature or reality should be seen as particular communities positing and defending tradition-specific goals, such as religious realists putting forward and working as coherently as possible within the ontological, epistemic and moral frameworks of religious realist traditions, for the reasons that religious realists find valuable. West sees what these groups do as *strategies* (1986a, p268) designed to promote interpretations of the world.

But this position, while comforting to those working within whatever tradition's in question, can do nothing to seduce¹⁵⁵ others into accepting that tradition.¹⁵⁶ In fact, the issue of whether whichever communities in question 'provide the best [explanations of the world or of God's nature] because they are true or whether they are true because they [provide the best explanations of the world or of God's nature] becomes a perennially circular one', in large part because truth in any community is value-laden.

Such communities may be able to come up with, within their own frameworks, "true" answers to pressing questions. But different communities needn't find anything compelling about such answers because their aims and purposes are so different. In effect, any given community ends up saying, in Neta's (2007) words,

'According to this very judgement: p'.

Where answers to the important question of who God is are framed within the frameworks of democratic and discursive communities, the identity of God for West himself becomes either a lived, existential, private (or perhaps, more accurately, shared) experience, or an abstract question (see Young, 2001). West sees it as the former. But according to Young (2001, p168), God's identity is also linked with a 'humanistic Black consciousness, personal liberty, and justice-for-all'. God's identity is linked with justice and goodness themselves. At least in its intent, West understands God's identity in moral terms. As he says in the closing passages of *Prophesy: Deliverance!*, his Christian life remains anchored in the hope of liberty, democracy, equality, and love.

West gives us a picture of God which is neither transcendent nor ahistorical. God's identity is for him linked with the most appealing community. Concerning questions of whether God existed before we did, or indeed before time and space themselves, we find a refusal to engage: West eschewing abstract questions. Young (2001, p171) notes that West may be interpreted as employing 'an a-theistic praxis in which the identity of the Lord is a "private agony"'.

On this view, there's a realisation that in West's sense (and he doesn't mean this negatively), 'anthropology [...] and the identity of the Lord [are] *perilously* close' (Young, 2001, p172 – emphasis in original). It seems frustratingly hard to pin down, but for West,

¹⁵⁵ This is West's own, curious, word (see West, 1986a).

¹⁵⁶ It can provide no rational standards to convince another group that the version is correct.

looking at God is looking at the suffering and the needs of the people. It's fragmented, but the picture of West's God is of justice, existential fulfilment, and hope in a hopeless world. A true description of God is one which tackles earthly problems and provides succour. The truth of the Lord can 'only be existentially appropriated', writes West.¹⁵⁷

In West's mind, it's erroneous to describe God propositionally.¹⁵⁸ Young makes the point that discovering the identity of the Lord is behavioural and felt, not abstract and academic.

But this leaves a sour taste. If West's identifying the Lord God with goodness or justice, we have to consider whether these are moral concepts. Because if they are, we must also remember that West is (we recall) a moral relativist. And as Young points out, if this is all there is to be said about the identity of the Lord, then it's of minimal theistic interest. God himself is reduced to an expression of moral goodness and social kindness, where goodness is – to paraphrase West – a 'small g goodness'.

Is West, indeed, reducing God to a 'small g god'?¹⁵⁹ Does the God West describes have any relevance to the Christian faith that most of us recognise, of the one even that he himself needs, or is such a thing nugatory and hollow?

Part Two – A Matter of Fact?

I'll confine my critique of West here to two distinct (although not completely unrelated) attacks: the first being close to points we've already mentioned in relation to his views on social inequality; the second being new – a question of ontology. As the first line of questioning has already been touched on in previous chapters, I won't dwell on it. It is however a new application of an argument, directly relevant to West's understanding of God, and so it merits mention. It's the second part where we really break new ground, and it's here where we'll spend most of our time.

So first we turn to a new application of some of the ideas we've previously explored, made pertinent to matters of faith: the question of religious truth.

Truth Matters

In her excellent book on West's philosophy, Rosemary Cowan (2003) echoes a criticism we've already encountered. Consequently, it should become clear that arguments we've used in previous chapters can be applied to West's conception of God.

¹⁵⁷ 1982aa, p98.

¹⁵⁸ It's beneficial to bear in mind that, as Copeland (2001, p161) says, West looks at all proper theologising as concentrating on a 'reduction of knowledge, of objectivity, of reality, of truth, of meaning', which sits perfectly with West's anti-foundationalist, anti-realist historicism.

¹⁵⁹ In paraphrasing West and employing the notion of a 'small g god', I merely intend to reflect West's own historicist, communally situated understanding of God in his historicist, communally situated understanding of "small t truths" (see West, 2004b, West, 2009, West, 2013, Judaken and Geddes, 2007, Morrison, 2004, Whitehead, 2015, and elsewhere).

Cowan highlights West's acknowledgement that on historicism, all faith claims are one or another person's *interpretation* of theological issues. This isn't as trivial as it may sound: we're not saying that non-historicists don't believe that claims are interpretations; what Cowan highlights is the non-absolutist, anti-realist,¹⁶⁰ communally efficacious, contingency-focused, culturally grounded nature of historicist truth-claims, particularly about religious matters. The truth of a religious claim is, for the historicist, grounded in culture and community.¹⁶¹

Cowan pinpoints one of the great challenges bedeviling West –

Perhaps the greatest difficulty with his Christianity concerns religious truth. While some idea of eternal Truth as manifest in God is essential to most mainstream Christianity, West is wary [of such things]'
(Cowan, 2003, p69).¹⁶²

Not only eternal Truth. Absolute truth, ahistorical truth, universal truth, anything indeed which a typical Christian might wish to call objective truth, it's all rejected by West. This raises uncomfortable issues for him, as we've seen. While it might be true that 'West does not suggest that all positions are equally true or equally false' (Cowan, 2003, p70), there's still a difficulty for him where he wants to say that 'the Christian Right [for one example] are *mistaken* in their interpretation of the Bible' (p69, emphasis in original), for it's difficult to see him providing rational standards to back this up, considering all we've seen in previous chapters.

There may still be ways of constructing better arguments (see Cowan, p69), but these – and how we understand their comparative value – are still relative to cultures and communities.¹⁶³ Even without that, 'better arguments' would still have to entail conclusions, and it's the conclusions - the truth-claims – whose credibility West's critics would question. No matter how strongly he protests that some ways of making arguments are better than others, 'crucially he does not claim *vis-à-vis* the Christian Right that his position is somehow ahistorically True' (Cowan, p69). Always confining religious "truth-talk" to 'specific communities of discourse construction' (Cowan, p70),¹⁶⁴ each of which with its own frameworks. Religious positions, in other words, may be true for a group, according to that group's rules and frameworks.

Where Cowan talks about how we see specific communities of discourse construction having their own rules and frameworks, they'll also have their own religious worldviews, there being a great many possible communities of discourse construction having contradictory worldviews. We also recall that claims about God can only be correct here relative to these worldviews, with no facts by virtue of which one of them is more correct

¹⁶⁰ West's word.

¹⁶¹ Cowan imagines it would be grounded in 'just one person', but West shows little sign of believing that. The point still stands, however.

¹⁶² 'Wary' being an understatement.

¹⁶³ Cowan is wrong when she claims West doesn't lapse into relativism: this is a straight misreading of his philosophy and an unquestioning acceptance of West's defensive protestations.

¹⁶⁴ The notion of specific communities of discourse construction will come up again, in our next argument, in relation to two other critics of West's position.

than any of the others.¹⁶⁵ Furthermore, we recall a corresponding admission that therefore, claims that God exists should be accompanied by the caveat

and this is also false.

So where we say 'the Christian Right are mistaken in their interpretation of the Bible', we should follow this with 'and this is also false'.

Even ignoring that, the historicist gets herself into a twist because accompanying every contestable God-claim is the addendum 'according to our framework, because according to a different framework, they're right and we're wrong'. Whichever way West angles it, he's caught in the traps of Boghossian's relativism, by his commitment to historicism.

Reality Matters

But there's something far more central to what Christianity's about that we have to explore. In this section I focus on the ideas of Leon Wieseltier (2001) and George Yancy (2001), although I also find corroboration in the work of Anderson (2001) and Cowan (2003).

The problem is that West has given us, in a complex series of explanations of what it means for a historicist to talk about God, something that's not *ontologically real*. God seems to have been reduced to goodness and equality, where goodness and equality have been shorn of their "realist" trappings and justified relative to the prevailing views of a contingently-formed community, with all talk of goodness and equality being relative to that community's frameworks.

Individual communities may be able to come up with, within their own frameworks, "true" descriptions of God. But other communities need find nothing compelling about such descriptions because their own aims and purposes could be completely different. The "truth" about God becomes relativised. In this respect, the issue is related to our recent discussion.

But there's more to it than that. The concept of God here is neither transcendent nor ahistorical (West 1980c, 1981, 1982c, 1986a). When we talk about God, we're not distracting ourselves with ontological considerations but rather reflecting on hope through suffering. Any reality God has, is purchased through personal or communal existential comfort and the reduction of misery.¹⁶⁶

Yancy (2001) sums West's historicist views up in saying that West

eschews the search of Western philosophy for an Archimedean point or metanarrative which transcends idiosyncratic historical processes and historically and culturally constituted epistemic practices. Hence, the truth of the beliefs of a

¹⁶⁵ For a discussion of this, we should refer back to Boghossian's three theses of relativism.

¹⁶⁶ We might want to reflect upon how, on this reading, the reality of God appears to manifest itself in the *negation of martyrdom*, an irony that appears to have been lost on West.

given religious *Weltbild* will be purchased within the very framework of that given religious world-picture (Yancy 2001, p117).

In other words, the truth of descriptions of God is justified relative to a culture's (epistemic and moral) frameworks. The truths of and within biblical narratives are likewise justified relative to these frameworks. These frameworks aren't universally shared, evolving contingently through the forces of history. The concept of God himself, in West's philosophy, doesn't lie outside the community which discusses it. And West disputes none of this, saying the 'truth-claims of religious communities are inseparable from the aims and purposes of those communities' (West 1986a, p269), going on to explain that the purpose of those communities is to provide meaning to troubled lives.¹⁶⁷

So, this being West's position, the criticism is an obvious one. As Wieseltier puts it:

The Christian tradition will not be enriched by a faith for which God is not real. Before what, exactly, does the postmodernist bow his head? For the anti-essentialist, what kingdom is at hand? (Wieseltier, 1995, p123)¹⁶⁸

In an anti-realist, historicist philosophy, where the truths of God's existence and nature are relative to a given culture, Wieseltier and Yancy have identified a serious problem for West. It's difficult to know whom, exactly, West worships.¹⁶⁹ He's not attempting to "get God's nature right" so much as provide comforting stories using God's name which have no trans-cultural justification.

Wieseltier notes how West claims that the elimination of transcendence is actually *necessary* for religion, arguing that West's position seems to be a contradiction of Christianity (Wieseltier, 1995, p123), highlighting indeed the 'polyvalence' (West 1996b, p411) of biblical text.

Wieseltier means it's a contradiction because Christians traditionally and generally believe that God is 'above all', existing *regardless* of what different societies say, independent of the discursive communities that seek him. In most traditional Christianity, God is independent and self-existent by nature, a *causa sui*, not created by us.¹⁷⁰ God exists independently of his worshippers and detractors, and can create, provide, take away - and even appear to his people, should he so desire. God is there for us. By rejecting any notion of God which isn't culturally relative, where he rejects the truth of God's reality outside human construct, and where he rejects God's very ontological status, embracing

¹⁶⁷ Plus, different communities face different troubles, and understand 'meaning' differently.

¹⁶⁸ It's not clear why anti-essentialism is so important to Wieseltier, but his point still stands: what Kingdom is at hand for the anti-realist, and whom does she bow down to?

¹⁶⁹ We can refer to a whole host of biblical, credal and doctrinal traditions to see why West's version of God seems out of step here. The Athanasian Creed for instance has it that God is *uncreated, unlimited, and eternal* - hardly predicates that would sit easily in West's strong historicist philosophy. And in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, God is said to be *unchangeable*, and particularly, unchangeable in his *truth*. Many other examples may be unearthed to show the friction between traditional understandings of God and the more and more apparently eccentric understanding that West argues for.

¹⁷⁰ We may refer to the concept of aseity here.

instead ontological relativism¹⁷¹, West appears to be rejecting not only biblical doctrine,¹⁷² but a God who is real, and exists apart from us.¹⁷³

Yancy stands with Wieseltier, seeing West's religious worldview as 'devoid of any ontological explanatory role' (Yancy 2001, p126), rejecting any religious discourse 'understood as referring to [...] an extra-Christian communal reality [...] from which Christian discourse, values, and descriptions are derived' (Yancy 2001, p123), concluding that West is forced to offer 'no stable divine logos [...] which ontologically warrants a single religious world-view' (p128). So when West says that when people say that God loves them, they're not making a claim about any *true* God at all. Indeed, for Yancy and Wieseltier, it becomes difficult to recognise such a deity from any accepted biblical traditions. God has no ontological explanatory role; talk of God refers to nothing outside of a 'Christian communal reality'; and God – the *Word*¹⁷⁴– doesn't even *warrant* a single religious understanding, let alone have one. For a Christian (such as West professes himself to be)¹⁷⁵ this feels very uncomfortable, if not (as Wieseltier commented) plain contradictory.

Yancy argues that for West the so-called truth of any religious claim is reduced 'to specific communities of discourse construction [which] comes replete with its own rules and categories but has nothing to say [...] about extratextual or extrareligious-communal ontic reality' (Yancy, 2001, p126). Or, in plainer English, for West, God-talk has very real limitations, being that it's senseless to make ontological claims about God; and saying even that "God is real" isn't saying anything whose truth can be found outside the community who says it.

But surely, Yancy says, Christians pray to a reality they believe exists apart from their communal and individual entreaties (Yancy, 2001), and it's West's disagreement with this, which West never appears to repudiate, which Yancy finds so difficult (and which, if we're honest, most Christians would find difficult to accept).

Cowan agrees that West's position is hugely problematic, not least because 'it empties Christianity of any ontologically explanatory role by suggesting that religious narratives are unable to "explain" anything outside their own [...] framework' (Cowan, 2003, p70). After all, surely Christians, the Bible, and the object of our prayers are all supposed to refer to a God 'who exists beyond the grid of a specific religious community' (*ibid*).

Finally Anderson is of the same mind, saying 'after deconstructing metaphysical and ontological concepts of received doctrines and interpretations of God, [many people] find [such] contemporary constructive theologies spiritually, practically, and publicly bankrupt' (Anderson, 2001, p141). He goes on to say that 'after deconstructing its Western theological metaphysical canon, many inside and outside the academy find [such types of theologian] producing little that is preachable or teachable' (*ibid*). West does try to bring

¹⁷¹ See West, 1981.

¹⁷² We could find any number of examples of such doctrine, such as Ephesians 4:6, or Genesis 1.

¹⁷³ - such as may be prayed to (see for instance Matthew 6:9-13).

¹⁷⁴ See among other places Luke 1-2, John 1:1 (where famously, we see that 'In the beginning was the Word [...] and the Word was God'), Psalm 33:6, and elsewhere.

¹⁷⁵ I am of course not questioning West's faith, or his commitment to it.

his Christian faith into the world of suffering, to turn abstract metaphysical discourse into concrete solutions to the evils within the world. But this does nothing to allay the worries raised, merely repeating themes which have little to say to his sceptics.

Summary

We've seen two charges: first, that West's historicist view of religion leaves him admitting that all God-talk is *false*, or that any unpalatable religious talk from those he disagrees with is, from the perspective of their own frameworks, *true*, and further that there are no rational standards to convince anybody that *his* version of religion is any better than any other version. This application of the arguments against historicism should be enough to cause him to reconsider his stance, especially where something so important to him – his religious faith – is concerned. But it's the second of the two charges which adds something new to our discussion: that his Christianity has been left with no ontologically explanatory role, that the very concept of God for him has no extra-communal reality, and that while a standard Christian may pray to and believe in a reality she believes exists apart from her practices, West's Christian does no such thing.

These are serious allegations. He's being told he leaves Christianity bankrupt and unteachable. What's left to evangelise, he's asked. The following part of the chapter deals with that question.

Part Three – A Matter of Choice

Anderson says that West's religion leaves little that's preachable. This may be true from Anderson's perspective, but it's important to ask whether it's true from West's. Can West defend himself against the criticisms that have been levelled against him?

In this third and final section of the chapter, we look at two things: first, we ask how West responds to the charges laid at his door, whether this response is coherent, and how well it fits with his strong historicism; and second, we examine whether his response works. In this instance, the question of whether West's response works will not be gauged against the satisfaction it gives his critics; it will be measured against West's own standards. In other words, can West maintain an internal coherence within his own worldview regarding religious faith? I argue towards the end of the chapter that he cannot.

This being so, West would appear to be in a difficult situation: on the one hand wanting to maintain his strong historicism, while on the other, his Christian faith. Were it to turn out that he couldn't do both at the same time, logic dictates that he should abandon at least one of these positions.

West's Defence

West accepts (1998) that there's no divine logos for the historicist which ontologically justifies any particular religious worldview, as this would fall prey, in his words, to Archimedean objectivism (West 1980b); and that Christian discourse doesn't refer to any extra-Christian reality (Yancy, 2001, p123). The object of Christian discourse, and the

object of prayer and supplication, is nothing an ontological realist would recognise, nor is it universal – it's community-specific. Reality for West 'is a constructed affair' (Yancy, 2001, p121), with no 'Platonic cave from which we must attempt an escape' (*ibid*); indeed we must steer clear of transcendental objectivism (West 1993i). Truth and rationality become products of social practices. Ontological commitments are avoided. So far, so agreeable. Like it or not, this version of religion certainly appears to fit coherently with his historicism.

As it stands, this would lay him open to the attacks of Yancy and Wieseltier. On West's view, Yancy argues (2001), the meaningfulness of the Christian narrative, the way Christians see Christ, the reality of God, and their very descriptions of the world, ethics and even hope, aren't located anywhere beyond the narrative itself. A God with a reality external to and independent of human beings has to be rejected. While West's understanding of God focuses on commendable goals such as the amelioration of human suffering (West, 1980b, 1998), this is still just *his* interpretation, based on *his* frameworks, for *his* purposes, and presumably the frameworks and the purposes of his discursive community. There's nothing 'extra communal' about any of it at all. Hence Anderson's criticism that West's Christianity is religiously bankrupt with little that's preachable or teachable.

But West may well say that it's not a problem for Christianity if Anderson, Yancy and Wieseltier feel unable to preach his message. On the contrary, it could well be a problem for Anderson, Yancy and Wieseltier that they have a false conception of Christianity. It may well be that Christianity has been preached and taught poorly for centuries.

For instance, Cowan (2003) recognises the apparent problems of West's Christianity in the same way that Yancy and Wieseltier do, yet she neglects to follow the arguments to say that this collapses his view of religion, and perhaps there's a reason for this: perhaps she recognises that his historicism is only *potentially* damaging to his Christianity, and that rather than giving West problems, it highlights problems for others.

Isn't it that the criticisms are simply inconvenient for West, rather than fatal, where his Christian faith is eccentric, certainly, but still defensible? Couldn't he simply respond to the criticisms by agreeing that his Christianity is unusual, while still maintaining that it's correct? In other words, mightn't he wish to bite the bullet and say, in a spirit of philosophical bullishness, that he's right and (nearly) everybody else is wrong?

If so, he could simply stick to his guns and try to convince others of the insightfulness of historicism, its existential profitability, and the beneficial emotional immediacy of his message of hope. It needn't bother him one bit that Yancy disagrees with him.¹⁷⁶ He might even think perhaps that he's blazing a new trail.

¹⁷⁶ In fact, apparently stung by them, he dismisses Wieseltier's criticisms as unduly personal and unfair (West, 1997b). It is what he sees as the unkind *ad hominem* nature of the attacks that bothers West, not the disagreement about substance.

In fact, West does just this. Throughout his work,¹⁷⁷ he argues for a Christianity devoid of ontological commitments, focussed instead on seeing the world through the eyes of the vulnerable and giving help to life's victims. He argues that the heart of Christianity is its message of love (1982a, 1986a, 2004a), that the Bible should be read through strong historicist lenses (1980b, 1982a, 1986a), and that Christianity has a distinctive message of hope for the oppressed, existential succour, and optimism that no matter what life throws at the vulnerable, there's light at the end of the tunnel (1980b, 1982a, 1993i, 2011b, 2012).¹⁷⁸

Christianity, religion, God-talk and theology for West are *human-centred*, making sense insofar as they affect people's lives in the world we inhabit.¹⁷⁹ African-American religion in particular, being his own tradition, addresses the ways that the *vocabularies* of black religious people relate to the ethical and political side of culture, informing black lives in America, such that situating those vocabularies (and the people who use them) historically is central (see West, 2003a).

His stance is historicist, fallibilist, and anti-foundationalist, he says (2012), saying that the 'Golden Age' (West, 2003a, p xv) of African-American religion brought questions of suffering to the fore over questions about the nature of God, the relationships that hold within the Trinity, or the infinitude of the divine. This steers noticeably clear of the transcendent, of metaphysical theorising, and of ontological reflection.¹⁸⁰

It isn't that West never comments on metaphysical and ontological reflections. We note his opinion on metaphysical and ontological theorising where God and religion are concerned: 'There is no doubt', he says 'that metaphysical and ontological reflections [...] are inescapable for finite human animals suspended in webs of significance we ourselves spin' (1986a, p267). We have metaphysical and ontological language, concepts, and frameworks.¹⁸¹ But these are the language, concepts, and frameworks which we as finite and contingent communities have constructed. They're 'always relative to specific traditions, theories, and particular sets of social practices' (*ibid*). They're inescapable but unnecessary, and certainly not to be taken "neat", in any way an ontological realist might swallow.

It is, however, that 'I tend to be rather silent on the philosophic 'more' beyond utility, the religious 'more' beyond politics, and the Christian 'more' beyond world-denying love. To

¹⁷⁷ See for instance West, 1982a, 2004a, and throughout *Prophetic Fragments* (1988).

¹⁷⁸ The message is the key here. It is not necessarily, for West, that *God* provides hope, it is that *talk* of God, and Christian *narratives*, provide optimism, comfort, and an ethical insight; while committing to Christianity fulfils many deep existential needs (see 1980b, 1988, 1989a).

¹⁷⁹ See for instance West, 2012, Sholé Johnson, 2003.

¹⁸⁰ It's difficult to stress quite how important this principle is for West. A reading of any of his religious work backs up these claims, such as his final words in the interview *Focus on the Funk*, 2012: 'I think that theology is indispensable for religious communities to make sense of themselves and their changing views about the world in light of what is perceived to be revelation, but, at the same time, that theology can have a pretentiousness, or double pretentiousness, if it is acontextual as opposed to contextual, if it is foundationalist as opposed to antifoundationalist, or ahistorical as opposed to historicist'.

¹⁸¹ We might note here that Putnam (1999, p120) reflects: 'as for the question of the "metaphysical status" of beliefs and meanings, if there is one thing I have learned from the classical pragmatists, Peirce, Dewey, and James, as well as from Wittgenstein, it is to take seriously – metaphysically seriously, if you like – ways of talking that are obviously indispensable to our lives and our thought'.

engage in sustained talk about this 'more' tends to open the door to the forms of metaphysics, ontology, and theology I reject' (West 2001, p351). In other words, West recognises that there's metaphysical and ontological *language* deeply ingrained into our critical vocabulary, but believes that it's contingent and unnecessary, and attempts to avoid its use as much as possible. While rejecting 'a conception of validity that stands above and outside the social practices of human beings' (West, 1989a, p225), he attempts to talk about religion and religious truths, mysteries and objects 'without falling into the traps of unwarranted metaphysics, ontology, and theology' (West, 2001, p351).¹⁸²

With this in mind, it seems no accident that the title to one of his seminal works is *The American Evasion of Philosophy*. The quest to avoid what he sees as the traditional philosophical questions of metaphysics and ontology with the intention of focusing on the problems that everyday people face is central to West's intent, particularly with a religion which is supposed to save. Metaphysical language aside, 'since out of necessity we must speak and act knowledge becomes a tool to cope with reality, not a mirror which depicts reality', he argues (1986d, p218). Different cultures have different tools to cope with reality. He sees Christianity, in this respect, as enabling.

His assertion that it's one enabling tradition¹⁸³ among many doesn't mean that he doesn't believe it. In many of his works,¹⁸⁴ and on his personal website, he positively affirms his faith in God and Jesus Christ. In fact, it's the love and the siding with the helpless which he sees in Christianity that encourages him to put himself 'on the line' (1996b) over it, taking its claims with full seriousness.

Christianity for West, then, rather than being about a stable divine logos which ontologically warrants a single worldview (see Yancy), is but one tradition among many,¹⁸⁵ with the bonus of providing hope and an existential bulwark against a seemingly impossible world. Indeed faith staves off the 'sense of deep emptiness and pervasive meaninglessness one feels if one is not critically aligned with an enabling tradition' such as Christianity (West, 1989a, p233). West would argue¹⁸⁶ that no matter how uncomfortable Yancy and Wieseltier are about this, there's no rational grounding available to show him he's wrong. They may not like it, but this doesn't mean it's false.

West's Defences Breached from Within

¹⁸² Echoing his sentiments, he notes that while he does his best to avoid 'unwarranted metaphysics [and] ontology', he recognises that there are inevitably (and unfortunately) 'such operative terms' lurking in the background of much of our discourse (1986a).

¹⁸³ This idea comes up in 1989a, but more than just there: so we hear him say 'when you're talking about theology, you're essentially talking about the fallible claims of mortals who generate various kinds of stories and narratives to impose some kind of meaning on a world of profound mystery, stories in which God is an agent. There's a whole host of other kinds of stories, in which God is not an agent, but God is an agent in those stories that constitute religious traditions, and that accent our intellectual humility and try to get us to be much more preoccupied with the kinds of persons we are, rather than with the kind of transcendental claims that we make about the world' (West, 2012).

¹⁸⁴ It would seem redundant to list every instance, but a quick glance at West, 1980b, 1985a, 1986a, 1988, 1996b and elsewhere will give a clear enough overview of his position.

¹⁸⁵ This, at least, is a truism.

¹⁸⁶ See Chapter One.

West's critics should consult West's own definitions of what constitutes truth and falsity when deciding on the workability of his religious views. Instead of merely putting forward traditional Christian narratives and declaring that West doesn't share them, a better tactic would be to understand the internal consistency of his position, and go from there. So how do we do this?

A good starting point is to refer to where he specifically talks about what it is to make a religious belief true. We see in 1980b: 'Before we begin to examine what it means to say that the resurrection claim is true or false', he tells us (p260), 'we must have some idea of what it means to say that any claim is true or false'.

He expounds upon what *he* means to say that a claim is true or false, giving a neo-Quinean, neo-Kuhnian account of truth¹⁸⁷ where 'the truth-value of our claims about [...] God are determined by marshalling evidence for or against the descriptions, versions, or theories of which these claims are a part' (p261). Put into the language we've been using, we can say that there are many possible epistemic frameworks available, and our truth-claims are relative to them. Where we make such a claim, it has to be judged within, or relative to, the broader body of understanding which that framework demands. It must be, within that framework, *consistent*.

Once we accept this, it becomes less interesting to examine whether *claim a* fits *observation b*, and more fruitful to examine whether it resides coherently and cohesively within its framework. There are no facts, or rational standards, with which we can judge the absolute truth or falsehood of each possible framework, but there is the question: "Is [this or that] framework 'sufficient for [a given community's] aims?'" (West, 1980b, p264). So on this reckoning, 'the primary test for the "truth-value" of particular Christian descriptions [is whether a description] promotes and encourages the putting of oneself on the line, going to the edge of life's abyss and finding out whether the Reality of Jesus Christ [...] can sustain and [...] develop oneself in one's perennial struggle of becoming a fuller and more faithful self in Christ' (*ibid*, see also Anderson, 2001).

This is a complicated way of saying that the truth of any Christian claim should be judged by whether it sits well within a framework whose descriptions, theories, and very purpose help support our existential struggle against hopelessness, using the hope offered by Jesus Christ as a lifeline. And whether it sits well within a framework where *committing to* Jesus Christ is the way to fully grasp this lifeline. Accept a Christian framework, whose purpose is to sustain and support within a world of suffering, and then judge whether our religious claims fit coherently within it. *Then* you'll be able to judge the truth or falsity of your God-talk.¹⁸⁸

True or False?

Now we have a workable idea of what West means when he says something's true, we're in a position to apply it to his own claims about God and religion. To do this, we need

¹⁸⁷ At least, this is what he claims.

¹⁸⁸ The significance of this view of what a truth-value is should not be lost. It's possibly his most properly articulated explanation of what it means to him to say that something is *true*, rather than simply saying that something might be true relative to something else.

only take his statements and compare them, asking whether they do, truly, fit within the framework he's given us.

We know that he holds to Boghossian's three theses of relativism: that (1) there are no absolute facts (epistemic or moral) which can confirm or disconfirm particular judgements; that (2) our truth-statements take the form: *according to the framework (epistemic or moral) that I accept, such-and-such is true*; and that (3) there are many alternative frameworks, but no facts by virtue of which one framework is more correct than any of the others. We also know (from our discussions) that West applies this position to his religious statements just as much as to other statements.

We know, further, that West is a *constructivist*,¹⁸⁹ and that epistemic frameworks, moral frameworks, and even ontologies,¹⁹⁰ are products of particular societies. And we know¹⁹¹ of his strong anti-realist, anti-foundationalist convictions. Together, these form the core of his historicist beliefs, which he applies to everything from moral to religious considerations.

Were this all West had to say on the matter, we may find his position attractive or unattractive to various degrees, but we could, in theory, trace a consistency throughout his work. However I contend that there are certain – and *crucial* – points he makes which, taken within the broader context of his thinking, violate his own criteria for what it is to say anything about God that's *true*. Let's examine them.

First, he argues that he can offer *no rational grounding* for his Christian beliefs. The spirit of this runs everywhere in his writing, but it's articulated clearly when he says 'I do not think it possible to put forward rational defenses of [my] faith that verify its veracity [...] the [grounding for belief] is not reason or rationality' (1989a, p233). This, so far, isn't a problem in that it's not anti-historicist. Accepting as West does the three theses of relativism, we'd expect him to say something along these lines.

Second, however, he's acutely aware that this faces him with an enormous problem when attempting to combat the nihilism he sees as so pervasive in the world around him. How do you look hatred in the face yet still muster the courage to love? he asks. 'It doesn't make any sense [...] to talk about loving your enemy if you don't have some connection to a power greater than you' (West, 2011b).

What might he mean by this? Most of his discourse concerning powers greater than individuals focuses on secular Marxist-inspired analyses of economic and social injustice. But it doesn't *sound* like this is the kind of thing he means here. Having spent much of his career writing about hopelessness and nihilism, it would sound incongruous for him to say here, as though with a flourish, "but there are man-made structures offering hope *greater* than the ones crushing it".

¹⁸⁹ He talks (1997a) of racial constructs and of social constructs (1980c, 1993e, 1993g, 1997a), but also of moral constructivism (1985c) and of epistemic constructivism (1985e, 1986a, 1988a, and to some extent 1991b). When read from this perspective, constructivism of one sort or another runs through his entire output.

¹⁹⁰ For some corroboration on this, see Hart, 2011.

¹⁹¹ West, 1981.

And so it proves. It becomes very clear very quickly what he's referring to. '[Secular people's] notions of equality somehow have to be anchored in that which cuts across the grain deeper than fleeting cultures and changing nation states', he declares (2011b). There needs to be something trans-cultural¹⁹² for our notions of equality, justice and rightness to be anything other than fleeting and inadequate. And this is something that religion – *Christianity* – can offer. Indeed Christianity *does* offer this, in his mind. 'A transcendent God before whom all persons are equal thus endows the well-being and ultimate salvation of each with equal value and significance', he writes (1982a, p16).

But for a historicist such as West, this seems cryptic at the very least. Were he not so invested in strong historicism, we might imagine he meant that there's an absolute, ahistorically situated, rationally-grounded fact of the matter to which a person might be able to appeal when arguing for equality. Something such as our traditional notion of God himself. West gestures in this direction when he writes that 'for Christians, Jesus Christ is the Truth' who 'rests outside any particular [...] description' (1980b, p264). Yet this is also the 'paradox of the Christian tradition' for West (*ibid*), which 'does not permit [...] Christian descriptions to be true' – even that, we presume, of a transcendent God before whom we're all equal.

This challenging passage contrasts "Truth" with what is "true" – the large-T Truths of ontology¹⁹³ with the small-t truths of historicism, to reference West's language. He appears to be saying that while Jesus Christ (and by extension, God) is indeed real, there is nothing true we can say of him. Yet this is an odd thing for West to write – for there may indeed be many "small-t truths" we can come up with about Christ, which would be consistent with a strong historicist position, even where there are no "large-T Truths" to articulate.¹⁹⁴

So on the one hand, while West asserts – with an admission that he can give no rational justification or grounding for this – that Jesus Christ offers something which 'cuts across the grain deeper than fleeting cultures and changing nation states', he also asserts that Jesus (and presumably the trans-cultural standard of equality he offers) 'rests outside any particular [...] description' we can come up with. There's nothing ahistorically situated, non-contextual, and unshaped by preconception that we can say about Christ, God, or indeed anything at all. All the truths we can imagine are contextually grounded. And certainly, 'for Christians "Truth-talk" precludes disinterest, detachment, and distance because Jesus Christ is the Truth [...] which cannot be theoretically reified' (West, 1980b, p264). We, who discuss Jesus and call upon him as our saviour, have always 'appropriated'¹⁹⁵ him for our own purposes.

¹⁹² Or perhaps supra-cultural.

¹⁹³ Absolute truths.

¹⁹⁴ West appears to be saying similar to what he said in *Nietzsche's Prefiguration of Postmodern American Philosophy* (1981), where he accepted that there's a world 'out there' (it's this which he argued bypassed idealism), but refused to accept that it's this world which determines what's true or not; and argued further that the historicist isn't preoccupied with articulating true or accurate copies of this world. On a related note, he discusses the tragic nature of the Christian, saying that the Christian strives for, yet has no chance of achieving ultimate salvation, where ultimate salvation is defined as the hope for 'the transcendence of history'. (West, 1982a, p18).

¹⁹⁵ This is West's own word (see West, 1980b, p264).

What we appear to have is a *commitment* to something which cannot – in West’s eyes – be rationally justified, nor even described unshaped by the existential requirements of the people discussing it. God-talk, our Christian propositions, and the very notion of the divine itself, are subject to all the architectures of Boghossian’s theses of relativism.

And it’s here we discover an extra, significant problem for West. For on Boghossian’s relativism, all our truth-statements are relative to contingent cultural frameworks. What’s more, these frameworks are shaped by time and tide, they’re reflections of a community’s aims and purposes, which change from moment to moment, context to context. So all anybody can say is ‘*according to the framework I accept, God is good*’, or ‘*according to the framework I accept, there’s a transcendent God before whom all persons are equal*’... (and so on). And crucially, as we’ve seen in previous chapters, the speaker must also acknowledge that whatever is asserted, is not the case under other frameworks, and there are no facts by virtue of which [my] framework is more correct than [yours]. Truths about God become relative to the frameworks, which are constructs of the populace. Truths about God become relative to the constructs of the populace.

We shouldn’t need much warning: this sounds very much like a form of *idolatry* West himself refers to, in very scathing tones. For he’s clear: idolatry is terrible. It’ll serve us well to quote him extensively, so we can have an idea of what he means by this.

‘The crisis in contemporary American religious life is profound and pervasive [...] in that it affects every form of religiosity in the country. [My] principle aim [...] is to examine [...] and contest the widespread accommodation of American religion to the political and cultural status quo. This accommodation is suffocating much of the best in American religion; it promotes and encourages an existential emptiness and political irrelevance. This accommodation is, at bottom, idolatrous – it worships the gods created by American society and kneels before the altars erected by American culture.’

(West, 1988, pix)

So it’s idolatrous to worship ‘the gods created by [...] society and [kneel] before the altars erected by [...] culture’. Let’s take a moment to consider this. West says it’s idolatrous to worship the gods created by society. The idolatrous aspect of the worship isn’t that the society whose image God has been fashioned in is a modern American one; it’s the fact that people are worshipping a God who’s been fashioned by a society, and the altars which are being knelt before have been fashioned by a culture. The idolatry here is that the god that’s being worshipped has been fashioned by the worshippers. Worshipping ‘the gods created by American society’ seems no more and no less idolatrous than worshipping the gods created by any other society. Idolatry doesn’t stop being idolatry because the idolaters are nice.

And what West’s historicism gives, as we’ve shown, is a constructivist philosophy whose truths and concepts are grounded in a community’s frameworks, shaped through their aims and purposes. The concept of God, no less than anything else, is grounded in a society, the truth of whose propositions is relative to some or other framework, grounded in communal

practice and constructed out of historically contingent aims and purposes. Religious truth-talk is confined to within specific communities of discourse construction, which replaces absolutes, transcendence and ontologies with a God devoid of any ontological explanatory role. This, plus the rejection of religious discourse referring to extra-communal reality, combines to point directly at what West both argues *for* in the majority of his work, and what he argues *against* here. There's very little in West's social constructivism which could be said to be 'a power greater than you [...] anchored in that which cuts across the grain deeper than fleeting cultures and changing nation states' (West, 2011b). Indeed, there seems everything about it which West calls idolatrous.

Nor can West obviously appeal to strategies which might avoid the problems of 'fleeting cultures and changing nation states'. Were we to ask whether cultures might converge and cease to develop,¹⁹⁶ as though history showed they were heading towards an ideal state,¹⁹⁷ his answer would be a resounding "no". He states specifically that 'I hold that there can be no ontological assurance of convergence and unity without our reading into cultural practices the very projected convergence and unity presupposed by our own perspectives, that is, vicious circularity' (1986d, p221).¹⁹⁸ Indeed, on strong historicism, the likelihood of all cultures converging (and remaining together) seems – at least numerically, on the evidence of history, and accounting for the lack of any absolute standards – incredibly small.

So where countering idolatry is one of the principle aims of *Prophetic Fragments* (West, 1988c, pix), West seems unable to resolve the conflict lying within his own views. Where he gives us strong historicism, he gives us idolatry. Where idolatry occurs, so – he says – does existential emptiness (*ibid*), emanating from two sources:

First, the object of hope does not cut deeper than fleeting cultures, and cannot provide promise beyond the culture itself. Where there is helplessness, the hope offered needs to suggest something outside the desperate situation causing the anxiety, and cannot be fleeting (for fleeting hope is no hope at all).

It is easy to accept West's criticism that an idolatrous religion would hold no power against, and indeed potentially lead to, hopelessness and existential emptiness, for what sort of hope can a God who isn't real (to recall Wieseltier's phrase) provide? And what sort of existential comfort can a notion of a culturally relative God possibly give? And if even God can't provide hope, then what has West got left? And if the God we worship is the construct of our discursive community, then how can we revere him as the God from whom all just works do proceed? How can we trust him to give us, as West would hope we could trust him to give us, that peace which the world cannot give?

Second, where God is the construct of a materialistic society, worship itself is predicated upon 'the excessive preoccupation with isolated personal interests [which] unduly accommodate the status quo' (*ibid*). And although West hopes to motivate change, the fact

¹⁹⁶ That is, cease to be 'fleeting' and 'changing'.

¹⁹⁷ This would be an obvious move for a Marx-inspired philosopher such as West to make.

¹⁹⁸ The work I'm referring to - *On Leszek Kolakowski's Religion* – appears in the same volume (*Prophetic Fragments*) whose introduction rails against idolatry.

remains that society *is* one of “large-eats-small, materialist capitalism”, and so the existential emptiness comes as a part of the package of the idolatry which strong historicism delivers. Raising awareness of the problem does nothing to change it, but merely highlights the emptiness, highlighting at the same time the tragedy of the impossibility of locating a God from whom all just works proceed. And existential emptiness is (refer to West, 1993i, 1993j) one of the chief ingredients of nihilism, which West finds particularly problematic (see West, 1993j, 1993k).

So nihilism, the loss of hope and the absence of meaning (West, 1993k), the enemy which West feels is greater even than poverty and inequality themselves (1991, 1993, 1993i, 1993j, 1993k, 1997a, 2009), is generated through idolatry. And idolatry is a consequence of a strong historicist perspective on religion.

West appears trapped, and so, by extension, do those of us attempting to follow him. If his faith can be focused on the first-person religious experience we learned about,¹⁹⁹ then this intimacy of connection may be in some way bring him closer to a personal fulfilment or peace of mind. It may also permit him to commune better with the divine – depending on what he takes this to be!²⁰⁰ But if he’s used his faith as a bulwark against inequality and hopelessness, then he’s used his faith as a motivation for his entire social philosophy; and if he uses his faith to provide insights which a secular worldview cannot give, then he uses his faith to go deeper than he’d otherwise be able to go. Yet if relying on his faith means relying on something that’s idolatrous and likely to generate emptiness and nihilism, then everything seems undermined. The faith which keeps him going, which he puts himself on the line for, and which he would use to offer others hope, becomes a poisoned chalice. If this is all West offers us, then there is no prophesy deliverance, there is only false prophesy.

¹⁹⁹ We shall talk in more depth about this in Chapter 7.

²⁰⁰ It certainly isn’t clear at this stage. In another paper, it might be tempting to discuss this with reference to the work of Elizabeth Anscombe.

Chapter Five: Matters Incommensurable

Introduction

West's philosophy seems lost. Those of us who would look to follow him to find a solution to social ills from a non-absolutist, Christian perspective, risk being equally lost. On the one hand, his historicism appears to collapse into the very vulgarity that offers no hope to those who need it most. On the other, the religion he believes rids the world of nihilism is itself blunted by the historicism he believes is so necessary, leaving him with a God who isn't *real*, and a religion that's *idolatrous*.

I argue in this chapter for a route out of West's problems, if we pick our steps carefully. I argue that we can take what West has given us, problematic as it may seem, and find some hope within it. These may not be West's views "pure and unadulterated", but they're certainly inspired by them; and they certainly don't appear to contradict what's central to his thought. There's an element of application here: both in applying West's historicism to discussions had by other philosophers,²⁰¹ and in applying the work of other philosophers to West himself.²⁰²

Initially, we must break the connection between historicism and vulgar relativism,²⁰³ something we worked towards doing in Chapter 3 and which led us to believe that one can conceivably take some of the key aspects of historicism without necessarily descending into relativism; although at the time, this idea was left undeveloped. We look more closely at that here. This forms the first section of this chapter, and involves turning to three philosophers, Nietzsche, Putnam, and Bernstein. From there, we explore not only that, but *how* an absence of absolutes and Archimedean points need be no barrier to finding theories and arguments that are *better*, or *more right*, than others. To do this, the second section follows several closely-argued steps.

Leaving the path trodden by West, yet staying true to his general philosophical orientation, I turn again to Richard Bernstein, whose sympathies with the pragmatist tradition and sensitivities to historicism (see Bernstein, 1983) allow him to see that those who take a non-absolutist stance have some responsibility – to themselves, at least, for integrity's sake – to demonstrate whether or not relativism is the inescapable outcome of their views. *Contra* relativism, Bernstein focuses on showing how Hans Georg Gadamer (1975) believed that on non-absolutism, vulgar relativism was avoidable. This will prove enlightening to us, as West (1985a) indicated that he thought (or at least hoped) the same from Gadamer.

²⁰¹ One such discussion is that which relates once again to Bellarmine and Galileo.

²⁰² As we'll see, these include philosophers such as Bernstein and Putnam.

²⁰³ We need to be specific here: "vulgar" relativism allows for no rational standards in choosing between one theory and another. West gives this definition many times (West 1985a, 1986a, 1989a, 1989b, 1999), while those whose philosophy he admires, such as Rorty (1979, 1984, 1993) and Putnam (1981), also refer to vulgar relativism as "anything goes", leaving us with no way of deciding which theories are better than others.

Gadamer believed that we can find *better* theories and arguments on non-absolutism, and in so doing achieve moral and epistemic *progress*. This is effected by the following means:

One. Historicism is not historically-conditioned randomness, and doesn't entail arbitrariness. Nowhere in West is it entailed that contingent historical developments create random historical events or arbitrary cultures. On the contrary, our argument demonstrates that there's nothing random about cultural development, and it would be incoherent for West to claim otherwise!

Two. Contingent historical epochs don't exist in bubbles, separate and unrelated. History develops from what came before, even in cases of significant paradigm shifts. I examine the implausibility of imagining a society whose paradigms have changed out of all recognition in a historical instant such that an observer might believe one society had been instantaneously "replaced" with another, unconnected one.

Three. Even where societal norms are incommensurable, this is no barrier to inter-societal discourse (and hence, discourse between groups with radically different moral and epistemic frameworks). *Incommensurable* is not *incommunicable*. I show (from a reading of West, Bernstein, Gadamer, and Dewey) that democratic discourse can allow very different cultures to interact meaningfully. Consensus may be found, grounded in self-critical hermeneutic reflection aimed at inter-cultural agreement. Even within non-absolutist historicist frameworks, theories and practices needn't be seen as having equal value, some being judged as better than others. Therefore, moral progress *may* be made.

Taken together, we show that with universalisable dialogue and hermeneutic reflection, different (even incommensurable) cultures, on a non-absolutist framework, can still find moral and epistemic progress in a non-vulgar "not-everything-goes" historicism - even if we may never find a final point of absolute, infeasible truth.

Sections One and Two take us from the recognition that historicism isn't synonymous with vulgar relativism, to an understanding of *how* a historicist like West can avoid vulgarity in a coherent manner that's acceptable to both the letter and the spirit of historicism. The task ahead of us is now to show how these arguments work, in detail, in a methodical and demonstrable way.

Section One – The American Evasion of Relativism

If we're to find how to rescue West's historicism from an inexorable collapse into vulgar relativism, we should ask: in dispensing with metaphysics,²⁰⁴ is West throwing the baby out with the bathwater? Is his historicist turn from *realism in ontology and foundationalism in epistemology*²⁰⁵ necessarily the black ice on the slippery slope

²⁰⁴ This is a phrase he uses (1986a), which we may broadly say covers ontological realism, foundationalism in epistemology, absolutism, universal validity claims, and the whole range of "metaphysical whipping boys" he intermittently cites.

²⁰⁵ West, 1981.

towards vulgarity? Can we take West's ideas, allow him to remain consistent in both the inspiration for and the spirit of his historicism, and still bypass the vulgar relativistic traps he so detests and which we have shown pose serious problems to his ethical motivations?

To find out, we examine the genesis of his ideas.

Nietzsche, he claims, presaged the "towering philosophers" of Quine, Rorty, and others (1981). He describes Nietzsche as profound, calling him the central figure in western postmodernism, eschewing correspondence theory and metaphysical reflection but not rejecting the world. Our constructs, preconceptions, vocabularies, and standards of explication are not features of the external world but at best attempts at describing it. For the postmodernist who stands on Nietzsche's shoulders, "the world" cannot be isolated from our perceptions, ideas, and values. There are no theory-independent truths.

So if our answer to the question:

"are we bound by necessity to accept that West's historicism, birthed in Nietzschean postmodernism and leading to his rejection of ontological realism, epistemic foundationalism, and absolutism regarding facts and frameworks, entails no rational standards to judge between ideas?"²⁰⁶

- is "no", then we've found what West once referred to as a fecund discursive space²⁰⁷ where we can attempt to *manoeuvre his historicism into a non-nihilistic position. This is where our argument must focus.*

"All or Nothing at All"

We can look to Putnam and Bernstein for a beginning. 'I recall a conversation with [Chomsky] years ago', Putnam writes, 'in which he suggested that philosophers often take perfectly sensible continua and get in trouble by trying to convert them into dichotomies'.²⁰⁸ Bernstein (1983) agrees. We need to jettison the fallacy, he argues, of believing that where there are no absolute or ahistorical frameworks enabling us to tell better theories from worse, there's no rational way of making and justifying practical comparative decisions. The former simply doesn't entail the latter.

Both Putnam²⁰⁹ and Bernstein²¹⁰ describe realism and absolutism as (broadly) the view that there are facts "out there", truth is fixed by something mind- and language-independent, and that this presupposes a fixed, metaphysically-privileged notion of object and a set of ahistoric, absolute standards by which we can judge the truth of object-claims. But Bernstein argues that it's needlessly restrictive to assume

²⁰⁶ Refer back to West, 1985a, 1986a, 1999.

²⁰⁷ See West, 1999, p141.

²⁰⁸ Putnam, 1987, p27.

²⁰⁹ See Putnam, 1981, p49, 1995, 1999, and Timmons, 1991. According to the metaphysician, 'the world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects. There is exactly one true and complete description of "the way the world is". Truth involves some sort of correspondence relation between words or thought-signs and sets of things' (Putnam, 1999).

²¹⁰ 1983.

that, to have rationally defensible arguments,²¹¹ we need to appeal to ahistorical, absolute standards. He quotes the anthropologist Peter Winch,²¹² saying:

We must [...] be open to new possibilities of what could be invoked and accepted under the rubric of "rationality" – possibilities which are perhaps suggested and limited by what we have hitherto so accepted, but not uniquely determined thereby (Bernstein, p100).

It's shared understanding, and an application of reasonableness of use (rather than an absolute framework) that allow us to say speak correctly and rationally about something. And this reasonableness isn't supported by anything that's 'wholly present'²¹³ in what we're talking about.²¹⁴

Consider the claim:

"There's a tanker in the harbour".²¹⁵

Depending on a host of factors – what we mean by "in the harbour", whether a hovercraft laden with three barrels is technically a tanker, the significance of why we make the claim in the first place, *etc.* – we might say that the sentence is right, wrong, or borderline. But whatever we say, it's not the sentence *simpliciter* that's true or false,²¹⁶ and it's not an ahistorical fact-of-the-matter we appeal to. It's more complex than that, and dogmatic appeal to ahistorical frameworks misses out on so many other considerations. Considerations such as the *praxis* of knowledge claims. After all it seems impossible²¹⁷ to separate understanding and application. Pragmatist voluntarism rejects talk of understanding, belief, and action as isolated.²¹⁸ Where knowledge is inseparable from praxis – and the stress is certainly on praxis, for West²¹⁹ – the importance of ahistoric claims seems diluted. Yet there's nothing in praxis entailing relativism.

This, on its own, proves nothing. But it does suggest that the choice isn't merely between the metaphysics which West followed Nietzsche in rejecting on the one

²¹¹ These are what West called for to rescue relativism from vulgarity (1985a, 1986a, 1991a, 1993i, and elsewhere).

²¹² Winch, Peter, 1972.

²¹³ Putnam's words.

²¹⁴ Putnam (1999, p63) refers to Cora Diamond to make sense of the mistake that both the traditional realist and antirealist make, using Diamond's story of pictorial representations of faces (see Diamond, 1991, Ch9). Imagine looking at two pictures of faces. Then seeing that they have the same expression. In saying this, we're not saying that the lines of the mouths or the angles of the eyebrows are identical. We're seeing something *in* the lines, angles, and shading. But seeing something *in* these things isn't the same as seeing something *besides* them. Putnam argues that both the realists and antirealists have taken the debate to be something like saying 'there is something *besides* our practices of calculation and deduction that underlies those practices and guarantees their results; [or] that there is *nothing but* what we say and do' (p63). It's Putnam's contention that there's another way of looking at the issue. It's not simply that there's "something besides" or "nothing but".

²¹⁵ Putnam's example.

²¹⁶ That is, we can properly assign it a truth value when we know surrounding factors like intention, context, framing sentences, and other such considerations.

²¹⁷ According to West, Dewey, Gadamer and Bernstein.

²¹⁸ See West, 1985e, 1988a, 1989a, 1991a, 1993a, and elsewhere.

²¹⁹ West, 2013, pp. 291-301.

hand, and unregulated “anything-goes” relativism on the other. And it’s this possibility that we’ve called a *fecund discursive space* somewhere we can apply some creative thinking perhaps to the questions raised – and the answers given – by West. The rest of the chapter explores the fruits that this space can yield.

Section Two – The Remote and the Rest of Us

Let’s assume that we’ve managed to open up that space, and that vulgar, unregulated relativism isn’t the only, inevitable, consequence of West’s historicism. Can we now map out a radical reconstruction of West, such that he can keep his historicist principles while remaining both a Christian who believes in the truth of the Bible and worships God, and a moralist who wants a deep, structural analysis of (and solution to) the problems of inequality and nihilism in the world?

The rest of this chapter explores the possible mechanics of how historicism need be no barrier to avoiding “anything-goes” relativism; and how West can still find rationally-grounded *better* arguments and theories which can be seen as *more right* than their alternatives. To achieve this, we follow the structure laid out in this chapter’s introduction.

Part One – Contingency, Historicity, and Arbitrariness

We start with Bernstein,²²⁰ who wrestled with just those problems West faces, albeit from a different starting point. Caught between the rock of absolutism and the hard place of relativism, Bernstein turns to Gadamer to find sophisticated solutions to apparently insurmountable challenges. In this section, I take the liberty of drawing on many of Bernstein’s ideas to navigate a route out of the troubles West finds himself in. In so doing, by the chapter’s close, we solve one problem, yet highlight another.

First. Historical contingency doesn’t produce arbitrary outcomes

To begin, we should assure ourselves that although historicity gives us contingency and historically-conditioned cultures, we shouldn’t confuse that with arbitrariness. Bernstein²²¹ makes this point well, reminding us that we’re always modifying and shaping what we’re becoming. Saying social practices are contingent isn’t saying they’re arbitrary ‘if by this we mean that we can somehow leap out of our historical situation and blithely accept other social practices’.²²²

Social practices evolve historically. They may be contingent, but they’ve *evolved* – one moment builds into the next, none of them existing in bubbles, separated from subsequent moments. Quite the reverse: we become what we are *because of* our pasts, not despite, or coincidental to them. A lack of necessity doesn’t mean arbitrariness. Simple, illustrative analogies may elucidate this:

²²⁰ Especially 1983.

²²¹ 1983, p167.

²²² p206.

Everyday conversations may be contingent upon contexts but the words are hardly arbitrary, else nothing would ever make sense. Or again, one may be out walking, caught in a stream, rocks all around, wishing to avoid getting soaked. Every step, contingent upon where the water's less swollen, governs the next decision about which rock to head for. This is contingent indeed, but nobody ever steps *arbitrarily*. That would be stepping *non*-contingently upon where the water was lowest and the best rocks were. And for a final example in an inexhaustible list, the theory of evolution isn't a theory of arbitrariness. Far from it in fact, it depends on evolution *not* being arbitrary. No taxonomies could possibly be traced were this not the case, and hardly any argument for species survival in a theory of that sort would account for life on earth in the long run. And so, contingency pushes us forwards, but our directions are linked to the places we've been, and the forces that govern the journey. There are logical and rational reasons for things being the way they are. With arbitrary historical moments, no scholar would ever be able to trace any historical developments. Indeed, it's doubtful in an arbitrary world whether scholarship of this sort would be possible at all!

But West *is* such a scholar. *The American Evasion of Philosophy* is precisely about the non-arbitrariness of American pragmatism, and, we note, his own philosophical position. For a historicist who argues for radical contingency, arbitrariness makes little sense. Contingent history shapes what we do, what we're becoming, and how future societies shape their futures.

Second. Tracing non-arbitrary reasons

As Bernstein explains, we can often provide an

account of why certain [...] argumentation prevailed and others did not. In giving such an account, we are not appealing to permanent, atemporal standards of rationality [...] but to those reasons and practices that are 'hammered out' in the course of [...] inquiry. What a [given community] takes to be 'good reasons' may turn out later to be no longer accepted as good reasons. But when this happens it is not a matter of 'mere' rhetoric or of arbitrarily endorsing one set of values in preference to another set.
(1983, p67)

Even the word "contingent" should give the game away. Being contingent *upon something else* is the very antithesis of arbitrariness. The clue, we're tempted to say, is in the question.

A powerful example might settle this once and for all. It's the confrontation between Bellarmine and Galileo,²²³ being a struggle between competing frameworks. When Bellarmine argued for a theistic view of the cosmos, he wasn't just giving personal, subjective preferences disconnected from whatever had gone before, but arguing rationally in a line of tradition, using sophisticated ideas worked out over generations building on theories and discussion that had informed his community's

²²³ A useful example, having been used to good effect by Bernstein (1983), Boghossian (2006), and to some extent, in slightly different contexts, Rorty (1979, 1991).

thinking. His ideas didn't exist in a bubble, they were a continuation (though by no means a necessary one) of an evolving historical tradition. They were, within that tradition, rational (in ways we needn't concern ourselves with here) and consistent.

The arguments fitted perfectly within a school of thought which also didn't exist in a bubble, separate from other and preceding contingent schools of thought. Bellarmine justified his theories with reference to the best possible theories and evidence available, even when the theories and evidence are bound to change, using techniques and methods embedded in historical social practice. Accepting also that our historically contingent preconceptions allow us to interpret in the ways we do, as West would, isn't to concede arbitrariness, it's to accept, as West did, that where we come from plays an important role in our formulation of truths, and interpretation of texts.²²⁴

Part Two – Contingency, Incommensurability, and Solitariness

Accepting that worldviews and paradigms aren't arbitrary, we can begin showing that they don't exist completely separately from one another, historically, socially, or even geographically. We who occupy one framework aren't cordoned off from those who occupy another.

First. Frameworks are neither prison cells nor blinkers

The idea that we're wholly imprisoned by our frameworks is unconvincing. Occupying one framework doesn't prevent us expanding our horizons and discussing with those occupying others. Our frameworks aren't impassable limitations on our ability to understand them. They're the evolving culminations of history and traditions, not historical blinkers preventing us from seeing at least a little of how others see, or gags preventing us from speaking with those of other traditions. Nor do they disable us from developing intellectually as we connect with, or engage dialectically with, others alien to ourselves. In Gadamer's words, we're 'never utterly bound to any one standpoint',²²⁵ with 'truly closed' horizons (*ibid*).²²⁶

Bernstein also points out that plurality doesn't mean we're limited to separate lives with irreducible subjective interests (Bernstein, 1983, p223), and adds that rather, 'it means that we seek to discover some common ground to reconcile differences through debate, conversation, and dialogue' (*ibid*). Even where people don't seek to reconcile their differences, that doesn't make the differences irreconcilable.

And where a society begins with one epistemic or moral framework, and morphs into something quite different, with different frameworks, we may be able to discern the reasons for this. Much of the time, we're able to give retrospective accounts of why

²²⁴ West, 1980b, 1981, 1996b.

²²⁵ Gadamer, 1975, p303.

²²⁶ At their best, Bernstein tells us, Kuhn and Feyerabend each show us that, where there's incommensurability, we can still "get" how incommensurable paradigms work; we can see how they fail; we can competently compare and contrast them with each other and with our own; and we can make rational, defensible choices about which are better.

one argument won out over another. The accounts we give will allow us to see not only the points of departure where one framework gave way to another, but the connections between different ideas and paradigms, areas where communication was possible, and ways in which the paradigmatically different could somehow meet (intellectually, ethically, and perhaps physically).

Galileo and Bellarmine help illustrate this, each representing radically different epistemic frameworks. Let's accept, for the sake of argument, that Bellarmine's epistemic framework and arguments were historically contingent but non-arbitrary. Now let's accept the same for Galileo. So far so good. What we now see is that it's a historical fact, or, if it transpires to have been apocryphal, it *could easily have been* a historical fact, that Galileo and Bellarmine clashed, exchanged intellectual blows, and engaged in a kind of dialectic. They or their followers critiqued each other's ideas, wrestled with the difficulties those ideas posed, and appreciated the consequences each other's ideas might have had for their own thinking. In other words, they *conversed*, they entered into a dialogue.

Two differing frameworks met. On some level, the antagonists understood the other's point, even while denying it, its credibility, and its sense. From our perspective, we can judge which of them better made sense, even though the two frameworks were historically contingent, alien to each other (and maybe us), and incommensurable. Moreover, we can see what happened in the aftermath of the famous clash: Galileo won the day.

But this was hardly a *necessary* outcome. One argumentative slip and he might easily not have done. He did, however, and the landscape shifted with him, such that our own cultural, theological, scientific and epistemic frameworks were conditioned by the event. And what can we say about it? Among other things, it was contingent upon the happenstances of history, but not arbitrary. It happened as part of the evolution of history, with ideas informing each other as time passed. It was a step along a historical path, neither necessary nor arbitrary, that we're still travelling. And it demonstrates the ability to communicate across radically different frameworks.

It shows that, albeit slowly and painfully, different cultures can meet, find points of mutual understanding, and dialectically *move forwards*. Historically contingent is not arbitrary, frameworks aren't bubbles, no framework is a prison from which we cannot escape, and very few frameworks will ever be so completely alien from each other that no points of contact are discoverable.²²⁷ Furthermore, it's unimaginable that all cultural paradigms will change out of all recognition overnight. Some points of contact are always there. Constructive arguments are possible and this shows that good reasons, and the social practices they're embedded in, aren't discrete and isolated, but are part of larger networks (see Bernstein, 1983, p68).

Bernstein puts it well when he writes:

²²⁷ Hilary Putnam (1995) touched on this issue, arguing along linguistic lines that the fact that some concept or other in our language doesn't belong to a different language, doesn't show that statements in our language which use that concept cannot be entailed by statements in another language.

Both Galileo and Bellarmine offered complex reasons [...] to support their respective positions. Each was claiming validity that would presumably stand up to further critical tests. The 'reasons' that they offered themselves had implications, entailments, and ramifications with other sorts of reasons and considerations. When we now claim it was right that Galileo *should* have won out over Bellarmine [...] it is because we can now give strong arguments showing why the type of reasons Bellarmine gave were deficient. [...] Of course, we do this with reference to what we now take to be the best possible [...] reasons that can be given – reasons embedded in [...] social practices that have been 'hammered out' [over the course of time]. To admit (or rather insist) the likelihood that in the future there will be modifications of the standards, reasons, and practices we now employ does not lead to epistemological skepticism but only to a realization of human fallibility and the finitude of human rationality. (Bernstein, pp68-69)

Second. Incommensurability and dialogue

So different epochs and cultures are not so radically different that they can't communicate "across borders". Even when those cultures are incommensurable. But what do we mean by *incommensurable*?

Bernstein (1983) spends considerable time discussing this, arguing persuasively that whatever it is, it's not a barrier to communication. He warns that we must distinguish between *incommensurability* and *incomparability*. It's 'not only mistaken but perverse', he says (p82), to think that incommensurable theories and paradigms are incomparable. Indeed, the 'very rationale for [...] the notion of incommensurability is to clarify what is involved when we do compare alternative and rival paradigms'. And further: 'incommensurability does not get in the way of understanding and comparing [...] concepts' (p96). Perhaps better than tripping ourselves up over an oft-disputed notion, we can say in this case that when we say things are "incommensurable", we only mean that they may be valuable in different respects, that different arguments should be made when justifying each of them, but that they aren't, in principle, mutually inaccessible or unintelligible (see Fultner, 2011).

West (1986a) alludes to this. Disagreement becomes part-and-parcel of conversation, neither stopping conversations nor excluding conversationalists. Quite the opposite, it provides the very grounds necessary for debate. West argues that secular scientists and religious realists²²⁸ each have very different understandings of truth, according to their community's aims and purposes. But clearly, they can still debate, we see it all the time. What we *don't* see is "never the twain meeting". Putnam (1995) argues that recognising that having a concept exclusive to one language doesn't show that statements and propositions in that language using that concept cannot be entailed by statements or propositions in the second language.

And so, back to Galileo and Bellarmine. They certainly operated within "incommensurable" frameworks, but with no insurmountable barrier to

²²⁸ "Secular scientists and religious realists" are West's fancy, and we needn't concern ourselves with whether he could have used better examples.

communication. They understood each other, and could use idioms within each other's "language". Incommensurability is less about incommunicability and more about there not being a single, absolute, or neutral language or framework which fully allows 'cross-paradigmatic comparisons' (Bernstein, 1983, p85), such that we could discover 'a single, universal framework of commensuration' (*ibid*).²²⁹ We shouldn't interpret this as meaning that different frameworks can't be compared, but it does attack, commensurate with West's historicist ideas, the notion of one overarching framework within which all other frameworks somehow nestle.

It's a parallel of what West wrestles with, that there's no single set of ahistorical rational rules that permit us to determine which of several rival frameworks is better. They can't be judged *with reference to a "mother framework"*. Put slightly differently, there are no universally reliable meta-frameworks. We must stop looking for a 'common, neutral epistemological framework within which we can rationally evaluate competing theories and paradigms' (p92).

Incommensurability doesn't support what Bernstein calls 'the Myth of the Framework' (p91), that there can be no inter-framework communication, where we're 'enclosed in the prison house of our own frameworks and forms of life'.²³⁰ As he says (p93), in accepting incommensurability, we can appreciate the levels of skill and imagination needed to appreciate what's distinctive about 'different ways of practising science', and how 'in some areas' scientists 'see different things'. It's not that comparison's irrational, but it allows us to see the diversities of practical reason involved in making rational comparisons. Incommensurability is certainly deep difference, with no one-to-one direct fit of likeness and unlikeness; but it's not incomparability.

Consider conceptions of selfhood in different cultures. We may, for example, entertain a Cartesian view; but looking further afield into culturally-removed societies, we see incommensurable views emerging, which look eccentric to our eyes but which are held – critically and self-aware or otherwise – quite naturally by others, in ways which permit their societies to function coherently. These alternative pictures of the self - where we may never 'make a point-by-point comparison or translation [with or into our own pictures] or discover something which is *the* generic concept of self of which these are exotic species with clearly defined differentia' (Bernstein, p96) - may be obvious to other cultures, yet hugely different from our own. Incommensurable perhaps, but they can still be intelligible to us.

This though leaves us with a knotty question. Given historicism, given that this doesn't create arbitrary or random societal norms, given that different societies' norms aren't completely isolated from each other, and given also that even incommensurable norms and frameworks can be compared and discussed, and that dialogue can occur between and about them, we need to ask how getting this far has

²²⁹ As a *very* cartoonish metaphor, you can't decide an illegal move in cricket by appealing to the rules of chess, and there isn't one set of rules that governs all games.

²³⁰ Bernstein points out (1983, p80), that finding no single, permanent, ahistorical, absolute framework or meta-framework against which we can measure the rightness of competing theories, doesn't give us relativism. Incommensurability within mathematics, for example (such as the incommensurability of the hypotenuse of an isosceles triangle with its sides) doesn't give us anything even close to mathematical relativism.

benefited us. We still need to work out *how* moral and intellectual progress can be made and validated, how agreement can be reached, and how we can assure ourselves that this agreement is truly progressive and not founded in prejudice and ignorance. Communication is possible, but where cultures and societies don't see eye to eye, it's still difficult to imagine how meaningful agreement and progress can be made.

Part Three – Historicity, Hermeneutics, and Solidarity

What we need is a strategy. Bernstein begins from the position that completely appropriating other people's vantage points is 'impossible' (Bernstein, 1983, pp142-143), if by this we mean some Kafka-esque version of waking up with another's body and *Weltanschauung*. Given this, the goal would be a *fusion of horizons* (1983, Part III, and elsewhere), an opening up and broadening out of our horizons and thereby an enrichment of our vision and understanding. Put simply, we're in the business of educating ourselves in the traditions and the viewpoints of others, sympathetically understanding as much as we can of what they understand, and in a way, opening our eyes.

First. Hermeneutics and horizons

Where 'the medium of [one's] horizons is linguistic' (Bernstein, 1983, p144), we realise that communication is possible. People of different languages learn to talk to each other all the time, translators and interpreters bring different languages to others on a regular basis, and scholars bring 'dead' languages back to life with admirable gameness. Secular and religious linguistic metaphors, idioms and vocabularies often communicate effectively, while scientific and poetic societies have seldom if ever found constructive and effective communication impossible.

Language is perfectly suited to understanding other languages, standpoints, and horizons. Language *communicates*. Where it's at least possible to fuse and grow our horizons into and with others, and ideally where they do the same with us and our horizons, we're able to see our practices from new angles, testing our preconceptions and assumptions, rooting out our prejudices, and exposing, to the lights of new ways of perceiving, our blind-spots and unwitting ways of thinking which isolate us from other peoples.²³¹

Opening ourselves up, learning from others, and extending our horizons, is at the same time an act of understanding, learning about, and seeing ourselves, and how we behave, *differently*. This becomes a process whereby our horizons are expanded evermore: learning about ourselves means seeing ourselves differently, and this means learning about ourselves. In Bernstein's words, we 'gain the type of self-knowledge that is achieved whenever we realize that something that we have thought was obvious [...] may not have this epistemological character at all' (p96).

²³¹ Examples which illustrate this could include sexist, patriarchal societies being exposed to feminist thinking, such that they come to realise how alienating of and destructive to the latter their language is. One could even imagine a naïve and insular capitalist, upon first meeting a naïve and insular communist, undergoing some sort of fusion of horizons to make any conversation about economics and society possible.

And this perpetual motion of understanding isn't restricted to ourselves - where we understand ourselves newly, we understand newly how we *relate to* others, and understanding this offers new perspectives on those others. Where understanding ourselves differently is understanding ourselves in relation to others in new ways, then the opportunities to understand those others present themselves immediately. And through others, we gain better knowledge of ourselves, writes Bernstein (p144). But it doesn't end there. For through better knowledge of ourselves, we gain better knowledge of others. A virtuous circle is discovered.

Second. A quick word about understanding

Understanding, on this model, never finds closure, but that's neither the point nor the ideal of understanding. There's no "peak" of understanding to reach, only upward and outward growth. Looked at like this, the distances between groups aren't negative, they're positive. They open up understanding and offer opportunities for horizon-broadening, for finding new meanings in old texts and practices. As we broaden out, we become closer to those who'd previously been distant.

Bernstein notes that becoming aware of our prejudices and learning that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy, so to speak, is the beginning, not the end of wisdom. We're 'thrown' into the world, he says, as beings who understand and interpret, where understanding isn't one type of activity to be contrasted with other activities (p113). Understanding's what we *do*. It's not like we play, converse, philosophise, *and* understand; understanding's there, in the way we live our lives. There is, moreover, an active aspect to it, a practical wisdom. Bernstein, following Gadamer, talks of *phronēsis*.²³²

But understanding's complex, and it's something we give – we give our understanding *to* things, and it forms part of a dynamic intellectual motion, an engagement. As we recognise our prejudices, we inform our understanding; and as we inform our understanding, we add to our enabling prejudices. And as texts (for instance) have no meaning in themselves which can be separated from those who engage with them, our reading of the texts is an act of giving our understanding to them.²³³ Bernstein argues that this interaction of ourselves, our prejudgements, and the things we're trying to grasp, is conceptually inseparable from understanding.

Turning to West's interests, truths we hold dear about God, for instance, are likewise laden with preconception and interpretation (see West, 1996b, for more on this). Even basic truths that the majority of Christians hold dear are never free from preconception and interpretation. But this isn't "denying God", it's highlighting the hermeneutic character of the meaning of our God-claims. We're adding a fallibility to our understanding, and recognising historical contingencies in our interpretations. We're accenting the interpretive aspect of the meaning of belief. We are, tacitly,

²³² I don't wish to spend a great deal of time here discussing *phronēsis*, but a working definition of 'practical knowledge', 'practical understanding', and 'practical wisdom' should suffice, at least for now.

²³³ All understanding, according to Gadamer, involves interpretation (and *vice-versa*); so, understanding any text, theory, or moral truth statement is an *interpretive activity*.

inviting extra-cultural angles of interpretation to interplay with our understanding and further the meaning.²³⁴

Third. Hermeneutics and historicist principles

All this involves an awareness and application of historicist principles, which include accepting that not only are interpretations of the world, social practices, and ethical norms of societies contingent upon the historical contexts they were formed within, but that our own judgements of these theories, interpretations, practices and norms, are also to be understood as contingent upon historical context. These principles give us a humility and perspective when judging others and their practices. Our views are as prejudice-laden as theirs. And so, in applying historicist principles, we become aware of our preconceptions, and this compels us to look at the contingent historical forces acting upon us. We become engaged not only with those things we attempt to understand, but those historical forces that have moulded us and the ways in which we encounter otherness.

So in discussing the rationality of making *better* or *worse* choices, or of deciding which of a competing set of theses is better or worse, the practical, perspectival, self-aware aspect of the decision-making can't be ignored. Where we wish to move beyond positing permanent, ahistorical criteria to measure theories against, we need to be mindful that other rational enquirers, faced with the same evidence, will likely draw different conclusions from it, and that there'll be good historical reasons for this. Saying that something's a better theory than something else is saying not just something about the theory or the framework within which it's being gauged, it's saying something which refers to social practice, and social practices which include traditions, historical forces and perspectives.

Tradition and reason, preconception and observation, persuasiveness and rationality, these aren't opposites, but integral to each other. The interaction of ourselves, our prejudgements, and the things we're trying to understand is conceptually inseparable from understanding. And the historically-constituted norms of the communities of rational enquirers cannot be ignored either. These include those norms interwoven within the active relationships, inter-subjective communications, and linguistic practices of critical societies. Illustrating this, Bernstein (p78) notes 'if we want to understand what science is, it is not sufficient simply to describe what scientists do [...], but we must also take account of the norms constitutive of scientific enquiry'.

We can now ask a familiar question: what's going on when we engage with alien, incommensurable frameworks? In West's (1986a) language, what's going on when a secular scientist attempts to properly understand the frameworks, paradigms and preconceptions of a religious realist, and *vice-versa*? Neither party can escape her historically-conditioned frameworks or traditions, or see things through the eyes of the other, or directly appropriate the other's vantage point. The job is to find the resources within our own worldviews to "reach over", "reach in", and understand the

²³⁴ In these ways, the hermeneutic circle appears as an ecosystem – evolving, self-correcting, self-affecting, and with a complexity which denies ease of description and accurate prediction.

views of others as best we can, and such an understanding 'requires a dialectical play between our own pre-understandings and the forms of life we are seeking to understand' (Bernstein, p173). To do this, it's essential that we become historically aware and examine our own cultural baggage.

Fourth. Discourse and democracy

So, we "reach over" in the pursuance of truth. In the following arguments, I suggest that the key to this lies in a conscious broadening of democracy, facilitated by the humble, self-aware, self-critical, historicist, hermeneutic principles we've discussed, about which, we remember, West speaks passionately. Democracy, hermeneutic principles, and imaginative problem-solving, I argue, can enable epistemic and moral progress without any need for ahistorical, permanent absolutes.

According to Gadamer, truth is in a sense *discursive*, somehow *democratic*. In Bernstein's (1983, p151) words, it 'needs to be justified or warranted by argumentation'. Something can be called 'true' only when 'we can [...] give convincing arguments and reasons to show why it is true' (*ibid*).²³⁵ According to Bernstein, truth for Gadamer depends on the 'validation of [...] claims by our own thinking and argumentation' (*ibid*), even where we have conflicting (and newly fused) traditions influencing this thinking. To be sure, our own thinking and argumentation evolves into wider spheres of sophistication, whenever influenced by conflicting traditions.²³⁶

We judge truth claims by the standards of our group (see West, 1980b, 1981, 1986a, 2004, and Bernstein, 1983), and their aims and purposes, and what governs their understanding of rationality. These standards of rationality have been forged in the fires of history, they aren't ahistorically given. So, truth, on Gadamer's view, just as it is on West's, isn't discovered through reflection, it's reached *in the acts and the processes of agreement*, and as our horizons broaden, the means we employ to reach agreement change and become ever-more sophisticated, and as they do, the validation of truth-claims changes with them.

One of the great connecting strands of the pragmatist tendency, from James and Dewey up to Rorty,²³⁷ Putnam, and beyond, West (1989a) argues, has been to engage in 'conversation, undistorted communication, communal judgement, and the types of rational wooing that can take place when individuals confront each other as equals and participants [... These engagements...] draw us toward the goal of

²³⁵ There are problems with this, of course. Not everybody may find convincing what we find convincing; and some things might be true even where we can't give reasons, but this isn't a technical description Gadamer's concerned with; it's a broad understanding of the nature of truth and truth's relationship with discourse and democracy.

²³⁶ We may protest that this doesn't get us to anything like "the heart of truth", but for anti-essentialists like West, this isn't a problem. It's important to realise that while Gadamer might have shied away from fully explicating a notion of truth (if he ever had one), he certainly thought that truth-claims are *validated* by reflective, "horizontally-influenced" reasoned arguments. And West will have no problem here. Where he argues, as he does, that truth claims are validated not by an ontologically real, ahistorical reality but by a community of discursive parties, he'll have no hesitation in agreeing that truth needs to be warranted by argumentation within an ever-widening, hermeneutic community.

²³⁷ Rorty talked of pragmatists as those who 'reduce objectivity to solidarity' (Rorty, 1984, p228).

cultivating the types of dialogical communities in which *phronēsis*,²³⁸ judgements, and practical discourse become concretely embodied in our everyday practices' (p223). Gadamer's view fits comfortably within this.²³⁹

So, we take incommensurable communities, and ask whether they can communicate. As we've seen, the answer's yes. And then we ask, can their incommensurable ideas, theories, and practices *be compared*? And compared by these different communities, to the satisfaction of the other communities? And again, the answer's yes. And then we can ask: in the absence of ahistorical, absolute, or permanent facts and frameworks to judge paradigms and arguments against, how can we find which is right?

It's to this we now turn.

Fifth. Democracy, solidarity, and the question of "objectivism"

Back to Galileo and Bellarmine.²⁴⁰ Galileo's what we might playfully call "Enlightened", an illustration of Reformation thinking and secular scientific principles. Bellarmine, on the other hand, isn't so Enlightened, representing counter-Reformation principles, and not recognising the secularised cosmology of his opponent. We can take Galileo and Bellarmine as paradigmatic – or at least as *high-relief* – standard-bearers in a clash of incommensurable communities. Let's now assume that West, Gadamer, Bernstein and others have it right, that there are no absolute ahistorical standards²⁴¹ we can judge our truth statements or ethical claims against. What now?

We know that the Reformation and counter-Reformation met. We know they communicated. And we know that through rigorous, often painful, *rational* democratic dialogue, in which all sides contributed (for without this we wouldn't be able to satisfy ourselves with our conclusions), *agreement was reached*. Maybe not everybody agreed with everything, but a lack of universality isn't the exclusive domain of democratic anti-realists.

So, we have our example – and one that could have worked far smoother than it did, had self-critical, ever-broadening, hermeneutic principles been employed. But this notwithstanding, we have an example of incommensurable paradigms clashing and conversing. And as – or after – they clashed, agreement was eventually reached. But in finding such agreement, nobody appealed to 'permanent, atemporal standards of rationality' (Bernstein, 1983, p67). They used arguments designed to persuade and show that one way of thinking was better than another.

This doesn't mean they simply used rhetoric; and although what we take now to be good reasons may turn out in the future not to be accepted as such, this doesn't

²³⁸ One could say practical wisdom, lived judgements, applied knowledge, and prudence.

²³⁹ We may also refer to Dewey (1922a, 1922b, 1983).

²⁴⁰ Simply because it keeps things clearer when we're consistent with our examples; and because Bernstein and others have used them for their own purposes.

²⁴¹ What Bernstein (1983) refers to as *objectivism*.

mark them worthless, “merely subjective”, or indefensible outside matters of taste, any more than if a metaphysical realist changed her mind about what constitutes good reasons as evidence and theories developed. The standards were mutually accepted standards and, therefore, not exclusive to those representing the Reformation or counter-Reformation.²⁴² But while perhaps only tacitly, they were considered, by all parties, to be good standards. And in employing non-absolutist, non-culturally specific standards, agreement was at some stage reached that Galileo’s position was *better* than Bellarmine’s.

Typical of the kind of argument undertaken by Galileo and Bellarmine, the advancement of scientific theories is in large part – as Bernstein points out Kuhn argued – a creative and imaginative process, not a search for an ahistorical absolute, but a generative, inventive act of experimentation to see what *works*, often a leap in the dark to solve practical problems. This process occurs in a social setting. Its object is often the practical understanding or overcoming of practical problems. It’s a heading towards *phronēsis*. Inspiration indeed accompanies perspiration. This creativity and imagination doesn’t preclude rationality, it simply means that rationality isn’t necessarily bound to permanent meta-frameworks or Archimedean courts of appeal.

The theories scientists advance are in the main articulated in language,²⁴³ and as Rorty (1989) argues, the meanings of our words are bound up with the contexts in which we use them, adding that all our language may be seen as metaphorical. As metaphor takes its character from the cultures in which it’s used, with vastly different, even incommensurable metaphors used in different cultures, we see that meaning, interpretation, culture, history, and understanding are all constantly at work with one another. Yet this doesn’t lessen our sense of being rational agents, it merely undermines the likelihood of historically-contingent, culturally-dependent language providing ahistorical truths. Truth and meaning are always ‘*coming into being*’ (Bernstein, 1983, p139, italics in original), always ‘happening’. Turning to Gadamer (1975, p298), ‘the discovery of true meaning [...] is never finished; it is in fact an infinite process’.

Scientists may be among society’s more rational enquirers. When science is done well, we see it as a standard-bearer of rationality. And we can say with Bernstein (1983, chapters 1-4) and Gadamer, that there need be no meta-framework of scientific method, no permanent criteria for evaluating or justifying scientific hypotheses, and no single thing we call scientific method, aiming at one type of answer we call, solely and above all else, a “scientific answer”. We can also say there’s no single meta-framework telling us, *inter alia*, what counts as *better* or *worse* arguments. But importantly, this in itself doesn’t rule out there being better or worse arguments, any more than the lack of a single meta-framework of scientific method might mean that there’s no scientific method. An inability to pinpoint a single, ahistorical meta-framework for something, should not be confused with that something being a figment of our imaginations.

²⁴² Had they not been mutually accepted standards, it’s hard to explain how constructive discourse could have happened.

²⁴³ Perhaps always so.

Sixth. A question of standards

Turning to whether we then require standards to judge our arguments against, we may say something like: consistent with West, Gadamer and Bernstein, it seems odd to argue that while we can't provide single, permanent meta-frameworks for scientific (or moral) enquiry, or making better arguments, we can provide such frameworks for the act of *judging these arguments against*. There's no need to presuppose any such thing. Democratic, hermeneutically alive discussion neither needs nor usually wants permanent meta-frameworks (which may be limiting). In the imaginative process of scientific and moral progress, such things function as prisons, restricting and suffocating debate.²⁴⁴

We aren't denying that we can find progress, only that whatever progress we find can be measured against an ahistorical "Archimedean" framework. Denying that framework isn't denying progress or rationality, but shining a light on what we mean when we talk about progress and rationality. As Bernstein (1983, p196) writes, it's 'all too frequently assumed that if we cannot come up with universal, fixed criteria to evaluate the plausibility of competing interpretations, this means that we have no rational basis for distinguishing the better from the worse [... But] we can and do make comparative judgements in concrete cases [and] support them with the appeal to reasons and argumentation'. We just don't use Archimedean points or ahistorical frameworks as our standards.²⁴⁵

To find standards which avoid vulgar relativism, we find standards which aren't exclusive to one culture, paradigm, or framework. That is, we require norms and standards that aren't ahistorical or absolute, but *culture-independent* – shared, or at least available to all regardless of time, place, culture or context. Expanding our horizons in the most inclusive way possible seems the best way of doing this when seeking to understand and intelligently critique the frameworks of others and reach mutual, universal agreement, while avoiding "true for me, false for you" answers. A synthesis is pursued whereby "as universal a 'we' as possible" seek knowledge together through an evolving, sharing, process, both within and of the incommensurable.²⁴⁶ Dewey (1922a, 1922b, 1978), indeed, believed we can get ethical enquiry *right*, and that the democratic community of enquirers was the means to achieve this (see also Putnam, 1994).

This hermeneutic fusing of vistas tests our own prejudices, helping break us free from cultural specificity. It demands of us to see more and to lessen the impact of our historically-conditioned norms. And as more people engage in the process, we

²⁴⁴ We could argue that incommensurability undermines there being a set of discoverable meta-frameworks to tell us 'how rational agreement can be reached on what would settle the issue on every point where statements seem to conflict' (Bernstein, 1983, p92).

²⁴⁵ Putnam, (1994, p154) reminds us ironically that there's no Archimedean point 'from which we can argue that what is indispensable in life *gilt nicht in der Philosophie*' (doesn't apply in philosophy).

²⁴⁶ This is nothing alien to West, indeed he embraces the notion. In his 2021 *Masterclass* series, he asks what he describes as 'fundamental questions', such as 'how does tradition shape and mould our conceptions of who we are?' and how can we 'be willing to get out of [our] unique and singular skin, [and] imagine what it's like to be in the skin of others?' (West, 2021a).

move away from the dangers of vulgar relativism and towards something more universal, which more people can accept, whose standards, potentially, *everybody* can share, and are culture-independent. We're not looking for objectivity, we're contributing to rationally-formed agreement. *All* frameworks and paradigms become open for understanding, comparison, and horizon-expansion. "Your framework versus my framework" gives way to "our mutual conversation". 'Investigating [...] problems requires just the values that have come to be linked with the [ideal] open society', notes Putnam (1994, p176).

From a hermeneutic perspective, a truth which allows us to *fuse* horizons rather than pitch one against another, is essential to avoiding vulgar relativism. This fusion of horizons helps universalise the discourse and move away from culture-specificity. It universalises the norms and standards employed in conversation by consciously expanding them *towards everybody, by everybody*. There may be no ahistorical Archimedean objectivism about this, but as Putnam and Bernstein argued,²⁴⁷ we aren't faced with an either-or Scylla and Charybdis of absolutism or vulgar relativism. Ever improving arguments where incommensurable, yet comparable frameworks rationally interplay, are essential in finding this truth. We can judge claims, arguments and worldviews by using the dialogically available set of standards and practices that culture and history have made available to us all, hammered out in the course of conversation, while still avoiding, ultimately, a retreat into one or another culture.

While there's no appeal here to the "objective", there's still rational justification available, which can be universally accepted and isn't culturally-dependent. For we aim to justify our arguments and standpoints not only to our own traditions, but to unfamiliar traditions also; and we aim for a position where all groups can accept those arguments and standpoints. So while we may never be able to discover an absolute, ahistorical, Archimedean framework, meta-framework, or court of appeal to which we can turn to help us agree on what's right or wrong, or a better or worse argument, it would be wrong to conclude that we can't in retrospect and principle identify the rational, agreeable, and explicable standards which showed that one theory or cultural paradigm won out over its less successful competitors. It may not be that fixed truths are discovered, as some traditionalists may have hoped; it may not even be that everyone is bound to agree with the rationale of the justification; but it is the case that trans-cultural rational standards are at play, and that these need be neither absolute, nor culturally-relative.

Conclusion

We've seen a number of things in this chapter. In the first section, we saw how the supposed necessity of the connection between historicism and vulgar relativism wasn't obviously necessary at all, as had previously been thought. In Section Two, we explored further, and saw that historically contingent positions shouldn't be confused with arbitrary positions; that historically-conditioned epochs don't exist in bubbles, separate from one another; and that they'll still be able to communicate

²⁴⁷ In Section One of this chapter.

with each other. We then saw that ever-broadening democratic discourse can allow vastly different cultures, with vastly different frameworks and paradigms, to interact in ways they can all understand; and that it's theoretically possible to bring in the widest possible community of enquirers, perhaps approaching a universality of enquirers, to create consensus such that important questions can be tackled. The best way of doing this, I argued, is by employing hermeneutic principles.

Where we find communication, consensus, and hermeneutic self-reflection highlighting our culturally-dependent preconceptions, it's possible to reach *agreement* on important subjects. Agreement on even a small number of things leaves the door open for agreement on more and more subjects, such as scientific, moral, and epistemic differences. Where there's the possibility of universal, cross-cultural agreement based on hermeneutically-derived and universally agreeable standards, we found a route to avoiding vulgar relativism. And where vulgar relativism is avoided, it becomes possible for this potentially universal community of enquirers to agree that some things are *better* than others. In this way, moral and epistemic *progress* can be achieved.

We've done all this after following lines of reasoning in West's writing in our previous chapters and arriving at just that very place that allowed us to discover this, all the while remaining true to the spirit of West's work, but using some license in how we apply it. We've found that West's philosophical tools, and the philosophical spaces he opens by using them, have allowed us to explore new answers to questions that had been pressing down on us, which West himself had not fully addressed. And we've used the ideas of a number of other philosophers – such as Putnam, Bernstein, and Gadamer – to shine a light into some of the areas where previously, there had been a need for clarification and clarity. And we've done this without contradicting our non-absolutist position or rejecting our ethical focus, through directing our attentions towards hermeneutic self-reflection, and universalisable discourse.

Naturally, those occupying incommensurable frameworks find it incumbent upon them to expand their horizons as far as possible into opposing frameworks, avoiding any "my-framework-versus-your-framework" stances. At the same time, they must still be able to maintain that there's no single, absolute framework or meta-framework on the one hand, and on the other, that through the process of hermeneutic ever-widening discourse, people can come to better and better answers and those from fundamentally opposing frameworks can still find equitable agreement upon important questions. This is the challenge.

But it's intellectually unadventurous of us to retreat from ontological realism, ahistorical absolutes or permanent meta-frameworks, and then admit a failure of mission. We've seen that in critically evaluating alternative frameworks, we don't have to assume an absolute ahistorical standard to judge alternatives by. Nor need our answers be arbitrary. Fixed, ahistorical standards don't after all appear necessary to argue rationally or show that one view is better than another. We can agree which argument is better than another without the need of absolutes. We can see the force of certain practices being better than others within the contingent developments of

history, without needing to somehow transcend history in order to do it. We know, finally, what we *don't* need in order to make good, rational judgements and see that some arguments, practices and positions are better than others. What we do need, however, is the ability to expand our intellectual (or moral) horizons, get to grips with alternative paradigms, and engage in democratic discourse in order to compare these paradigms, the ideas that accompany them, and the practices they give rise to; and then to forge common agreement on a shared basis, in non-culturally specific ways. In this way, it seems that a hermeneutically-informed, self-critical *democracy* may best provide the basis for truth and progress.

This is a significant step in our investigation. However, in taking it, we find our footing in something which may prove far more problematic than even the issue of vulgar relativism we've been so keen to avoid. The avoidance of vulgar relativism has driven a concentration on culture-independent norms and standards, but it's here the dangers lie. In the next chapter, we turn to this new-found difficulty, analyse it and understand exactly why it's so troublesome, before offering, in the final chapter, a radical solution, one creatively and newly reconstructed straight from the philosophy of Cornel West. In doing so, we discover that we're able to offer an ingenious solution to the very problems West finds himself challenged by, using ideas taken directly from West himself.

Chapter Six: Democracy Matters

Part One. Introduction: A Might Without Right?

There's an old saying: *Might Makes Right*, whose first recorded use came in the Christian abolitionist work *Christian Non-Resistance: In All Its Important Bearings, Illustrated and Defended*,²⁴⁸ a book which, if Cornel West has ever read it or were ever to read it, he may well approve of. 'But now, [...] brute force rises up to the rescue of discomfited error, and crushes truth and right into the dust. 'Might makes right,' and hoary folly totters on in her mad career escorted by armies and navies', exclaims the author; while Abraham Lincoln appealed to voters during the crucial days of electioneering as America prepared to tear itself apart in a civil war based in no mean part on the issue of slavery: 'Let us have faith that right makes might',²⁴⁹ he said, turning the phrase on its head.²⁵⁰

While neither Ballou (the book's author) nor Lincoln may have had in mind the problems of vulgar relativism or historicist questions over the justification of moral positions we're interested in, I suggest the phrase they coined carries with it a significance that we cannot now ignore.

We've reached a crucial moment in our investigation: having come so far, it may be that we've found ourselves facing an impossible challenge. The historicism West advocates looks as though it's caught us on the horns of an unpalatable dilemma: either, it seems, we're compelled to accept the sort of vulgar relativism we, indeed he, and others find so abhorrent and which would undermine our whole project of social justice and the search for moral progress, or – and perhaps this is even worse – might really is right and truth itself now lies in the hands of power.²⁵¹ Having spent so long breaking the link between historicism and vulgar relativism, we must now turn our attention to this second issue. What is it we mean when we say that truth lies in the hands of power, and how does it affect our arguments? Perhaps more crucially, if it's true and as bad as indicated, what answers could we have?

We began the previous chapter with the hope of a route out of the difficulties a West-following philosophy had found itself in, by turning to the work of Hans-George Gadamer and Richard Bernstein, who both argued that non-absolutist positions were no barrier to finding better arguments and moral progress. Self-critical hermeneutic discourse was put forward as a method of reaching cross-cultural (or we could say "culturally independent") assent as to whether one thing or another was *better*, or *more right*,²⁵² than its alternatives. Such acultural methods

²⁴⁸ Adin Ballou, 1846.

²⁴⁹ Cooper Union Address, February 27, 1860.

²⁵⁰ "Ragnar Redbeard", a pseudonym of (possibly) Arthur Desmond, wrote a book called *Might Is Right*, advocating an extreme form of individualism and social Darwinism, which took the dictum seriously, arguing a form of Nietzschean morality and egoism.

²⁵¹ I shan't spend time arguing why truth lying in the hands of power should set off alarm bells for all those fighting to enfranchise the disenfranchised, and equal the unequal.

²⁵² Boghossian's phrase.

were key to avoiding vulgar relativism. However, while we can accept their arguments, we left the chapter with a deep concern which we'll have to confront now.

Where Bernstein and Gadamer attempted to find ways of giving better arguments, they left themselves open to the criticism that "better" is grounded in nothing more than democracy. Now, we might ask why that's so bad: democracy and democratic process after all have led to the enfranchisement of millions from the widest range of backgrounds, and arguably been the grounds for a fairer society – something we and West undoubtedly approve of. Worrying that "better" is grounded in democracy may appear a strange thing to say, needing some explanation. Therefore, I devote a significant amount of attention to this as this chapter progresses.

In what follows, I engage with what we might mean when we say that "'better' is grounded in democracy", and in so doing, why democracy cannot provide the kind of grounding for moral progress that West, or we – or indeed any historicist – would want. This chapter makes the following case, broadly speaking: drawing on arguments employed by Habermas, we realise that the solution to the problem of non-absolutist rationality is not properly solved by a universalised, hermeneutic, democratic discourse. All democratic discourse contains power dynamics, even within the language it uses. Those at most risk of the nihilistic existence West wishes to fight are precisely those with least hope of asserting themselves, yet they have most to lose.

If universalised discourse requires norms, norms are forged democratically, and democratic discourse contains power dynamics, then those democratically forged norms will disadvantage those who start the game from a position of weakness. Wherever regulative norms are cultural, no universalised discourse will be equal. What's required is a culturally-neutral, universally available, regulative norm. Hermeneutic discourse alone can't provide that.

To show this, we follow these steps:

Initially, we briefly remind ourselves of the issue, which is taking Gadamer seriously such that answers can be found to moral questions that are better than other answers, without the need for absolutes or the dangers of vulgar relativism. This is where we got to in the arguments surrounding moral progress and non-absolutism that we developed from a sensitivity to the challenges that arose reading West. We critique this by picking out an interesting line from Habermas's debate with Gadamer, where he suggests that Gadamer's ideas are insufficient for our purposes.

We then show why these ideas are insufficient, first by examining Habermas's demand for a "species-wide competence" to universally validate communicative action, then by looking at his critique of Gadamer's attempt to discover a fair and equally weighted universalised discourse, examining why a grounding of discourse in universalised democratic practices, as Gadamer desires, is replete with problems – chiefly, problems relating to social and language structures.

Finally, we look to the responses Gadamer gives to Habermas, but find them wanting.

We conclude, therefore, that Habermas was right and Gadamer's route to discovering fair and equal discourse, free of the kind of power imbalances that leave the downtrodden at a permanent nihilistic disadvantage, is lacking.

Part Two. The Arguments.

Let's begin with a simple question: what is it that we're trying to do?

I suggest that the object of the exercise is to focus on our non-absolutist principles, chase our goal of rationally justifiable moral progress, accept where West's enquiries on these topics had taken us to but acknowledge the apparent limitations we'd found in him, take seriously the line of argument Gadamer presented, and then take seriously the solutions he offered. These were that it's possible to come up with *better* arguments, without absolutes or appeals to "large-T objective Truth", by adopting a self-critical, hermeneutic approach and "universalising" it to the widest possible community of equally self-critical enquirers. The previous chapter undertook to do just this, finding merit in the approach.

So the next step is to acknowledge that these solutions, while undoubtedly incisive in their response to the challenges he took on, were by no means perfect. I suggest in fact, that while important, Gadamer's ideas were incomplete.

To demonstrate why, our first port of call will be Habermas, a man who spent many years probing, deconstructing, and challenging Gadamer.²⁵³

First, Habermas and the demands for a "species-wide competence"

In this short section, we examine what Habermas wanted to achieve, and what he thought was needed to achieve it. In examining what he wanted, we see that *first*, he hoped to find a means of validating communicative action through the possibility of a universalised discourse, open to all, just as Gadamer had wanted; and *second*, that this discourse would be free of bias. In examining what Habermas thought would be needed to achieve this, we see that *first*, he looked to communicative norms which could be freely accepted by everyone who might be affected by the discourse; and *second*, he identified a requirement that all who are affected by a norm of action should be allowed a fair, equally weighted contribution to the discourse surrounding it.

²⁵³ I should say that Habermas wasn't completely critical of Gadamer. In fact, he greatly admired his work, describing much of it in extremely positive terms. Alan How (1995 – *The Habermas-Gadamer Debate and the Nature of the Social*) makes a point of mentioning this, noting in particular how Habermas regarded Gadamer's hermeneutics as the best route available for justification of 'a non-objectivist social science' (p6). Habermas also agreed with Gadamer that what we're looking for to make the hermeneutic process work properly is a shared – even if not conflict-free – exchange and broadening (or merging) of horizons (see How, 1995, also Nielsen and Emerson, 2002). But it's at those points of divergence that we find the conversation most interesting.

First, what Habermas wanted to achieve

According to Nielsen and Emerson (2002), Habermas wanted a route into universal discourse which was accessible to all, and acceptable to everyone. For such a thing to exist, any argument for universal structures would need to avoid ethnocentrism or bias, and demonstrate that we must all, regardless of who we are or where we come from, be able to communicate self-critically, openly, and fairly (Nielsen and Emerson, 2002, especially p33, also McCarthy 1991, especially pp134-135).²⁵⁴ It also assumes (even relies on) the premise that everybody accepts the normative maxim that all who are affected by a norm of action should be allowed a contribution.

This is because, for Habermas, communicative action depends upon interpersonal relations with a normative dimension. When speakers from different epistemic or moral frameworks, or sociological or cultural backgrounds, find themselves in a social relationship, oriented towards the same thing and not isolated from each other, there's contact. Within this "contact zone", people interact, consciously and subconsciously avoid each other, exchange views, understand and misunderstand each other, and take on, sometimes partially shake off, and project elements of identity to and from one another.

In this sense, identity becomes a creative, participatory event. Communicative action becomes a dynamic ecosystem involving an active and impactful to-and-fro of ideas and even personal and cultural identity, incubating new ideas from old and new combinations of previously disparate thought systems in the friction of debate. Such communicative action demands universal participation; and universal participation requires equality, opportunity, and safety. A potentially universal community of participants must each feel themselves free from constriction and discrimination, and that the conversation (and any mode of conversation used) is as much *theirs* as anyone's. To this end, Habermas's ideal dialogue seeks social consensus grounded in 'reciprocal discourse' (How, p17).

His hope (see How, p43) was to find a universal, dispassionate method of discourse which would filter out the ideological misunderstandings we all carry with us. In this way, he could open up discourse to all possible participants, and do so without prejudicing one group against another. Indeed, any community, or community-of-communities, we work towards realising, needs some means of recognising and rectifying the weight of domination and power imposing themselves on societies and individuals through the Trojan horse of language.²⁵⁵

Second, what Habermas thought was needed to achieve this

Habermas argued consistently that properly inclusive transcultural relations were impossible without discourse norms which could be freely accepted by all those who

²⁵⁴ I'll leave aside questions of learning difficulties or disabilities here, and assume that provision, in a more sophisticated analysis, could reasonably be made for those who find "neuro-typical" and "physio-typical" communication difficult.

²⁵⁵ I'll say more about language, the "medium for discourse", shortly.

might be affected by dialogue and action,²⁵⁶ this position being reflected in his attempt to create a regulative theory aimed at outlining dialogical modes and practices that individuals could feasibly agree on together. His aim was to validate communicative action through a form of universalisation, whereby every valid norm must be freely acceptable by all those with an interest in it. For Habermas, this was a requirement for any ethical discourse that opened up communication and oriented interlocutors towards each other's lifeworlds and expectations, without seeking to impose a final word upon one another, or upon the conversation itself; and which turned those interlocutors towards both a self-reflection aimed at critically understanding their own perspectives, and an outward reflection aimed at sympathetically understanding the perspectives of others.²⁵⁷

Second, Habermas's critique of Gadamer

Gadamer had attempted to discover a fair, equally weighted universalised discourse, as we've seen, yet Habermas argued that he'd failed. To show Habermas's reasoning, we take the following route: *first*, we remember that Habermas, like West, believed moral discourse needs to win out through rationally justifiable arguments, articulable equally by all, unprejudiced by the dynamics of power, aiming at understanding. *Second*, this discourse, for Gadamer, is ideally realised in a universalised democratic dialogue. But – third – Habermas recognised that universalised democratic dialogue cannot safeguard against power inequalities. At this stage in the argument, the route bifurcates, and we see two distinct dimensions to these power inequalities, which I then examine in turn.

First - we've located Habermas's requirement for universalisability. Every speech act, he argued, implicitly raises universal validity claims. We need to find agreement because our communication, at best, rather than being about force, emotional manipulation, or the blind acceptance of authority, must be in large part about convincing others through better arguments which can in principle be rationally justified. In theory, when we communicate, we assume that what we say can be agreed upon by anyone capable of understanding us (see How, p15). This is more than simply a caveat stitched on to Gadamer's work as a caution against a hermeneutics that isn't fully participated in; it's a critique of the very structure of any potential solution Gadamer had come up with. After all, Gadamer also had a stake in these issues, weaving them into his hermeneutics.

Second - in Gadamer's case, the hermeneutic activity aimed for mutual understanding, even between incommensurable frameworks,²⁵⁸ and an important aspect of understanding is in reaching *agreement* (see Gadamer, 1989). Also, in his view, *coming to an understanding* is contextual. Human discursive interaction is, we might say, about attempting to understand each other contextually. So there's

²⁵⁶ This can be found throughout Habermas's writings on the subject, but How (1995), Moon (1995), and Nielson and Emerson (2002) make exactly the same point.

²⁵⁷ See also Nielson and Emerson for more discussion on this.

²⁵⁸ Or at least, what we have called – after Bernstein – “incommensurable frameworks”.

dialogue aimed at understanding, understanding aimed at agreement, and agreement that finds its voice – and its springboard for further investigation, communication, and understanding – in dialogue. These three aspects of hermeneutic discourse can't be separated.²⁵⁹

Third - but Habermas recognised that there was no protection against power imbalances here, and Gadamer's conception of dialogue 'provided no way for us to distinguish between a legitimate consensus, and one that had been achieved through a 'systematically distorted communication'. [...] In a patriarchal society, for example, forms of inequality between men and women may be accepted by both sexes, but still be the outcome of assumptions and definitions that pre-empt any other conclusion than the rightness of male superiority' (How p16). This gets towards the crux of what we hinted at at the end of Chapter Five, that Gadamer's solution, ingenious and important though it is, leaves space for power dynamics within the hermeneutic discourse and the confirmation – indeed the endorsement – of inequalities between speakers. It was Habermas's intention to identify and neutralise this unequal, distorted communication, and his discourse focusing on reciprocity and his hopes for universality were intended to do just this.

In identifying it, we can focus on two distinct yet related dimensions of power imbalance. There are many points of intersection between these dimensions, so a careful – and self-consciously permeable – outline of the borders between them should be drawn. We'll look at the more accessible dimension first.

The First Dimension

The first dimension is that of *societal power*. Here we see that *first*, moral truths (and norms) expressed by a community may very well reflect the interests of those groups, and ideas unpalatable to those group interests won't survive. *Second*, we see that if equality within discourse is judged and regulated through that discourse, there's a danger that equality will never be achieved. Where the acceptance of some norms over others is decided by discourse, it becomes apparent that - essentially - "to the winners of the argument go the spoils". *Third*, as norms are reflections of the interests of a democratic community, and as the discourse of communities is what regulates equality within that discourse, and as these discourses produce "winners" and "losers", with the winners carrying with them the norms of discourse, the argument is that a universalised democratic discourse may actually, contrary to Gadamer's hopes, produce the very power imbalances he sought to eradicate!

Habermas believes that on some levels, dialogue's controlled by those engaged in it. This may seem hardly worth mentioning, but, in what Bernstein (1983) describes as a non-objectivist framework, such as West's, Habermas's, and Gadamer's, it's important. We remember West (1980b, 1981, 1986a) insisting that truths shouldn't be judged against some objective reality, but by the standards, aims, and purposes

²⁵⁹ Gadamer also argued that *application* is part-and-parcel of understanding. Understanding, often, occurs in the act of application, in the being-able-to-ness of application. When we're able to apply one thing to another, particularly when this is in a real-life situation (as opposed to, say, some theoretical abstract in an academic discussion), we understand, at least to some extent.

of particular groups of interlocutors. This imbues truth with a heavily social aspect. Truths become dependent, even where the link with vulgar relativism has been undermined and the incommensurability of frameworks has been broken down, upon the society of speakers; and in such cases, where Gadamer's hermeneutics maintains a level of truth expressed by a community, those truths reflect the perspectives and the power dynamics of the communities that hold them. Any "truths" which that society finds unpalatable won't survive.

Democratic dialogue, far from ensuring equality between people and providing the security needed for true universal discourse of the type Habermas wished for, must itself be questioned. The validity of democratic processes becomes drawn into uncertainty. Indeed, the very validity of hermeneutics itself might be brought into doubt.²⁶⁰ Georgia Warnke (1995) agreed with this analysis, noting that Habermas couldn't think how Gadamer could provide safeguards against this. Habermas saw that we can only be said to have resolved a disputed claim if we can all agree to the reasons given in its support, and furthermore if absolutely everyone involved is given a fair and equal chance to raise questions and make their own claims (Warnke, 1995, p126). And the notion of equal chances isn't as simple to secure as Gadamer would have wanted.

Where "equal chances" are measured by democratic discourse against the standards set through democratic discourse by those participating in – and *driving* – this discourse, it's difficult to see how equality can be separated from the social processes that need to be equal. And there's a danger of vicious circularity here, because – put crudely – equality's supposed to be ensured by social processes, but these social processes need to be equal if they are to do this job properly. And yet, equality's ensured by social processes ...

Diggins (1994, 1998) makes a similar point. Universalised democratic discourse always carries at least the sense of winners and losers, and a gradual hardening of some norms over others, with no guarantee of the "rightness" of these norms other than that they're accepted. And this acceptance is a social, political process which in itself doesn't have the interests of the weakest at heart. Norms become adopted because they *win out* over alternatives, and they're often more likely to win out when they're championed by those with more power, guile, education, or sophisticated discourse skills. Those in a position of weakness seldom have such advantages.

It's worth noting that West's alive to the dangers that democratised discourse holds, remarking that it often leads to a 'deification of power' (West, 1989a, p101). He offers no arguments to sever this connection, but does note (1981) that nihilism's a natural consequence of a culture regulated by structures that mask manipulation, mastery and domination. Furthermore, he agrees with Gadamer that all discourse is based on preconceptions, and no matter how much we hope that our preconceptions are scrupulously fair, we know they're tainted by prejudice. And democracy in all its forms, structured, regulated, formal, or otherwise, has a long history of upholding forms of domination, even unintentionally. Indeed, even the most cursory study of

²⁶⁰ This isn't something which Habermas alone thought. Even Gadamer recognised it (see How, 1995, for more on this – especially but not exclusively p196).

human interaction shows that marginalisation, exclusion, and even the silencing of those who don't conform to accepted norms, has been a feature of democratic discourse for as long as it's been recorded.

So far from setting bulwarks against injustice, a universalised democratic discourse may produce imbalances, inequalities, and unfairness. Considering the normal mechanics of social interaction, it may even be that such things are likely - and Gadamer certainly offers no strong argument to the contrary. However, even were this not the case, the second dimension of power imbalance will certainly prove problematic to him.

The Second Dimension

This is even more ingrained than the first. While the first dimension can roughly be characterised as relating to social structures, the second can roughly be characterised as relating to language structures. And language, being the means through which social processes and hermeneutic action generally take place, is integral to everything Gadamer hoped to achieve. We examine this in the following way:

Initially, I argue that language isn't neutral, unpacking different ways the non-neutrality of language is manifested. From there, I show that the line West has always taken, that no truths that can be articulated neutrally, is also found in Habermas. I then apply this thought to Habermas's quest to find ideal modes of communication that everybody, regardless of who they are, can agree upon (the universalisability criterion) that's not only universalisable, but fair and *equitable*.²⁶¹

We then find that discourse is implicated, for Habermas, in normative claims. With norms being articulable linguistically language being inseparable from the cultures that use it, the argument is that norms are laden with power inequalities.²⁶² But equity demands an idealised community of equal speakers, free from power inequalities. So, the required ideal speech conditions appear unachievable. This argument plays out as follows:

Habermas argues (Habermas, 1992, How, 1995, Warnke, 1995, and Nielson and Emerson, 2002) that language isn't neutral. It carries with it inequalities in all sorts of ways: in gender-specificity, ideological subtexts within speech patterns, the value-laden modes of expression, the value-laden nature of individual words, the political dimensions of truth (see West, 1981, and elsewhere), taboos, the metaphors that "win out" and are accepted by communities, the very fact that language developed alongside, in the wake of, and saturated with, the norms and values of the societies

²⁶¹ We should note that finding "ideal modes of communication" between those who speak different languages is likely to prove even harder than finding them among those who speak the same language. Also, finding such modes seems on the face of it likely to be harder between different societies than it will be among groups within the same society.

²⁶² In simple terms we can understand norms as mutually-binding yet unformalised social rules that motivate and govern actions, to which participants in given social groups are reciprocally answerable (see Geertz, 1973, Coleman, 1990, Nielsen and Emerson, 2002).

which use them, and even in the implicit “turn-taking” that languages have built within them,²⁶³ structured in such a way that controls speech.

To be sure, for Habermas, language is a medium of social domination, fostering and legitimising power relations (Habermas, 1968, p259). For him, ‘language is [...] ideological’. And so, truths carried by language become ideologically saturated. The fact that truth and language go hand-in-hand, and that language reflects socio-historical forces,²⁶⁴ just highlights that truths, as we frame them, are outcomes of social processes. As socio-historical forces have privileged some groups over others, language resonates with this privilege; and so, then, does truth. Truth, like language, is indeed far from neutral.

Social outcomes, we can add, will almost always favour some groups over others, especially where the better educated are concerned, and *this* is especially true where people are better educated in the ways of using language. Discourse is effected through the medium of language. The routes this discourse takes, the conclusions it reaches, the very methods by which it’s conducted, all labour under the invisible weight of social privilege. Language becomes the fixer, discourse the Trojan horse, hermeneutics the tool and the engine of, rather than the solution to, social problems.

How (1995, p146) puts it well. ‘Gadamer assumes a dialogic symmetry exists where a systemic asymmetry may be the norm’. In Habermas’s picture, society needs some means of recognising and rectifying the mechanisms through which processes and structures of power impose themselves on the weakest “behind the back of” language, in the shadows of discourse. He believed that Gadamer failed to produce such means, and in failing to do so, left his version of hermeneutics vulnerable.²⁶⁵

The debate pans out

We see where Habermas wanted to take the discussion: within any society, especially a pluralistic one such as in the modern world, the question is how we can come up with modes of communication that everybody, regardless of race, gender, culture, class, economic power, or otherwise, can agree upon – and furthermore how we can ensure these modes of communication are fair and equal. In his vernacular: how do you construct a transcultural ethics?

He writes that in communicative action, ‘one actor seeks to motivate another rationally by relying on the illocutionary binding / bonding effect (*Bindungseffect*) of the offer contained in his speech act’ (Habermas, 1990, p58). This *Bindungseffect* of communicative action isn’t achieved through compromise and shouldn’t be one of the mechanisms of unequal power, it’s the product of free, autonomous, mutual understanding. Our reasoned communicative actions are implicated, for him, in

²⁶³ Many languages feature specific norms for introducing, interrupting, closing conversations, and other such “who-goes-next” procedures which incorporate restricting features.

²⁶⁴ See, for instance, How, 1995.

²⁶⁵ Warnke (1995) agrees that Habermas is largely concerned with ‘how language has the ability to coordinate action in a consensual or cooperative way as opposed to a forced or manipulative one’ (Warnke, p120), and that this forced or manipulative way is inherent within discourse. We have no evidential reasons to accept Gadamer’s view over Habermas’s, and so must continue to take Habermas’s view seriously.

normative claims, becoming the object of study for those interested in revealing the normative foundations of society, ethics, and knowledge.

Norms become central to discourse-based morality, and in pluralistic societies, where valid norms must be freely acceptable by everyone who could be affected by them, it's *transcultural* norms²⁶⁶ that become central. Nielson and Emerson (2002) spend time discussing this:

Habermas's writings [...] contain the promise of determining – regardless of context – the justification for norms of action in decentered complex societies that entertain conflicting views of “the good.” [...] It relies on the much-contested maxim of universalizability that states: for a norm of action to be valid, all those who could be affected by it or by its side effects must have the opportunity to enter into practical arguments about it and, from this association, form a rationally motivated agreement that such a norm should indeed come into force (Habermas 1990, 120). Despite his effort to arrive at a “context free” discourse ethics, several criticisms have been levelled at his position, each of which hints at a different aspect of the question of transculturalism’ (Nielson and Emerson, p32).

And so they have. Norms, often defined by sociologists as guides to conduct, or rules, standards or modes of behaviour generally expected to be followed by acting within accepted roles prescribed (or proscribed) by and understood within the structure of groups or communities,²⁶⁷ bring with them their own challenges. For any societal norms should be articulable through language, and as J. Donald Moon points out (1995), where Habermas argues that language is riddled with power-dynamics, it seems reasonable to conclude that norms would also be riddled with power-dynamics. And so a vicious circularity begins: in order to avoid power-dynamics inherent within conversation, we need norms; but norms are beset by power-dynamics, and so we need to avoid those...

It may be that norms, *to work*, need be neither valid nor agreeable, equal nor fair,²⁶⁸ but where unfair norms are operative within conversation, this conversation will be saturated with power imbalances. And this, for Habermas (not to mention Gadamer and West), is intolerable. So while normative validity may be desirable, even ‘implicit in communicative action’ (Moon, 1995, p148), the validity of the norms can't be challenged through deductive logical arguments, because these deductive arguments would ‘presuppose the (contested) truth of their premises’ (Moon, p149).

For Habermas, any ideal or universal²⁶⁹ communicative norms must themselves be agreeable to and by a potentially universal collegiate of speakers. They're *ours*

²⁶⁶ We needn't be wedded to the word “transcultural” – “culturally independent”, “acultural”, “universal”, and even “culturally transcendent” (though not, obviously, in a metaphysical sense) may also suffice.

²⁶⁷ See Nielson and Emerson, p26.

²⁶⁸ See Moon, 1995, for a fascinating discussion about this, where he cites as an example an unequal relationship between a diner and a waiter in a restaurant which neither feels comfortable with. This story focuses on the unequal norms present in their relationship, and concludes that while they're disagreeable, all norms need to be to perform their function is commonly understood and accepted!

²⁶⁹ Also: culturally independent, culturally transcendent, transcultural, etc.

anyway, being of our making, in some way.²⁷⁰ To complicate matters, universalisability assumes an archetypal commonwealth of speakers with optimal and perfectly balanced modes of communication, wherein there'd be no distorted conversation, only equitable, even-handed attempts to achieve ideal understanding. And this represents an artificial construct, in that 'interlocutors or speakers never act in a purely rational way and that speech is often politically or ideologically motivated' (Nielson and Emerson, 2002, p34). Put simply, while modes of bias-free speech are required, these will never be achieved. In other words, this ideal speech situation clearly runs contrary to Habermas's own thinking, notably where he argues for the ideological aspect of speech.

And norms, Habermas agrees, are context-dependent (and hence influenced by power relationships). If we looked for metanorms to avoid this problem, this would seem ill at ease with the spirit of Gadamer (and West). The idea of context-free or ahistorical metanorms, if that's really what's being suggested, doesn't only sound odd, it runs contrary to the whole ethos of what West (and Gadamer) has been trying to do. Norms 'mediate the social' (Nielson and Emerson, p42), and are hammered out²⁷¹ in the social world. They're voluntary agreements, permitting meaningful interaction. As a mediator between actors, a norm allows us to come together without conflict, structural incommensurabilities of understanding, crashing into each other, or scraping painfully past each other, as it were.

Crashing into *each other*. Scraping past *each other*, today, tomorrow, *here* and *now*, into real people, actually communicating, in *reality*. There's no ahistorical norm of communication, practice, or understanding, because norms are always about communication, practice, and understanding with respect to the historically situated *real world*. The discursive norms we use must be hammered out constantly, developed communally, and geared towards agreement. Understanding requires common ground, but this isn't predetermined prior to context, it's mutually determined within context.²⁷² A norm of a norm will either play by the same rules, or won't be a norm. And so, the notion that communicative action holds out the promise of 'determining – *regardless of context* – the justification for norms of action' (Nielson and Emerson, p32, my italics), seems self-defeating.

Although Habermas continues to maintain that universal love, caring, and understanding can be sustained while wrestling with culturally divergent discourse, and continues to wrestle with the problem of socially contextual communicative actions and norms, he's also aware of the size of the problems he confronts, particularly the problem of ethnocentrism that power dynamics within socially dependent communicative norms faces. And while social interactions are 'constituted by a plurality of norms that allow a certain degree of paradox given that inside

²⁷⁰ According to Habermas, they're consensual, and the vehicles of "communicative rationality" (Habermas, 1996) where communication is a human activity; and they're emergent, but perhaps more accurately, can be described as socially and discursively constructed (Habermas, 1998); while also democratic (Habermas, 2004).

²⁷¹ "Norms being hammered out" warrants mentioning that the kind of image "hammering something out" brings to mind is far more deliberate and brutal than we need for our purposes. Norms are certainly emergent from social interaction, but they're not "hammered out" in anything like the way a deal might be hammered out in a boardroom.

²⁷² For more on this, see Gadamer, 1989, How, 1995, and Nielson and Emerson, 2002.

societies there are disparate views of the good' (Nielson and Emerson, p43), his 'most controversial claim remains that postconventional morality maintains its universal status despite the often conflicting situations of different lifeworlds' (p56).

It is indeed controversial, for we've seen, as yet, no mechanism by which Habermas can eradicate the power dynamics dogging his attempts at equal, free, universal communicative action. Nielson discusses this at length, noting a "pressure point" on the level of practical discourse: our claims, questions, answers, and musings, he suggests, must all be intelligible, corresponding to certain criteria for communicative validity. But if communicative competence comes through emergent and contextual social processes, as Habermas believes, then how does any speaker who doesn't share the communicative culture and competence of the other, ever hope to achieve a coherent response?²⁷³ Transculturalism,²⁷⁴ far from being harmonious with Habermas's position, threatens the very notion of an ideal speech situation. But the ideal speech situation, putative though it is, works in Habermas as a sort-of "bridging mechanism" for achieving universal moral justifications. It's the mechanism by which intercultural discourse allows for fairness. Without it, there won't be any universality or shared, common inclusion. Without it, language becomes some form of colonising system (carrying with it what West, 1985e, 1988b, describes as "regimes of truth"),²⁷⁵ a tool of power, an ethnocentric stick to prise power with. Without it, whose language do we use for our transcultural ethics?

This is significant because a language can't be separated from the culture that uses it. One might say a language "speaks its culture". Translated or even shared words meaning the same in different languages often have different significance, carry different moral or social weight, are used in different speech acts, and convey attitudes and power dynamics that can't be shared by speakers from other cultures. Modes of speech, register, nuances exclusive to one language or another, historical consequences of words, meanings fixed by collective experience or uniquely shared social trauma or joy, even the volume or speed at which a language is spoken, these considerations and more mean that when one tongue is spoken over another, one culture is spoken over another as well.²⁷⁶ Paring a language down so that only its unambiguous²⁷⁷ and unambiguously shareable elements are used damages it to the point of impotence.²⁷⁸

²⁷³ See Nielson and Emerson, 2002.

²⁷⁴ - defined by Nielson and Emerson as the process that leads to hybrids that occur when different lifeworlds clash or come into contact.

²⁷⁵ West discusses regimes of truth (1988b) as the ways in which distinctions between true, false, legitimate and illegitimate are put forward, and the power-laden ways the regimes themselves are legitimised.

²⁷⁶ The problem cannot be circumvented by translators and interpreters, for obvious reasons.

²⁷⁷ I use this word in the full knowledge of its contestability, but I'm allowing it the benefit of the doubt, for the sake of the discussion.

²⁷⁸ One may be tempted to agree with Nielson and Emerson (p63) that the word, in language, is 'half someone else's'. But it's important that all parties in the conversation own that word equally, and for Habermas this is still to be answered. Furthermore, if transcultural communication 'means taking on elements from other lifeworlds without ceasing to be oneself, then it can be argued [...] transcultural actions require first and foremost that one act in an aesthetically convincing manner' (Nielson and Emerson, p59). Language and communication, people risk forgetting, aren't only about words - indeed, being 'aesthetically pleasing' can go a long way towards building social networks, maintaining trust, convincing others, and even sounding authentic (depending on how generous we are with our understanding of "aesthetic").

The colonisation of one lifeworld by another is a violation of Habermas's idealised communicative action, because it always invokes systemic power differentials. This notwithstanding that it's this very "colonisation", with language, its codified, ideological, and cultural weapon, that's supposed to be that very thing with which societies communicate equally and search for validity in discursive interactions. While a society needs some method of recognising, catching, and balancing out the power dynamics imposing themselves upon it through (and also hidden by) language, there can be no determinative principles or axioms outside of context and language, no extra-linguistic ideal. Anything like that would be incongruous, bordering on the incoherent.²⁷⁹ We use, need, and are shaped by language. While language may emerge from social interaction, and while norms may be of our making, it seems we can't escape the unbalancing and potentially divisive power it holds over us.

A Gadamarian response

While Habermas raised a powerful objection to Gadamer's ideas of discourse, a Gadamarian response is needed, otherwise the issue will only be half-considered – after all, it is Gadamer's ideas being attacked!

This section shows how Gadamer critiques Habermas as choking discourse, suffocating the best route into equality by requiring that we focus not on the discourse itself but on the social relations surrounding it. He argues that Habermas misunderstands what speech acts are, so risking getting his analysis of them wrong. But, as we'll see, it transpires that really, Gadamer gets Habermas wrong on three crucial issues, hence failing to properly provide answers to the questions Habermas raises.

Gadamer's Interpretation of Habermas

Gadamer believed he occupied a contraposition to Habermas's critical scepticism, insisting that we look for the meaning of what people say in what they say, not outside it in social contexts. In simpler terms, we shouldn't focus on the circumstances surrounding what's said and the people saying it to the detriment of

²⁷⁹ Interestingly, Habermas suggests that the tool necessary for finding a 'dialogic symmetry' and reducing the privilege some interlocutors have over others is Freudian psychoanalysis, which would, he believes, allow a critical diagnosis of and highlighting of the 'distortions in the life of an individual' (How, p147). Yet while the appeal of Freud to a hermeneutic thinker is evident, this answer seems strange. To begin with, as a tool for regulating the forces that impose themselves on communicative action 'behind the back of language', it's strange that it's itself linguistic in nature; and, as a regulative part of a social mechanism designed to combat cultural relativity or power imbalance, it is itself a paradigmatic example of a theory of one particular and already powerful society. We also note that psychoanalysis is itself political, in that different schools have vastly differing aims, purposes, ideas, methodologies, and even self-understandings, and so cannot be impartial. There's also a clear danger of power differentials where the psychoanalytic "experts" interfere with the self-image of others! People who fail to conform are often treated as "ill", and this imposition of viewpoint, ideological as it certainly is, isn't free from the trappings of power. Moreover, psychoanalysis is too positivistic, too scientific, and even too "objectivist" for the hermeneutic mindset. Either way, as How notes (p206), its scope for playing an acceptable role in forming regulative norms is questionable.

focusing on what's being said. We should play the ball, not the man, to use a popular idiom.²⁸⁰

For Gadamer, if we become "dry linguists", interpreting discourse in a mechanical, social-scientific way, as if it were just an instantiation of people's background – as though we were saying, "That's just what they would say, isn't it" – we all-but kill the conversation before it even starts.

The argument is that language isn't removed from us, operated like a servant or controlling us like a master. It's the 'continual definition and redefinition of our lives' (Gadamer, quoted in Mueller-Vollmer, 1986, p284). Conversations require us to express our individuality; also allowing others to speak freely and be themselves. Free speech becomes choked whenever the speakers become conscious of the mechanics and power dynamics within their words; and whenever free speech becomes choked, so do the ideas and the expressions of those ideas. Fluency becomes lost and conversation becomes lost with it. When free speech chokes, so does the empowerment of disenfranchised peoples. In fact conversations fly when participants pay attention not to who others *are* but what they *say*.

It's mistaken to 'pursue a method that tries to eliminate historical distance, when what makes the human condition distinctive is its conditioning by history' (How, p43). As discussed in the previous chapter, there's always, even in the most alien, *some* point of understanding we can find, even if we're dismissive of it. Where, for Gadamer, we can locate *any* point or sphere of understanding, we open ourselves up to the possibility of a dialectical relation with the alien culture.

It seems like a category error to ask about the conversational norms we have regarding the conversations we have about the world there is. For Gadamer, language and reality happen together, language is a 'life process' (Gadamer, 1989, p446), and taking some instrumentalist view of language practice gets discourse wrong.

Conversation, for Gadamer, isn't "first understanding people" and "then applying this understanding"; it consists in bringing our own critical self-understanding into play so that our understanding of the other is in our application of what we're seeking to interpret. We may romantically draw comparisons with people (clumsily perhaps) working out how to dance with each other, possibly to sounds that are constantly changing, like the rhythms of Indian percussion or certain forms of free jazz; or musicians trying to find a common voice among different modal, harmonic, and polyphonic traditions.²⁸¹ The norms of communication here aren't fixed, and have no absolute or ahistorical character.

But if these are Gadamer's counter-arguments to Habermas, they miss the point. Let's examine why, element by element.

²⁸⁰ We can extend this and insist that we should be mindful of the genetic fallacy or *ad hominem* scepticism.

²⁸¹ West used a similar analogy during a debate at the Oxford Union: 'We[re] trying to get our instruments together, we[re] trying to find our voices', he said. See Cornel West, the *Occupy Wall Street Debate*, at the Oxford Union – available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CoWiV6Q8qME>.

Gadamer's Mistakes

First, Habermas wasn't saying we need to become "dry linguists", interpreting discourse social-scientifically. He was pointing out the power differentials within discourse, not that conversationalists need to become linguists. Becoming conscious of these power dynamics isn't Habermas's point: only that we as commentators should recognise them. So it's not that free speech becomes choked whenever speakers become self-conscious about speaking; it's that the freedoms themselves are illusory if freedom means equality, because discourse is filled with inequality, which curtails true freedom.

Second, it's not obvious that free speech *is* the most natural route to equality, as Gadamer contends. It can also produce hurtful falsehoods and misinformed prejudice. While *some* freedoms may be necessary for equality, freedom of speech *simpliciter* may also be one route into the perpetuation of inequalities. West is well aware of the Fifth Amendment of the US Constitution; but he's also well aware of the inequalities this same constitution has permitted. In short, in arguing for freedom of speech in the way Gadamer does, he's missed the point of Habermas's critique of discourse.

This cuts to the heart of Gadamer's response to Habermas: that his response is merely a repetition of the very problem Habermas was critiquing. When Gadamer says that there's always some point of understanding we can find between incommensurate frameworks, no one's disputing this. When he says this allows us to open ourselves up to a dialectical relation with other frameworks, this misses Habermas's point that this relation will be unequal. A Deweyan-sounding assertion that the answer to the problems of democratic discourse is more democratic discourse is all very well, but it's only a soundbite, not an analysis. Bringing critical self-understanding into play doesn't remove inequality. It highlights it.

The third critique comes directly from West himself. When Gadamer says we should look for the meaning of what people say *in what they say* and not outside it, West disagrees explicitly: the meaning of a claim is *not* just found in the claim itself. We have to judge truth within larger bodies of claims, relations, and contexts. West (1980b) argues that the meaning of our claims shouldn't be determined in isolation from other sentences, or the contexts they're made within. Truth and meaning can't be separated from theories of the world, values, or social norms.

In a nutshell, while Gadamer certainly raised an interesting objection to Habermas, it failed on three counts: he misunderstood Habermas's intention (that we become linguistic scientists, stifling our own conversations in metalinguistic criticism); he missed the point of Habermas's critiques and merely reiterated, in different forms, the very things that were under fire; and he held the position, incompatible with West's own position, that the meanings of our utterances are found within the utterances, and we shouldn't look to the social relationships of the utterers when examining them.

Habermas's critique of Gadamer stands. And this being the case, we require more than democratic, universalised, self-critical discourse to forge a route out of vulgar relativism while avoiding the pitfalls of power inequalities. It's this important need that the next chapter addresses.

Conclusion: Discourse Matters

This chapter began with a statement that might have sounded startling: that grounding historicist morality claims in democratic discourse was a dangerous exercise. We unpacked that by saying that for the kind of moral progress West wants, indeed the kind that *we* want, having travelled with West for so far but found ourselves building upon the routemap in ways West never himself did, we need to find fair and equal universalised discourse, but democracy alone is structurally incapable of giving us that.

To show this, I argued that first, democratic discourse is socially structured in such a way that it can't ensure against power dynamics. Second, I argued that the language used in discourse is itself structurally saturated with power dynamics. Furthermore, when searching for forms of communication agreeable to everybody, speakers (and speakers from radically different communities) require regulative norms of communication that can be freely accepted by all.

The problem is that these regulative norms appear beset by power dynamics. They're culture- and context-dependent, hammered out by groups of self-interested parties using just those inequalities that anybody wishing to *avoid* inequalities surely wishes to circumvent, no matter whether they believe theirs are the best interests. If what's needed for the democratised avoidance of vulgar relativism we were so close to achieving are regulative norms that are universal, universally available, free of socially-created power dynamics, and free of the vulgar relativism historicists seem to have become mired in, we require something better than Gadamarian discourse.

We need to turn back to West.

Chapter Seven: A Faith Without Foundation

Are we at an *impasse*? Can we ever find solutions to social inequality and nihilism if we persist in historicism, denying absolute standards against which we can decide the truth of our propositions, and rejecting ontological realism?

In the last chapter, we were unable to locate norms (or metanorms) for democratic discourse which avoided relativism or power dynamics, violating our requirement for moral progress and social equality. Yet still, West's confident²⁸² that moral progress can be found and social justice achieved. He's a prisoner of hope, he tells us repeatedly. Somewhere, within his writings, there must be the key to unlocking why. This chapter explores just that, and discovers a fascinating, and radical, answer.

It's important to note that the conclusion we work towards in this chapter is not something that comes directly from (or will be found directly in) West, and that he doesn't arrive at it himself.²⁸³ But at the same time, it's equally important to state that our conclusion will not overtly contradict anything central or indispensable that can be found in his work. We began our journey looking at (and benefitting from) West's arguments, and we remain consistent at the end. While not unswervingly following his conclusions, the hope is that what's presented here remains harmonious with what's gone before, and that even if West doesn't ever make these arguments himself, an ethically-motivated, equality-seeking, Christocentric historicist thinker who herself accepts West's lines of thought could nevertheless accept them. This author is just such an ethically-motivated Christocentric historicist.

Where we wished to hitch-hike with West along his philosophical journey, we refuse now to jump ship and take an unrecognisable direction, one that would be completely incompatible with his. Where we've used his own incisive arguments to ask our own questions, attempting to solve the same puzzles he's attempted to solve, using the challenges he's wrestled with to identify problems he himself might have missed, and facing square-on the difficulties we have encountered, we cannot now abandon the spirit of our quest. The answer we present is certainly original, it is not West's, but with much creative reshaping it can be seen as emergent from West's own philosophical thought and the investigations that have brought us this far.

For an ethically-motivated, Christian historicist such as the author of this work, struggling with questions of what it means to try to rationally and equitably justify moral claims in a pluralised world of difference, what it means to be a Christian in a pragmatist's skin, and what the relationships are between non-absolutism and ethics, having used the philosophical work of Cornel West to guide such enquiries and the questions he's asked as the stepping stones towards an answer, the conclusion we arrive at will be novel, arising independently from West, but heavily influenced by the debates we've shared with him, and indebted to his insights. Inspired by the

²⁸² Or at least hopeful (see West, 1993l, 1993k, Sharlet, 2009).

²⁸³ An interesting interpretive debate can be had about whether he might *think* it, *agree with* it, or even just tentatively *accept* it, but he never explicitly states it.

discussions we've had, a new solution will be presented which will triangulate between the desire to rationally ground moral claims in a pluralising world, Christian faith, and a non-absolutist philosophical / ethical position. Returning to the (mixed) metaphor of shape we used at the beginning of our investigation, the triangle will have been acknowledged, and the circle will have been squared!

The argument will be long, but relatively simple. Given historicism, no claims to moral truth have universal normative validity. All propositional truths are vulnerable to the dilemma of vulgar relativism or power dynamics, and unable to have universal normative significance. If we hope to come discursively to a culturally-neutral, universalisable moral truth, there are as yet no culturally-neutral, power-neutral discursive communicative norms through which we can achieve this. This runs contrary to West's and our ethics – equality and the breaking of nihilism. But critical to this chapter's argument is a return to the centrality of faith that West has himself argued for, a consequent acknowledgement that truth doesn't have to fall prey to vulgar relativism, while drawing on West's religious faith, knowledge of Christ – *the Truth* – is knowing him *as a person*, not as a proposition (such as "It's true that Christ exists"). It's existentially appropriating "the Truth", which is irreducible to those historically-contingent knowledge claims that fall foul of the vulgar relativism West hates. Christ is knowable universally. Deep knowledge of Christ involves empathy and an imitation of Christ. Empathy and an imitation of Christ allows us to feel and know the love of Christ, which is universally available and morally normative in a regulatory sense, and not culturally relative, being non-propositional. Being filled with, and acting through, this universally available, culturally transcendent love, is – in ways virtue ethicists can understand – the moral regulative ideal needed that can ground ethical perspectives without recourse to historically contingent moral frameworks. Christ becomes the historically transcendent / culturally neutral norm, and this is what permits "non-vulgar" moral progress and solutions to social inequality. The chapter finishes with a discussion of how this works in practice.

This draws together some foundational ideas from West's work – the centrality of faith (and especially the kind of first-personal religious experience West has spoken of), the focus on ameliorating nihilism and the effects of inequality, the desire to be able to rationally justify morality claims in a pluralised world, the acceptance of ethical and epistemic non-absolutism, and a historicist outlook. It also recognises the depth of wisdom and acumen that West has brought to the difficult questions that accompany these ideas, and utilises that, taking it strongly into account. But we should remember that where for West, historicism somehow *does the work of* ameliorating nihilism, here I present a case where a historicist outlook is understandable and important for a non-absolutist, but needs something else to prevent it from becoming counter-productive to the aims of an ethical thinker of West's – and this author's – bent. That "something else" is the kind of Christocentric faith drawn and developed from West's religious thought.

We proceed in three parts.

The first part deals with a question that's been looming over West and the discussions we've had around him: whether truth always falls prey to vulgar

relativism, with all knowledge being historically-contingent. West contends not, so I ask whether this contradicts his overall position – concluding that while unusual, it certainly isn't inconsistent with the rest of his views. All we need to do is find what he calls a 'locus of truth', a culture-independent "regulative ideal" (in essence, the norms Habermas sought) needed for avoiding relativism and power inequalities.

The second part takes more of a novel turn and explores how we can know this truth. I turn briefly to the work of Eleonore Stump, finding a route to knowledge which not only meets our requirements but which is perfectly concordant with West's own views, which I shall distil and separate, in order to examine individually. I show, through step-by-step argumentation, how West's Christianity can be used not only to locate but to *know* the Truth; a Truth that is both universally available, and irreducible to historically-contingent claims.

The final part asks what moral responses to the challenges of the world this inspires. While not providing detailed guidance to individual moral actions, we're nevertheless provided with a robust universalist moral motivation to act in particular *kinds of ways* – motivations which can cross-culturally justify our moral impulses without prejudicing the strong over the weak.

In the end, using the stages I've just outlined, we'll have resolved the tensions that had appeared irresolvable within a West-leaning Christian form of socially conscious pragmatism: those that revolved around the seemingly irreconcilable differences between historicism and Christianity (as highlighted by Wieseltier *et al*), and between the seemingly irreconcilable difficulties of trying to offer rationally justifiable answers to moral problems and the evils of structural social inequality (as we saw when looking at vulgar forms of relativism). The resolution is radical, as one might expect arising from discussions with²⁸⁴ a malcontent philosophical provocateur and social firebrand such as West, and requires us, finally, to see the Truth – but to see it differently. In order to do this, we turn, once again, to West's historicism.

Part One

- in which we examine how West calls upon two influences on his thinking – Christianity and Kierkegaard – to allow us to locate the regulative norms Habermas found lacking in Gadamer.

In following West, it's important to remind ourselves, at every step, of his nuances of meaning. Therefore, we begin with a recap of his position on historicism and religion, viewed with the benefit of the depth of our forensic examination of his work and the breadth of the context surrounding it. From there we focus on something that might seem out of place, but which can be understood through the lens of his Christianity and which he believes is key to avoiding vulgar relativism – the notion of transcendence. Transcendence opens the possibility of a regulative, normative ideal for West, but to understand how, we must look to one of his great philosophical influences – Kierkegaard.

²⁸⁴ Saying 'discussions with' should not imply actual conversations. The discussions have been the debates we have had in these seven chapters.

First - The unanswered question

West recognised the problems of historicism, accepting (1985a) that if we follow Gadamer all the way down the historicist road, we fall prey to the traps we've exposed. Coupled with his proud admission of "full-blown historicism" (1985a, 1988b, and elsewhere), it's difficult to see how he isn't just admitting that his own views are hugely problematic, especially as he agrees with forms of the Gadamer / Bernstein approach (and that Gadamer is his favourite living philosopher).²⁸⁵

Clanton (2016) among others argues for this. On the face of it, he says, West's view of religion, especially Christianity, is just the sort of thing Wieseltier (1995) criticised. Asserting Christian claims in a historicist worldview merely makes a move in a language game designed to support the aims and purposes of a given Christian community. West²⁸⁶ saying that defending the truth of Christian claims should be looked upon as making statements that bring comfort, hope, and existential fulfilment, does nothing to disabuse us of this. Here Christian truth claims are simply promoting a worldview, says Clanton, which values certain things as means of achieving certain goals. They're totally unconcerned with actual historical events.

Rather harshly, Clanton interprets West's Christianity as holding that when we talk about Jesus' love of the poor and exhortation to love our *enemies* as well as those dearest to us, what we're *really* doing is finding an excuse to advance *our own* 'humanistic, social, and democratic ideals' (Clanton, p207).²⁸⁷ We're hijacking something beautiful for our own political purposes. We're butchers, beggermen and thieves, mugging the religious for the choicest cuts of their religion, and clubbing them over the head with them until they agree with us.²⁸⁸

So it's important to ask whether, for West, truth must always be mired in vulgar relativism, and all knowledge must always be reducible to historically-contingent knowledge claims. I contend that it isn't, but to understand this, it's important that we examine the alternatives.

Second - West and Transcendence

At first glance, it looks like West calls upon a stance contradictory to his non-absolutist and anti-realist historicism. Nothing, West argues (1982a) - not science, art, religion, mathematics - *nothing* possesses privileged access to ultimate truth and reality. There's no theory-neutral, description-free criterion enabling us to discover anything necessarily true.

²⁸⁵ For more on this, see West, 1984b, 1985a, and 1987a. He adds (with pride) that he's studied closely with and admires Gadamer (1989b, 2009b, 2018), repeating (2013, p297) his admiration for Gadamer. We can see further evidence of this in his championing of concepts such as "hermeneutical humility", in addresses such as *The Profound Desire for Justice*, October 12th, 2016.

²⁸⁶ 1980b, 1982a, 1986a, 1986d, 2004, his personal Facebook page, and elsewhere.

²⁸⁷ West denies this, of course.

²⁸⁸ West agrees that our religion is informed by our cultures, and those we stand in relation to, whose relationships shape our reactions to the world. Christians have to consider that among those we stand in relation to is Jesus Christ.

But West doesn't believe that all hope is lost. He affirms, notwithstanding his deep-seated historicist principles, that a solution to the problem can be found by taking careful steps towards what can be called the *locus of truth*. It's here we have to re-examine West's attitude towards transcendence. Indeed, it's only when we do this that we realise there's been a possible answer hiding behind the arguments about vulgar relativism and rational justification all along.

Third - Towards Answering the Unanswered

The first hints come when West talks about the different senses in which we use the word "know". Whereas saying we "know" something in one field (say, science) may indicate one thing, it might indicate something very different in another (say, religious, or political).²⁸⁹ The historicist requires some *regulative ideal*, he argues (1984c, p164, 1985a, p255), and a *locus* of truth and justification (1985a). Without these, the historicist condition may be immedicable.

But the regulative ideal West seeks, appears to open him to contradiction, with an element of transcendence about it, something that may strike the reader as at odds with the rest of West's writings. For whatever regulative ideal we have, West says, should be – indeed *is* – beyond history (1984c).

In fact, according to West,²⁹⁰ the abolition of transcendence is necessary for religion, claims Wieseltier (1995), echoing much of what West says. While on the other hand, Morrison (2004) notes that West uses the word "transcendent" a lot.²⁹¹

West's certainly open to accusations of speaking with a forked tongue here. For while he's rejected objectivity and ahistoricity, which seem to preclude the most obvious forms of transcendence, we also see him speaking for the other side of the argument. Talking to Yancy, he's said: 'I've never rejected transcendence per se. There are many, many different varieties and versions of transcendence. [...] And certainly anybody like myself who [...] comes out of a Christian tradition [...] would never really want to call into question transcendence per se. [But...] I don't believe that any arguments for or against the existence of God have much weight one way or the other [...] it reflects a certain kind of ahistorical way of understanding God-talk of which I am highly suspicious' (West, 1998, pp41-2). West writes of believing in a 'transcendent God who proleptically acts in history' (1982a, p96).

An interesting way of resolving this apparent contradiction is to revisit West (1985a) regarding his honest and searching questions about Christianity, saying that those who go 'all the way down' the historicist road encounter problems of vulgar relativism or power dynamics. West recognises that for a Christian, this proves problematic. But why?

West gives two massive clues. In one, he says the full-blown historicism of Gadamer

²⁸⁹ See West, 1980b, 1986a.

²⁹⁰ For instance, 1980c, where he's sceptical about attempting to situate "God" as ahistorical.

²⁹¹ Often however, he uses the word about getting critical and emotional distance from a tough life.

results in a radical deprivileging of Jesus (1985a, p255);²⁹² while in the other, he claims that to properly grasp the Gadamerian nettle sacrifices the Christian locus of truth and justification (*ibid*). It's my contention that these two clues should be taken together, and that we need to read West as arguing that deprivileging Jesus Christ sacrifices the Christian locus of truth and justification. Indeed, he writes elsewhere²⁹³ that proper inclusive democracy cannot be achieved with spiritual impoverishment.²⁹⁴ In some way, currently unexplored, Jesus Christ *is* the locus.

The word "locus" is interesting, indicating truth and justification are *located* in Jesus. So when West writes (p255) that the 'criterion for Truth [...] resides [...] in the regulative ideal of the *Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit* ("anticipation of perfection")', we see a sudden illuminating connection being drawn for the Christian between faith in Christ and the "anticipation of perfection".

Go all the way down the historicist path with Jesus and we find a mere fragile, historical human being, riddled with imperfection (p255), so one in whom we can't realistically "anticipate perfection". Instead, West suggests we take a Kierkegaardian approach. One might wish, he writes, to find oneself 'on Kierkegaardian terrain' (*ibid*).²⁹⁵

Fourth - Kierkegaardian Terrain

What precisely West means by finding oneself on Kierkegaardian terrain isn't terribly clear, so it's useful here to take a brief look at it (although more needs to be said later). At first glance, the "terrain" appears relatively uncharted.

Marcia C Robinson (2011) notes that unearthing West's precise views on Kierkegaard is difficult, since he spends much time mentioning him yet little time discussing him. I'd add that he isn't always consistent when he does discuss him. It's noteworthy that West (1985a) makes a point of mentioning the Kierkegaardian perspective of emphasising the 'transiency of historical claims' and 'God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ'. But he doesn't stop there. At various points (1998 and elsewhere), he name-checks Kierkegaard as influential in his anti-foundationalism (see also Robinson, 2011), while in an interview in the *Harvard Review of Philosophy*, he says that he was struck by Kierkegaard's focus on wrestling with concrete forms of suffering.²⁹⁶

In the same interview he talks of how Kierkegaard wasn't anti-reason but called for other, faith-based routes to truth to be added to our armoury of enquiry; and that

²⁹² Compare West, 1982b, viewing the New Testament as talking about 'a direct divine intervention in the finite realm manifest in the unique miracle of character and being of Jesus Christ'). Here we have a sympathy towards something transcendent, and the privileged nature of Christ.

²⁹³ 1990b.

²⁹⁴ And – and this becomes relevant later on in this chapter – without *love*.

²⁹⁵ West nails his Kierkegaardian colours to the mast (1980b).

²⁹⁶ See West, 1999b. See also Naden and Blue in *Cornel West: African-American Biographies*, 2006, West's interview with Rockhill, 2010, and Sholé Johnson, 2003, and a talk given by ADC Cake, 2018; while in Sharlet, 2009, he discusses Kierkegaard's Christianity as embracing an awareness of death leading to a leap of faith into the hope of an eternal life, something we recognise in West whenever he discusses his elegantly funereal fashion sense.

we should acknowledge the limits of rationality (compare West, 1985b). In this sense, he contrasts Kierkegaard with the analytic philosophers (see also West, 1981). Kierkegaard's faith requires existential risk and some level of anxiety (1986a)! Perhaps this is partly what Spanos means when he writes (2016) that Kierkegaard's (and, we're invited to agree, West's) Christianity is 'existential' in nature (see throughout chapters 1 and 10), but also *personal*.

It seems in context that the Kierkegaardian terrain relates to West's Christian stance, though Kierkegaard isn't easy to read when looking for one simple position, and to retreat to saying that West means we should concentrate on how being a Christian is difficult, or a personal challenge, doesn't satisfactorily get us anywhere. So where could we look?

I suggest that we have to find evidence that West's aforementioned pair of clues, the position I argue he holds, finds support in Kierkegaard. To this end, we should look directly to Kierkegaard's writings, where we find the evidential support we need in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Volume 1.²⁹⁷ West claimed this became a foundational text in the development of his Christian-philosophical thought, so it seems a good place to start.²⁹⁸ Here, Kierkegaard writes (and I quote at length):

'The object of faith is the actuality of another person; its relation is an infinite interestedness. The object of faith is not a doctrine, for then the relation is intellectual [...]. The object of faith is not a teacher who has a doctrine, for [...] then the doctrine is *eo ipso* more important than the teacher, and the relation is intellectual, in which the point is not to bungle it but to reach the maximum of the intellectual relation. But the object of faith is the actuality of the teacher, that the teacher actually exists. Therefore faith's answer is absolutely either yes or no. Faith's answer is not in relation to a doctrine, whether it is true or not, not in relation to a teacher, whether his doctrine is true or not, but is the answer to the question about a fact: Do you accept as fact that he actually existed? Please note that the answer is with infinite passion. [...] Therefore, if the object of faith is a human being, the whole thing is a prank by a foolish person who has not even grasped the esthetic and the intellectual. The object of faith is therefore the god's actuality in the sense of existence. But to exist signifies first and foremost to be a particular individual, and this is why thinking must disregard existence, because the particular cannot be thought, but only the universal. The object of faith, then, is the actuality of the god in existence, that is, as a particular individual, that is that the god has existed as an individual human being. [If] Christianity were a doctrine, then the relation to it would not be one of faith, since there is only an intellectual relation to a doctrine. Christianity, therefore, is not a doctrine [...]. Faith, then, is not a lesson for slow learners in the sphere of intellectuality, an asylum for dullards. But faith is a sphere of its own, and the immediate identifying mark of every misunderstanding of Christianity is that it changes it into a doctrine and draws it into the range of intellectuality. [...] The

²⁹⁷ 1846. 1992 edition, Howard V Hong and Edna H Hong, eds.

²⁹⁸ See Robinson, 2011.

individual's own ethical actuality is the only actuality. That this seems strange to many does not surprise me. To me it seems odd that one has finished with the system and systems without asking about the ethical' (Kierkegaard, 1846, pp326-327).

In this wordy passage, we see three things. First, that the object of faith is 'god's actuality', divine and universal. Second, the object of faith isn't a doctrine, a historically-contingent set of beliefs, it's *personal*.²⁹⁹ And third, rather than being another set of religious precepts *about* the divine, Christian faith is 'a sphere of its own'. It's not the same *kind* of thing as a creed or conviction. There can be something universal for the historicist, but knowing the universal isn't the same as knowing a proposition or a doctrine, which can't be ahistorical.

So we have a faith whose object is divine (may be transcendent), personal not propositional, knowable, but which won't fall foul of vulgar relativistic traps because its non-doctrinal nature means it doesn't fall into those categories of belief which vulgar relativism covers. Christian knowledge of God is a personal knowledge; knowing the transcendent isn't making any truth claims.

Part Two

- in which we examine the *mechanics* of how knowledge of the divine becomes a regulative norm, irreducible to historically conditioned truth claims; and the unique coming-to-knowledge that this involves.

We begin with an easy enough statement: knowing God isn't reducible to knowing a proposition about the world. We can accept that, and it sounds compatible with West's philosophy as we've seen it, but to make that claim, we need to do two related things: unpack what it means, and establish whether West himself holds it as a position.

In the following six crucial sections, I examine a number of closely-connected ideas. For clarity, I'll separate them, but this is for comprehensibility rather than showing them to be categorically different from each other. Effectively, what I will be indulging in will be an exercise in philosophical chromatography: the aim will be to take the confluence of ideas present in West, and isolate them, endeavouring to examine them in order, showing how one supports the other, and ultimately using the distiller's skill to find the key concept in each one so that a new and illuminating picture can be rendered from them.

The *first* of these sections introduces the rest, and deals primarily with the knowing of Jesus being a *personal encounter*. The *second* section deals with this personal encounter as an *existential* encounter, looking briefly at what that means. The *third* section goes into greater depth and looks at the important notion of "shared

²⁹⁹ In *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard refers to sin as untruth, as though sin is distance from the truth – not truth, but specifically here, 'the truth'. Sin is seen as a distancing from the truth, perhaps, in that it's a distancing from Christ, the Truth in West's words, himself. And for Climacus, faith happens when we come to a mutual relationship with God.

attention". The *following two* sections then focus on the key notion of love, its relationship to the existential encounter and shared attention we've just examined, and the culture-transcending nature of Christian love. This builds up to the *sixth* question of what kind of relationship – and what kind of knowing – is necessary for West's purposes, how knowing Christ can ground discourse, and how, indeed, we can see this terrain illuminated through a Kierkegaardian perspective, leading into an important but under-examined idea in Kierkegaard – the idea of *imitation*, providing an empathy and a Christ-perspective. It's through imitation, ultimately, that we can achieve all that West needs. Let's go through the sections one by one.

i. *Ich und Du*³⁰⁰

West seems to suggest we shouldn't follow Gadamer and Dewey in order to sidestep vulgar relativism, partly because doing so reduces Jesus to an imperfect human (and leaves the doctrine more important than the "teacher"),³⁰¹ but also because it leaves us with a faith that is, as Kierkegaard argues, not faith but an intellectual stance, vulnerable to the problems that Gadamer *et al* have left us with. We deprivilege Jesus Christ and lose our locus of truth and justification. We lose Jesus to historicism and imperfection, and surely then lose our ability to do something West feels important with Christ - *encounter* him.

When West uses words like 'encounter' and 'encountering', he uses them overwhelmingly as an immediate, existential experience, a perspective-changing occurrence, a coming-into-contact-with, not intellectually, but *personally*. We see this in Yancy (1998), in Rockhill and Gomez-Muller (West, 2010), in Olopade (West, 2009a), and in West himself (1997c). Encountering Jesus Christ is clearly distinct from believing propositions concerning him.

West writes passionately that the *ground* of our hope in a hopeless world is neither empirically verifiable nor rationally demonstrable. It comes through an *existential encounter* in an intense personal relationship with Christ (West, 1986f, p5).³⁰²

Christ becomes 'irreducible' (1985a, p256), writes West, while doctrine is not.³⁰³ The Christ perspective - accessible through the encounter with, and personal knowledge of, Christ himself (as Kierkegaard would concur) - is discoverable in all, and applicable to all, communities. Looking at the world through the lens of the Cross is looking at it through the perspective of the Truth of Jesus Christ, knowable personally.³⁰⁴

³⁰⁰ The parallels with Martin Buber's *Ich und Du* (1923) are inexact but tempting. As Buber says of God: 'He is *Thou* and fills the heavens' (see throughout Part One of this chapter).

³⁰¹ Although no scholar of Kierkegaard, I wouldn't be surprised if this word "teacher" referred to Jesus (or God). There are so many Bible references calling Jesus "teacher" in one respect or another, that it would be surprising if the word "teacher" did *not* in some way reference him.

³⁰² We'll deal with the notion of the existential encounter more deeply later in this chapter.

³⁰³ West (1982a) uses the notion of reducibility again, claiming that truth cannot be *reduced* to the spheres of science, philosophy, or theology, and in 1986d, talking about Kolakowski's work on religion. Truth isn't a property of a description, Jesus Christ is the Truth, to be existentially appropriated rather than intellectually grasped. 'Jesus Christ', he says, 'is literally the Truth' (1982a, p98). West returns to this theme a number of times, notably 1980b and 1985a.

³⁰⁴ As we've seen, the irreducibility of Christ is something Kierkegaard concurs with.

Christian perspectives therefore may have ahistoric normative force because *they're not historically bound*, and are open to all communities (p256), while providing a locus for truth and justification. The Christian perspective becomes, therefore, culturally neutral, its normative force available to all.

In West's view, 'for Christians, Jesus Christ is the Truth, and Jesus Christ always rests outside our particular Christian descriptions' (1985a, p264).³⁰⁵ Truth for a Christian is personal, not doctrinal, ahistorical, but not a statement of creed. Statements and propositions can only give us "small-t" truths. The object of faith for Christians - the Truth - isn't that sort of thing. To really press his point home, he goes on: 'The philosophical implication of this is that, for Christians, Truth is not a characteristic of a description, not even of a Christian description'.³⁰⁶

There's a whole facet of knowledge that just can't be formulated as knowledge *that*, given through second-person experiences. There are meanwhile no "large-T" truths in our third-person propositional epistemic claims. Instead, 'Jesus Christ is the Truth or Reality which can only be existentially appropriated' (*ibid*).³⁰⁷ He's the Truth, in the Kierkegaardian sense, and knowing him is having personal knowledge of him. Encountering him, the Truth, is not an intellectual experience.

When I come to know someone personally, my warrant to trust her or not becomes deepened, not only because I've collated reams of evidence that she is or isn't betraying me, but because I've built up a certain kind of relationship with her. (Propositional) evidence cannot be the only scaffolding of belief. If I can be entitled to trust someone beyond what the evidence alone makes rational, then this is almost certainly because I've formed interpersonal knowledge of her.

Compare, for instance, the following biblical passages. In Exodus, 33:7-20, we get –
'Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend [...]. The Lord said to Moses [...] "you cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live".'

while in 2 Corinthians, we read –

'Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. Indeed, to this very

³⁰⁵ Interestingly, while 'Jesus Christ is the Truth', we might note how the devil is known in the Bible as the father of lies (John 8:44).

³⁰⁶ To be clear, Christian faith is not devoid of beliefs about God or Christ; rather, the crux of Christianity lies in knowing Christ, rather than knowing *about* Christ. Nor does West mean that for Christians no descriptions can be called true, any more than almost any non-absolutist would; but he believes our descriptions are always fallible, incomplete, historically conditioned, and measurable against culturally contingent standards.

³⁰⁷ It's probably worthwhile here to reference John 14:6, where Jesus says that he is the way, the truth, and the life; or even John 1:17, John 8:32, John 16:12, John 17:17, 2 John 1:2 – 1:4, 3 John 1:12, John 16:13 and elsewhere, with a mention of the truth "dwelling within us", hinting perhaps at existential appropriation? Jesus Christ being "the truth" is a concept as old as Christianity.

day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. [...] And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.'

Here we're introduced to a deep empathy, and a personal encounter with, God through Jesus Christ. Curiously, this seems to reflect our brain states during prayer. Studies³⁰⁸ indicate that the prayerful brain enters a state effectively the same as engaging in close personal interactions with loved ones, and demonstrate that there can be, at "peak prayer", a disappearance of the boundaries (both neurologically and experientially) between "self" and "other". Indeed, while not all religious prayer experiences delivered the same results,³⁰⁹ both Buddhists and Christians reported, at prayerful moments, a sense of unity with otherness. While vague descriptions of otherness-experiences may be frustrating, they provide anecdotal corroboration of both the interpersonal nature of communing with God, and the removal of distance between self and the object of prayer (God).³¹⁰

West's been consistent on this. Whereas he's been known - reasonably, considering his long career - to change his views from time to time (on his "hard" Marxist stance, on Obama, on how deep his historicism runs...), he's remained steadfast in his views on Jesus Christ and Truth. He affirms (1982, 1982a, and throughout his religious writings) that Christ is the (large-T) Truth, and for Christians, grasping the (small-t) truth is a fallible affair. No finite descriptions can adequately grasp the Truth. Knowing the Truth has an existential character, even an existential *emphasis* (2009). It's a way of life, and about learning to die.³¹¹ It's transformative.

ii. The Appropriation of Truth

We should briefly look at the *existential appropriation* of truth. In one broad brushstroke towards explaining what he means, West says that true Christian descriptions make the reality of Jesus Christ available (1982a).³¹² In an almost circular nutshell, true Christian descriptions make the reality of Truth available. To truly know Christ is to see the world through Christ's eyes, through the lens of the cross. It compels us to share Christ's compassion for the world, changing our perspectives.

When we find new meanings and understandings in everyday situations, such as personal encounters, and discovering attitudes to situations that transform those situations from negative to positive, or *vice-versa*, the delight or dismay isn't propositional, it's deeper. And this is part of how the appropriation of truth is existential, part of how *understanding* and *truth* are existential, and lived. When we accept the love of Jesus Christ, the Truth, we *encounter* it and understand the world afresh, seeing it differently.

³⁰⁸ See Schjoedt, *et al*, 2009, Coghlan, 2009, Neubauer, 2013.

³⁰⁹ Apparently, results differed for Muslims.

³¹⁰ See Newberg, Andrew B, 2013. *The Metaphysical Mind: Probing the Biology of Philosophical Thought*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

³¹¹ More on this particular idea later.

³¹² An idea also found in 1980b.

But there's more to it than this. The existential aspect of life concerns what it means to live as a person in a world of pain and joy (West, 1996a). Existential encounters are *lived* (see 1991d).³¹³ These experiences can be empowering and visceral. And interestingly, he calls Jesus Christ the Existential Exemplar (2001). An encounter (that word again) with him being an encounter with love for, and obligation to, all.³¹⁴ Christ is the exemplar of pain and suffering, and the agent of all our deliverance.³¹⁵

This notion of encountering Truth isn't dissimilar from that of existentially appropriating it. Both are intensely personal (West, 1986f), and both are transformative.³¹⁶ Neither is rationally demonstrable (*ibid*). We notice shades of Kierkegaard again here, with contemporaneity with Christ being a concept that pervades Kierkegaard, as he argues that Christian faith requires one to relate to Christ as an actual *contemporary* of his, meeting him along our lives' pathway.³¹⁷ The Christian tradition asserts that God is actually present and speaking to us through the pages of the Bible. This is more than merely figurative: God is said to be both present in Scripture and actually vocal through the Scriptures. There's an immediacy there, which West accepts.

For West, *truly* encountering the Truth means existentially appropriating it. Becoming a Christian is an 'existential commitment', he argues (West, 2014c). In terms of *knowing*, it seems that the encounter is the key. So what kind of encounter could this be?

iii. Encountering the Truth

In West, Jesus Christ is the Truth and a personal figure, and knowing him is having personal knowledge of the Truth. Encountering him is an immediate, lived experience, a coming-into-contact-with, not intellectually, but *personally*. The Truth for a Christian is hence personal rather than doctrinal. And the Truth, being Christ himself, becomes 'irreducible'.

We can understand better what this means by applying some of the ideas contained in Eleonore Stump's *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (2012), where she says that we can know a person far better than simply having propositional knowledge of that person. In many cases, such as deeply knowing a person, "Franciscan" knowledge is superior to "Dominican" knowledge.

Very quickly, we'll explore what Stump means by "Dominican" and "Franciscan" knowledge. Dominican knowledge can be broadly characterised as knowledge *that*,

³¹³ Interestingly, we have already seen how, for West, nihilism is a lived experience. We shall come to note shortly that this is a notion he also uses about Truth.

³¹⁴ In one theological-sounding passage, West tells us that the Holy Spirit becomes the Reality of Jesus Christ, and it's through the Holy Spirit that we existentially appropriate the Truth (West, 1980b).

³¹⁵ See West, 1984c.

³¹⁶ This isn't something he mentions in passing. The blood of the cross transforms you, he assures us (2015a).

³¹⁷ See for instance *Concluding Unscientific Postscripts*, also *Philosophical Fragments*.

or “propositional knowledge”. This is, Stump says,³¹⁸ the kind of knowledge that analytical philosophers, scientists, and many modern-day academics focus on.

On the other hand, Franciscan knowledge is properly inexpressible in propositional terms, for there are (she says) many things we can know which can’t be analysed as “knowledge that” such-and-such is the case. As in West, really knowing a person can’t be reduced to knowledge *that* something *is the case* about her.

Likewise, knowing the mental, emotional, and intentional states of others, isn’t reducible to “knowledge that”. And it’s not only about knowing people. Imagine a school bully, suddenly bullied by a new kid himself. Out of the blue, he comes to *know* what it means to be bullied. No matter how much his parents and teachers had cajoled him, this knowledge is something they could never have given him by telling him “that ...”. Or imagine a sex offender who, in a “Dominican” sense, might “know” how he’s hurt people; but it may not be until meeting his victims that a true, deep knowing comes upon him. He couldn’t have acquired that sense of “knowing” simply with “Dominican” knowledge and lectures.

As Stump puts it,³¹⁹ in St. Francis’s writings, he’s not just giving an account of Jesus and providing reasons to worship him, he’s there, face to face with the crucified Christ. His ministry is grounded in his personal response to a personal call from a personal, suffering God, focused on a personal relationship with Jesus. There’s a world of difference between converting the doubters by good arguments on the one (Dominican) hand, and answering Christ’s personal call to help him bring people to him on the (Franciscan) other. This ties in with West saying (1982a, 1986a, 1986d, and elsewhere), that there are no arguments with the force of universal necessity that confirm or disconfirm our theories of the world or analyses of the problems within it. And again, West explains³²⁰ that our response to Christian questions ‘doesn’t take the form of a written-down, reasoned-out argument’.

Bonnie M. Talbert (2014) agrees, arguing that personal knowledge requires repeated interactions, and comes from a push-and-pull, give-and-take dynamic, with a real-time (contemporaneous) exchange of moods, engagement, reactions, and “being-with-others”. We know someone well if we have as full and open a range of communication with that person as we think reasonable. Importantly, there’s also the issue of “shared worlds” in Talbert’s view, including interests, emotional responses, mutually enjoyed experiences, and much more. So where two people occupy the same world, to one extent or another, there’s the sense that they can go through life together, share events and emotions, and attend to the same things (and each other).

This is a large part of having, as we do when we know someone, *shared feelings*. Two lovers may realistically claim to share love (and *not* have “different loves” for one another); mountain climbers, caught on icy cliffs during a violent storm, might share the same fear; and we know perfectly well what people mean when they say they

³¹⁸ See throughout Stump, 2012, Chapter 3.

³¹⁹ Stump, 2012, Chapter 3.

³²⁰ 2009b.

share the same views on slavery. This isn't two separate people, each with "private" feelings, forever at some emotional distance yet able to communicate by reading the other's mind. There is, in some deep sense, a sharing of feelings. And with this, we can be said to *know* someone.

With a working idea of what Stump means by Franciscan and Dominican knowledge, let's explore what it means for West.

Stump says³²¹ we 'know God' by being 'rightly related' to him; that a "second-person" experience of somebody is typically obtained when we're directly aware of their mental states. Second-person knowledge requires direct and immediate personal interaction, which we can access when we have a close relationship with someone.³²²

One way Stump suggests we can get second-person knowledge of somebody is through "mirror neurons". She discusses at length neurobiologists who claim the knowledge of persons that the mirror-neuron system facilitates is based on a particular kind of second-person experience where one person is immediately aware of another *as a person*. Our brains are programmed so that when two people are in close relation, and one is sad, then the other undergoes the same neurological reactions such that she *feels* it too. In other words, one *existentially appropriates* the other's emotions. The mirror neuron mechanism elicits *the same state* in the observer that the person being observed is going through.³²³

Where we share a mutual world, we attend to the same things, mutually. According to Green (2009), 'Shared attention occurs when one is engaged in an act of attending to something' and, in doing so, being 'consciously coordinating with another [...] shared attention involves coordinated "attention focusing"'. Attention sharing becomes a form of intersubjective perceiving and mutual awareness whereby we genuinely feel somebody else's "fears *of*" and "excitement *about*" a thing.

In Christian terms, it's perfectly arguable that mystical experiences, such as experiences of the presence of Christ, are examples of shared attention. Given that God's personal, it's not surprising that knowing him should be having an interpersonal, rather than a perceptual, experience.

Indeed, a worshipper's awareness of God having a mental state – say, that of caring or concern – directed towards her, plus an awareness that God himself has an awareness of the worshipper's own mental state – say, worry or despair, directed as a plea to the divine – taken together would certainly seem to fit the description of shared attention. There's mutuality, awareness, and joint, focused attending all at

³²¹ 2012, Chapter 3.

³²² It may also be possible to know people in a second-person way without unmediated contact with them. Stories, Stump suggests, if written well, are one way of achieving this.

³²³ For more on Stump's discussion of mirror neurons, see Stump, 2012a, Stump, 2013, and Baker, 2009.

work here. It seems to fulfil enough criteria to conclude that Christian Christ-centred prayer could easily be reformulated as a paradigm example of shared attention.³²⁴

She who shares attention with God undertakes an intersubjective relationship, an experience of his love and emotions, a sharing of his perspective. She consents to engage with the Truth, rather than attempting to put it under a microscope. Through accepting a relationship with Christ, she brings herself as close as possible to knowing him.

One way Christians do this is permitting the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This is a facet of Christianity that sits deep within the tradition:³²⁵ the Holy Spirit, being part of the Trinity, allows us to experience God as directly as possible, being present not just to, but *in* Christ's followers (Romans 8:11). With the Holy Spirit dwelling within, the Christian has an immediate experience of God's love. In what we can describe as a form of mutual mind-reading, she literally feels what God's feeling, "sees" what God's "seeing", and attends to what God's attending to. And meanwhile God creates a "reciprocal causal contact"³²⁶ with the worshipper, deepening their engagement.³²⁷ The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is a truly existential act.

West's talk of *existentially appropriating* the Truth of Jesus Christ may make more sense here. The Holy Spirit is among us, West writes (1980b). We appropriate the divine through the Holy Spirit (1986f). "Appropriating" another's states, especially where those states are as strong as we'd expect during an encounter with Christ, would certainly be an existential experience! "Mapping" the Truth of Jesus Christ, or the love of God – the same state, in Stump's argument – directly onto one's own brain is a form of appropriation, at the very least.

In Stump's view, to have a true second-person experience, it's necessary that:

- a. one person is aware of another as a person;
- b. one's personal interaction with the other is of a direct and immediate sort;
and
- c. both parties are conscious.³²⁸

Applied to West's Christianity, a. and b. are pretty straightforward. But c.? Well for West, Jesus certainly is alive, does operate among us, and does speak to us.³²⁹ West's Christianity involves a personal God who speaks to, listens to, and interacts with us. He talks about the *humanity* of Jesus (see Sharlet, 2009), and of Jesus being

³²⁴ "God's mental state" may sound non-mainstream in Christian thought, but may be understood through ideas of "God the Son", and Christian talk of God's personal nature.

³²⁵ According to John 16:14-16, one of the roles of the Holy Spirit is to reveal Christ to the individual. 1 Corinthians 6:19, also, has us see that the Holy Spirit is within us.

³²⁶ This is Benton's (2017) phrase, used about shared attention.

³²⁷ Another route to shared attention might be through Scripture. It's not uncommon to hear Christians talking sincerely of Scripture speaking *directly* to them.

³²⁸ From this, one could imagine it possible to gain second-person knowledge of an enemy as well as a loved one.

³²⁹ Jesus *demand*s – present tense – certain things of us, West says (see West, 2006), while 'there is a God who sits high and looks low' (1980b). Furthermore, again using the present tense, he says 'Jesus loves a free black man' (2010b). And if that's not enough, prayer's personal, spoken to one who *listens* (2008, and elsewhere).

conscious of us. Indeed Stump³³⁰ accepts that standard cases of sensory perception aren't necessary for second-person experience. We're able to attain this through conscious interaction with Christ, be that by prayer, or otherwise.

West unquestionably believes this, talking at length³³¹ about falling in love with Jesus, and how Jesus loves us. There's shared attention in Christian love here. 'God loves you too', he repeats.³³² God *loves* you. We connect directly with him when we pray.³³³

The existential encounter with, and appropriation of, the Truth involves a mutual closeness, a second-person experience. We can also see how Stump's position gives substance to West's stance. And knowing the Truth, experiencing the Truth in a second-person way, means Truth becomes, in his (2009) words, a 'lived experience' after all. But fascinatingly, as we're about to discover, he believes that it's not only a *lived* experience, it's also about dying...

iv. Greater Love

Christianity requires 'primarily radical love in freedom and radical freedom in love, a fallible enactment of the [...] finite embodiment of the Kingdom of God' (West, 2015, pxii). This love's radical and Christocentric, exemplifying the connection of God to suffering, suffering to love, love to truth, truth to God, and God to all. The Cross, he says (2014, p72), central to his conception of Christ, is about *unarmed truth* and *unconditional love*. And we've already seen how, upon properly knowing Christ, our moral choices are informed by him - informed by love.

And as Jesus Christ is 'literally the Truth' (West, 1982a, p98) as well as love,³³⁴ requiring existential appropriation, then appropriating Truth is also appropriating love. So, for Christians, truth-talk precludes disinterest and detachment. One can't existentially appropriate, feel, and experience love, and remain detached. Remaining detached would be evidence that we *haven't* appropriated Christ's love.

And this love, says West, is always a form of death, and involves rebirth. Our old selves, prejudices, and hence old ways of interacting with the world, die. Love involves embracing this death.³³⁵ We must seek and follow the love of this sacrifice every day.³³⁶ Existentially appropriating the Truth is transformative. So is death. So is love. They are, argues West (2009, 2014c), inseparable.

This dying includes self-critiquing, struggling with our epistemic frameworks, and casting off our old lives. To be a Christian as West understands it, we have to lay

³³⁰ 2012, footnote 72, Chapter 4.

³³¹ West, 2014c.

³³² West, 2016b.

³³³ West, 2014c.

³³⁴ We see this throughout West's religious work. And the love that Jesus exemplifies is too rich and deep to be contained by human ideology, he argues (2018), and love was made flesh, he says (2020).

³³⁵ West, 2014c.

³³⁶ This, West argues (2014c) is following the way of Christ. To live is to die, and to perfect oneself is to have died often, one might impudently suggest.

down our old life and take up the cross, that is, take up truth, death, rebirth, and love. Christian love hence becomes the affirmation of life even while bearing death upon our shoulders.³³⁷ 'You have to be willing to die' he says.³³⁸ 'That's the statement allowing you to live'. And the action, the love, and the death, are each exemplified for West in the life and work of Martin Luther King Jr. who, he writes, also understood radical love as a sacrifice, a form of death, and an enactment of Christ's bloodshed. For King, and for West, love is a 'relentless self-examination in which a fearful, hateful, egoistic self dies daily to be reborn into a courageous, loving, and sacrificial self [...] this radical love flows from an imitation of Christ [...] The scandal of the Cross is precisely the unstoppable and unsuffocatable love that keeps moving in a blood-soaked history' (West, 2015, pxvi).

v. Blood and Sand

The links between love, truth, Truth, sacrifice, and justice are crucial for West.³³⁹ A key question that's hung over his philosophy and run through this entire investigation is how his historicism can possibly square with his heartfelt quest for social justice and moral progress. It's here we see how it fits together. It's here that we see how love matters.

For West,³⁴⁰ justice descends into something less than justice unless it's sustained by something deeper than justice. And that's love. Love underpins justice. True justice is inseparable from – though not identical with – love, and this is part of what he means when saying justice is what love looks like in public.³⁴¹ It's not that justice *is* love, it's that you can't have justice *without* love.

For West, the love that underpins justice doesn't discriminate, transcends culture, and is given for all. It carries us through darkness, isn't historically conditioned, and comes from somewhere other than our own cultural preoccupations. The love West wants isn't simply, to paraphrase Kierkegaard, an expression of the person who does the loving. For West, the love that answers these criteria is the love that comes from the cross (2014c). For West, love that isn't built on sand (and our vicissitudes) is built on the rock of Christ.

It's kept alive not *despite* our self-sacrifice, but *in* our self-sacrifice. As contexts constantly change, so we must constantly revisit our assessment of the world – and so the imperative to live this death returns, at every moment. Where love has consequences, we have to cast off our old ways of applying it as the days turn to night, and the nights turn to new days.³⁴²

³³⁷ See West, 2015a, p126, where he also argues that radical love is the 'evidence of Easter'.

³³⁸ See Sharlet, 2009. West returns to the theme often: see, for instance, West, 2016.

³³⁹ Unconditional love is always tied to justice, he says (West, 2009c, among other places). He ends by saying that you can't talk about loving folk without talking about justice.

³⁴⁰ See West, 2014c, 2016.

³⁴¹ This is something we see West coming back to, over and over, in books (2008, p210), on his social media accounts, in his public addresses (2011b, 2014c, 2017, and elsewhere), and in his interviews (see for instance 2016c).

³⁴² There's a form of virtue ethics here: existentially appropriating Christ is also existentially appropriating, and *living*, love, the bedrock for justice. Moral actions become the actions of Christian – Christ's – love, which may

Self-sacrifice is hard. It's a form of suffering. There is, for West, no love without truth, there is no truth without suffering, this truth-suffering is sustained through love, and the truest love is the love given to us through Jesus Christ. This love is universally oriented and overflows the person. This is the love of God, and we love not because *we* think it's right. We love our enemies not because *we* want to: we want to because it's right.³⁴³ And it's right because it's the way of love – but not a quixotic love. For West, you can't love truly unless you love truth, and truth lets suffering speak. And the kingdom of heaven is the kingdom of truth (px, 2015).

West proclaims this as radical (2015, 2015a), in that it stands above us yet provides all who access it with the grounding for our actions.³⁴⁴ But more than this, the intimate connection between love and truth is probably the most radical thing of all. For what classical analytical philosopher has argued for love and truth being so inseparable?³⁴⁵

It's also the radical *nature* of love that West pushes. It challenges us, forcing us to look again at our own place in the world. It's not comfortable, demanding that we die every single day, casting off the prejudices we've come to live by.

Love, not hate, can unite a divided personality.³⁴⁶ It can unite a community, or a community of communities. Love is in this way universalistic and pluralistic.³⁴⁷ Love reaches out, it doesn't separate. It's the only force available that can transform an enemy into a friend, flatten hierarchies, and remove selfishness. When we access the love Jesus offered through his suffering on the cross, we access Christ. By loving, we *know* God. And so, love accesses the Truth. This, West, believes, is truly radical. Love, he says,³⁴⁸ is the most significant force in the world.

Understanding the Christian position that we're all God's children, born equal and equally sacrificed for, and made in the image of God,³⁴⁹ makes any suffering imposed through inequality – of wealth, of opportunity, of fairness, of liberty – unacceptable (West, 1984d). As Christians, it's up to us to love others unconditionally, keeping our focus on their humanity, vulnerability, and suffering. Compassion is central to West's Christian witness. To use a phrase West's fond of, we

be seen by Christians as a virtue. And Kierkegaard would not be uncomfortable with this kind of reading: Lillegard, 2001, 2002, Tietjen, 2010, Roberts, 2019, and others, all put Kierkegaard at least tentatively within the virtue ethics tradition.

³⁴³ We can't *like* someone who wishes to hurt us, or our children – but we can love them. We can access the universally-oriented, redemptive, Christocentric love that West argues is God's love, and which flows from the sacrificial Cross.

³⁴⁴ We can argue that it loses its universal normative significance.

³⁴⁵ Love is often seen as part of Platonic studies, or aesthetics, or psychology, or perhaps philosophy of mind or moral philosophy.

³⁴⁶ For those reading further into Eleonore Stump's work, she discusses the divided self and how such division is a barrier to connecting with the divine.

³⁴⁷ It's here that we might recall Habermas's search for a universalistic, trans-cultural norm. Democracy, which is at the whim of human decisions, can't give us that – so what, we might ask, can?

³⁴⁸ West, 2014c.

³⁴⁹ In his (1984d, 2014c) address to Union Theological Seminary, West again states that each of us is made in the likeness of God. Throughout his religious work, West's perspective is of humans being God's children.

must let suffering speak. In following the suffering rather than the power, the communion rather than the culture, the Christocentric rather than the ethnocentric, Christ's love *equalises us*.

Love's justice has to do with creating conditions for equality and universal fairness.³⁵⁰ It's not charity; it becomes a natural enactment of the living love of Christ.³⁵¹ And with love that accepts the universality of humanity, and that we're all made in Christ's image, and which is, he says, the supreme unifying principle of life (2015, 2015a), we see a route to the universal norms Habermas sought in the face of Gadamer's democratic-hermeneutic approach when, in the Franciscan sense that Stump talked about, we come to truly *know* Christ.

While for the historicist no knowledge claims can ever have universal normative significance, knowing Christ is not making a knowledge claim, it's knowing him *as a person*, existentially appropriating him. At the same time, it's existentially appropriating the Truth – knowing the Truth, but knowing the Truth in a way which is irreducible to knowledge of any particular claim or proposition.

vi. The Imitation of Christ

Simply *knowing* Christ – knowing *the Truth* – won't take us far enough. Knowing Christ needn't in itself compel us to see the world accordingly or *be* the kind of person in whom others could recognise Christ. We might say that James, called Jesus' brother, knew him, but spent almost a lifetime not acting in a "Christ-like way". Judas Iscariot knew Jesus in the way Stump outlined, but didn't act in the way West would hope, and his betrayal for money had little to do with being Christian.

What are we to make of this?

It'll help to clarify what we mean by "being a Christian", or "following Christ". And for our purposes, we'll turn to 1 Corinthians 11:1, which advises being "like" Christ,³⁵² augmented with John 14: 16-17, where the "spirit of truth" lives in the Christian, and Ephesians 5:1-2, imploring us to walk in love as Christ loves us. We have to imitate Christ, not only doing what Jesus would do but focusing on his love and intentions, ridding ourselves of selfish desires and replacing them with love, renouncing our egos, taking on a selfless, virtuous, Christ-perspective.³⁵³

³⁵⁰ West declares himself a follower of Martin Luther King Jr (2015a), and in doing so, selects passages from King which speak to him. Of these, one echoes poignantly: "I" cannot reach fulfilment without "thou", he shows that King writes (in West, 2015a, p86). West's focus on the worth of others is undeniable, and his reasons are undeniably Christian.

³⁵¹ Again, this smacks very much of a virtue ethics perspective.

³⁵² It's important to note that imitating Christ isn't an attempt to act like him or do what he did, any more than dressing like him or going to live in Palestine would be. Imitating Christ involves an attempt to *become like* him, not simply mimic him. And for this, a deep knowing is required. There should be a transformative aspect to it, involving a cognitive, moral, epistemic, and personal transformation for there to be anything approaching a true imitation. As West (1982a, 2015a, and elsewhere) says, we need a *rebirth*.

³⁵³ It's hard to overstate the biblical case for this view of "being a Christian". We find it in Matthew 11:29, 1 John 2:6, 1 John 4:17, 1 Peter 2:21, Ephesians 4:22-24, Galatians 3:27 (where we get the wonderful notion of "putting on Christ"), Romans 8:28-29, Romans 12:2, 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, 2 Corinthians 3:17-18, and Daniel 12:2-3. All this involves a character transformation - a *death* and *rebirth*, in West's terminology.

We can argue³⁵⁴ that the minimum requirements for properly imitating someone involve not only the replication of behaviours,³⁵⁵ but the reproduction of goal-directed desires and intentional states. And this is, at least, what West's Christian aims at – to see the world *through Christ's eyes*, take radical Christian love seriously, take the Cross seriously, and take the sacrifice seriously. All this means that we have to consider how we understand, think about, and act towards the least of our fellow people.³⁵⁶

To access Christ's concerns, intentions, virtues, and sympathies, we can't simply ape him, we have to empathise deeply with him. Christ is a living person to the Christian, and the Holy Spirit is with her and within her,³⁵⁷ being a conduit for God's love.³⁵⁸ Both the presence of Christ and the immanence of the Holy Spirit can be understood as God and the Christian being mutually aware of each other (and of each other's awareness). This is both crucial to the imitation of Christ we want, and how Stump would urge us to *know* Christ.

Imitation and joint attention go hand in hand. Joint attention being a necessary though insufficient condition for imitation, which is at minimum the replication of an agent's behaviour with particular focus on their intentions. Imitating Christ is a lifelong task aiming at a Christ-focused moral and personal transformation of one's self, desires, and intentional attitudes towards the world and others. Through the mechanism of the mirror neuron system, we find ourselves able to connect with the intentions behind the actions of those we wish to imitate, understanding in an unmediated way the intimate meanings of the goal-centred actions of others.

So, to say whether a Christian imitator is truly imitating Christ, we have to ask whether she *means* anything – and *what* she means – when performing supposedly Christ-like actions, such as being routinely faithful, giving to the poor, and being loving in the face of adversity. And we need to have an idea where the motivation for these actions comes from. In some way, the imitator must share the *interests* of the imitated.

We're not restricted to goal-oriented actions either. When we see someone in pain, we react by mirroring that pain in the same brain areas (Keysers and Gazzola, 2009, 2009a, 2010). When we see a baby loving us, we mirror that love in the same area of the brain that the baby uses: it's not just intentional states we mirror, it's emotional states.

If we can form a personal relationship with Christ, and cultivate shared attention with him, then plausibly, we can imagine imitating him, especially with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In the fullest sense – of immediacy, joint attention, personal

³⁵⁴ Following Fridland and Moore, 2014.

³⁵⁵ It would be senseless to try to mimic the behaviour of Jesus in our modern day setting.

³⁵⁶ See West, 2009. In 2019a, West says that love and sacrifice are deeply spiritual things. He grounds *Hope on a Tightrope* and *The Radical King* in Christological love. In many places (for instance 2014), he says there's no greater joy than empowering "the least of these", echoing Matthew 25:40.

³⁵⁷ John 14: 15-16, and Romans 8:9-11.

³⁵⁸ Romans 5:5.

engagement, and existential transformation – West’s Christocentric faith brings the imitation of Christ within our reach. When united in a love relationship with Christ, there’s an intense sharing of attention and intentions. We gain Christ’s *perspective*. We access the possibility of union with Christ’s *character*.

Understanding true union with Christ as a deep and unmediated empathy, means when Christ hurts, we hurt; what Christ values, we value. We *feel* what he feels, and truly knowing him means that we share his love, values, and intentions. This intimate "Christ-perspective" changes how we see the world around us, fulfilling every criterion for imitation. This is why West says that as a Christian, there’s ‘no greater joy than inspiring and empowering others – especially the least of these, the precious and priceless wretched of the earth’ (2014, p5), where in ‘the practice of radical love, you are embracing human beings across the board, but you do give a preference - very much like Jesus - to the least of these’ (West, 2015a).

Here the final piece of the jigsaw falls into place: the Kierkegaardian terrain West’s been treading this whole time. It was Kierkegaard who argued that Imitating Christ gives us a framework for Christian moral thinking and behaviour, and that ‘[o]nly the imitator is the true Christian’ (Kierkegaard (1848/1991), p256). But did Kierkegaard mean imitation in the way we’ve understood it? We need to examine this to find out.

First, let’s note how much imitating Christ runs through Kierkegaard. In *Judge for Yourself*, he writes:

the imitation of Christ, is [...] where it is really decided whether or not one is willing to accept Christianity.
- Kierkegaard, 1851, p188, emphasis in original.

Here Kierkegaard claims that *true* Christianity relies on an imitation of Christ. He also makes this claim elsewhere, in his *Practice in Christianity*, where he tries to impress on the reader that imitation is the distinctive, differentiating sign of authentic Christianity, and only the true imitator is the true Christian (1848, p256). And for this “true” Christian, the imitation is for the God who came low and suffered for our sins, was whipped, degraded, and murdered, because he loved and loves us. The Christian imitates not for God’s *loftiness*, but for his *lowliness*. There is here – we notice an echo of West – a willingness for the Christian to become *nothing*.³⁵⁹

Christ’s life and humility supplies the template of what it is to be Kierkegaard’s Christian, and the purpose of reading Scripture isn’t the harvesting of historical facts about Jesus, but the opportunity to relate to him personally, to enable the empathy that enables shared attention, which itself enables imitation. Kierkegaard’s insistence on experiencing Christ as a close contemporary (Kierkegaard, 1848) is an insistence on an existential experience of Christ.

³⁵⁹ Again, West says how the primary lens the Christian sees the world through is the cross, bringing a willingness to live and die in light of the witness of a Palestinian Jew, crushed by the Roman Empire (from West, 2018).

This accords with West, who argues that Christians ideally exemplify Christ's love. In conversation with Russ Jennings,³⁶⁰ West says that Christianity's never to be understood as a set of beliefs; it's to do with the deepest orientations of our hearts and minds. It's a way of being in the world, whose adherents 'pursue the way of Jesus' after an encounter with him turns one's life upside down. Christians don't talk about love, they exemplify love, they *are* love. It's to step out onto nothing; but also, to step onto Kierkegaardian terrain.

So *first*, West's view is that knowing Christ is knowing the Truth; *second*, knowing Christ is deeply personal; and *third*, knowing Christ is in some significant way an existential encounter.

Exploring West's Kierkegaardian terrain, we know that *first*, West recognised that a foundational Kierkegaardian text in the development of his Christian thought, talked specifically of the Christian knowing God personally; *second*, we know that for Kierkegaard, knowing Christ personally is an existential activity; and *third*, we know that this, for Kierkegaard, involved more than acquaintance, it involved *imitation*. We also know that imitation, more than mere mimicry, depends on shared attention and a second-person epistemology of the kind outlined by Stump. And this allows for an existential appropriation of the emotional and intentional states of the imitated. Just as West would wish.

Knowledge of Christ can have universal normative significance. With loving goal-directedness that comes through second-person epistemology, avoiding the vulgar relativism West so consciously fought against and which is available to all, Christ himself becomes the historically transcendent norm, knowledge of whom is not bound by "third-person epistemology". West has routes towards regulative moral norms which are universal and free from power dynamics. We've also identified a direct route towards knowing that which West believes is the basis for all moral theories and positions: the Truth, which is what we've been searching for all along.

In Summary

What we've engaged in, quite apart from our exercise in chromatography, has been a form of alchemy: not so much in turning West's "base metal" into our own "gold" (for I would make absolutely no claims either that West has only given us base metal, or that my own conclusions are of greater value – this is certainly not my intention!), but because we've taken the material that West has given us and created something new out of it. And in doing so, we have light at the end of the tunnel. Christianity isn't in fact incompatible with the historicist perspective, as Wieseltier and others claimed, but the contrary – it enables the historicist perspective by inverting the problem and saying: *if* you accept the lived, loving, existentially engaged Christianity that West offers, *and* you empathise, share attention, and imitate Christ, *then* you have a route to the regulative norm you were missing, and the historicist position may finally become tenable. Rather than: "if you're a historicist, your Christianity falls

³⁶⁰ Jennings, 2016.

foul of relativism",³⁶¹ we can say: "Christianity can prevent your historicism falling foul of vulgar relativistic traps³⁶² and the power imbalances discussed by Habermas.

Part Three

- in which we examine how (and what sort of) moral decisions can be made from this position, and whether we can truly say that our creative interpretation and development of West permits this.

We've seen how "knowledge" isn't always historically contingent; and we've discovered, from an application of both Stump and Kierkegaard, how this can be construed. Though not slavishly following West, it would be interesting, considering this has come from an examination and development of his ideas (and also considering his insistence on pragmatism having real-world application and social accountability)³⁶³ to see how *knowing the regulative norm* affects our moral actions. It'll also be interesting to know whether, though it's not his actual stated stance, it's consistent with a West-leaning approach. We turn, finally, to this question.

But is it "pragmatic"?

We now have to discover how the fruits of our investigation manifest themselves in practice. We'll explore three questions.

First, we've skirted around the issue of virtue ethics. Moral actions have become the actions of those manifesting the virtue of Christ's love. But although it might sound straightforward, is virtue ethics actually compatible with Christianity? We need to know that a Christian virtue ethics isn't so eccentric that it's unacceptable. Second, is the pragmatism that West espouses compatible with virtue ethics? And third, how does a Christ-imitating, second-person epistemology work itself out in the shape of our Christian, pragmatist, virtue ethics model? What would a moral decision in these terms look like?

We'll examine each of these questions in turn, beginning with whether, and how, virtue ethics is compatible with Christianity.

1. The Virtues Among the Christians

It's relatively simple to demonstrate the compatibility of Christianity with virtue ethics.³⁶⁴ Hauerwas and Pinches (1997) make a spirited case for Christianity as holding a position central to virtue ethics, and virtue ethics being central to Christianity.³⁶⁵ Hauerwas³⁶⁶ also argues that Christ's humility and love are not rules to

³⁶¹ This is essentially Wieseltier's (1995) position.

³⁶² This is West's (1985a) phrase.

³⁶³ See Cowan, 2003, Carter, 2009, Mendieta, 2017, West, 1985e, 2012.

³⁶⁴ At least, *types of* virtue ethics. Broadly speaking we focus here on the life lived through and according to Christ's love, forgiveness, compassion, kindness, and humility (among other virtues).

³⁶⁵ See Hauerwas and Pinches, 1997.

³⁶⁶ Hauerwas, 1973, and 1991. See also Herdt, J.A., 2012.

follow, nor do they provide a list of consequences to avoid (or achieve). They're a moral exemplar of *whom* to be.

As he says, being moral agents requires a directionality that involves the development of character and virtue. Moreover, for our lives to be reflective and morally meaningful, our vision must cohere around dominant narratives, with Christ's virtuous character a paradigm of a coherent set of stories constituting an understanding of the nature of the world. The moral life, for a Christian, involves the character and virtues contained within the narrative of Christ, where Christ isn't to be followed but known (as the *who*).

Hauerwas isn't alone in writing about virtue ethics within Christianity. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams,³⁶⁷ argues³⁶⁸ that moral decisions are made by agents who are "the sort of people who ...". Ethics through this lens becomes 'a difficult discovering of something about yourself' (Williams, 1998, p296), and how we become ourselves.

For the Christian, moral actions are acted out of the love of Christ, and must, in some way, instantiate both the love, and the virtuous character, of the person of Jesus, who's entered into communion with her. The Christian's moral actions are instantiations of the very character of God. And according to Williams, manifest, as well as possible, the selfless holiness, the other-directed lovingness, and the benevolence and self-denial of God in Christ, reminiscent of how West talks about seeing the world through the eyes of the Cross.

These manifested actions can only be made through *who we are*, which is bound up with our relation to God. Understanding this relationship, then, becomes key, and involves self-questioning, just as Gadamer advocated. We're brought back, again and again, to the fundamental question of *who we are*, and what our character is.

So Christianity is compatible with virtue ethics. At the very least, one can be a Christian whose ethics are virtue ethics, not despite being a Christian, but in some strong sense *because* of it. The second question is whether West's pragmatism is compatible with virtue ethics.

II. Is West's Pragmatism Virtuous?

We begin with West's most insistent calls to arms: 'justice is what love looks like in public'. Be just, and by the same token, be loving.³⁶⁹ Is this a statement of virtue ethics?

³⁶⁷ Dr Williams has also held academic posts at Oxford and Cambridge.

³⁶⁸ Williams, 1998.

³⁶⁹ It's almost impossible to give this phrase a single reference, so ubiquitous is it. We may at least situate it in one of his speeches: *Cornel West: Justice is What Love Looks Like in Public*, given at Howard University, 17th April, 2011, available online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGqP7S_WO6o&feature=youtu.be&t=21s.

It may be. Rawls, among others, regarded justice as 'the first virtue of social institutions'.³⁷⁰ And love has long been held among Christians as a virtue.³⁷¹ Hearing West repeatedly talking about justice and love, holding both as central to his ideal life, doesn't in itself, of course, indicate he's a virtue ethicist. However, I'm not trying to paint him into that corner: just show that he - or someone with similar historicist views - could accommodate a virtue ethics into his 'fecund discursive space'. And West's pragmatism does contain elements of virtue ethics: he argued³⁷² that the importance of his pragmatism lies in values, vision... and *virtues*.

This isn't too surprising. For Dewey, West's inspiration in pragmatism, our responses to moral questions are public responses to public stimuli.³⁷³ He wrote:³⁷⁴ 'Honesty, chastity, malice, peevishness, courage, triviality, industry, irresponsibility are not private possessions of a person [...] All virtues and vices are habits which incorporate objective forces' (Dewey, 1922, p16). Dewey looked upon the virtues as 'primary moral ideas' (Carden, in the introduction), and that certain of our habits and dispositions can rightly be classified as "virtues". Furthermore, as the moral realm is not a mysterious private world but is that sphere of enquiry concerned with habits, dispositions, and actions relating to the betterment of society, we can surmise that Dewey held that ethical enquiry is, to a large degree, an enquiry into a person's virtues.

Furthermore, Carden goes on to argue that for Dewey, that which makes our actions' goals valuable lies not in some deontological end-in-itself or unchanging Moral Goods,³⁷⁵ but in the intelligence and character of the moral agent. And if this is true, if the moral sphere is truly located in the dispositional behaviours of the agent towards environmental stimuli, and if these dispositional behaviours are what Dewey considers to be "character",³⁷⁶ then it seems perfectly proper to connect the value of moral actions with the character of the moral actor.

Quoting Dewey directly, Carden writes:

Expertness of taste is at once the result and the reward of constant exercise of thinking... The formation of a cultivated and effectively operative good judgment or taste with respect to what is [...] morally approvable is the supreme task set to human beings by the incidents of experience.

(Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, p209, quoted in Carden, p40)

³⁷⁰ Rawls, 1971, p3.

³⁷¹ St Paul famously equated love with the virtues in 1 Corinthians 13:13. Robert Merrihew Adams (1999) argues that virtues such as love, wisdom, justice, patience, and generosity allow one to somehow be more like God, who is himself goodness and love. Yiu and Vorster (2013) also argue the virtue of love; while Bob Harrison (1998), urges us to act in such a way that we 'exhibit the virtues which the Holy Spirit develops in you, the way of love'.

³⁷² West, 2016.

³⁷³ For more on this, and a deeper exploration of what it means, see Carden, 2006.

³⁷⁴ Dewey, 1922.

³⁷⁵ Carden is at pains to point out (chapter 2) that Dewey rejects both deontology and consequentialism in ethics. In fact, he emphasises (p61, chapter 3) that he believes that the centrality of the virtues in Dewey's philosophy allows for an avoidance of both absolutism and (vulgar) relativism (whether he is right about this or not).

³⁷⁶ - and if the virtuous character is directed towards the betterment of society...

Our habits and dispositions, formed through reflective thinking, produce an expertness of “moral taste”. The development of character, on this view, gives a rich foundation for the virtues, and the development of the virtues stands as important to morality (see Carden, p53). That Dewey held this view isn’t surprising: he talked about the “virtues or moral excellences” elsewhere,³⁷⁷ which may be why Carden (p40) insists that according to Dewey, by far the best means of engaging in the resolution of conflict should be considered to be the virtues.

Carden isn’t the only commentator to put the focus of Dewey’s ethics on the virtues: Gouinlock³⁷⁸ and Teehan³⁷⁹ argue that Dewey constantly appeals to the centrality of the virtues in moral agency. And although it may be stretching it to claim that Dewey was a dyed-in-the-wool virtue ethicist,³⁸⁰ this isn’t the point being made.

The argument here has been to accommodate virtue ethics into West’s ‘fecund discursive space’, and we’ve shown that neither West nor Dewey, West’s inspiration in pragmatism, are opposed to accommodating the virtues into their ethics. Bluntly put, while West may never describe himself straightforwardly as a virtue ethicist, it’s possible that a philosophy such as his could entertain a virtue ethics perspective; and that one who followed West’s style of pragmatism could, without contradiction, describe her ethics in such terms.

We can tentatively say that those whose pragmatism Dewey motivated, and whose ethics are Christian in the way West’s are, may find that their position isn’t antithetical to a virtue ethics stance. Quite the contrary, in fact: a Christian, historicist, non-absolutist, pragmatist position such as West’s appears to actively lend itself to such an approach. And if this is the case, we’ve shown that not only can you be a virtue ethicist, a pragmatist, and a Christian, but West himself isn’t far from this position, and those broadly aligned with him may quite comfortably adopt such a stance.

III. *What Love Looks Like in Public – How This Works in Practice*

Benton (2017, p24)³⁸¹ argues that appealing to second-person knowledge can significantly enhance and improve our understanding of several Christian doctrines, including the *virtue* of a friendship with God, the *indwelling of the Holy Spirit*, and even the concept of *theosis* (simply put, a transformative process aiming at closeness and union with God),³⁸² all of which are steps we’ve taken on our path towards *a faith without foundation*.

³⁷⁷ See Dewey, John, 1920. It’s in this volume that Dewey says that the weight and burden of morality is in our intelligence, which is one of our character traits, which might rightly be called a *virtue* (see Dewey, 1920, p173, or instance).

³⁷⁸ Gouinlock, 1986.

³⁷⁹ Teehan, 1995.

³⁸⁰ Shane J. Ralston (2019) argues cogently that Carden *et al* are incorrect in tying Dewey too closely to the virtue ethics tradition, and that although it’s tempting to label him in such a way, he was really an ethical pluralist, calling on multiple ethical approaches rather than simply one of virtue ethics.

³⁸¹ Matthew A Benton, in *Epistemology Personalized (The Philosophical Quarterly, 2017)*.

³⁸² See also Shuttleworth, 2019.

And following our discussion of these steps, considering questions of God's personal nature, "goodness", and the Trinitarian complexion of the divine, Benton asks us to consider that "being good" may be 'showing a resemblance to goodness', i.e., showing a semblance of godliness. At best, an imitation of Christ.³⁸³

But crucially, there's more to it than that. If God is truly Trinitarian, then goodness is, in some way, *societal*. The Trinitarian God is a *society* of persons: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in intimate communion. This communion is something we aim to access when we take communion ourselves, pray, and aim to imitate Christ – meaning that our imitation of Christ starts to look like a societal interaction. And we ascribe certain excellences to social systems and interpersonal relationships.

Indeed, if people are created in the image of God, and if God is communal in nature, then we may assume that we're created as communal beings, and actualising the *Imago Dei* involves actualising a "godliness" of interpersonal relationships with those around us, who are likewise created equal in this same social image. The communal nature of God is loving; the communal nature of humanity would be, therefore, communally loving. Realising this in that imitation of Christ would be to become unavoidably socially loving. Benton puts it well:

God creates us [...] for community: we can flourish by relating to one another second-personally only because of our differences, and through such differences we can begin to recognise one another as subjects worthy of the dignity afforded a personal "you". Thus the Trinitarian society of persons creates us for the purpose of knowing and loving each other [...] with the ideal being the Tri-personal God's own intimate and mutual knowing of the other divine persons.

(Benton, p27)

The Truth – Jesus Christ, through whom we know God – therefore takes on a *democratic* aspect. And truth's democratic nature is what West wished to show all along.³⁸⁴ And in becoming related to the Truth, we become related to a relationship. Loving Christ means loving our fellow human beings.

When Williams (1998) asks whether Christians make moral decisions differently from non-Christians, this becomes important. For we make moral decisions the same way everybody else does; but the context of these decisions is significantly different.

³⁸³ This doesn't limit itself to Christians. Benton argues how non-religious people can have second-person knowledge of Christ, giving as an example "Mary Jane knowing Spiderman", because she already knows Peter Parker, while believing she doesn't know Spiderman at all. Here we could plausibly make a case for atheists being able to have second-person knowledge of Christ even while disbelieving the existence of God (and this is not a new idea – Robert Barron, the auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, discusses this issue relating to a famously acerbic atheist polemicist online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vW8yBnpN48w>).

³⁸⁴ In mentioning "democratic aspects" here, I use West's (1981, 1982a, 1989a) broad Dewey-inspired understanding of democracy as associative, Socratic, communicative living; of collectivity in truth-seeking; and of intersubjectivity and mutuality in the formation and regulation of norms and moral life. I don't mean the narrower political definition, closer in form to "structured government".

As Williams says,³⁸⁵ we make our moral decisions not in a solipsistic bubble but in a society of fellow agents, of others. In this way, Christians (who are in a relationship with God through Christ) are formed by different, and infinitely greater relationships, than non-Christians. They discover who they are partly by reflecting on these relationships, the types of relationships they are, and whom they're in relationships with. The relationships Christians have with God may be reflected upon in the same ways that secular relationships may be reflected upon; but the opportunity for relationship with the Divine is something the non-religious cannot easily obtain.

In Williams's own words, his goal in making moral decisions may be expressed in the following passage:

What will guide me is the need to show in my choices the character of the God who has called me and the character of the community to which I belong; my God is a God whose concern for all is equal; my community is one in which all individual actions are measured by how securely they build up a pattern of selfless engagement with the interest of the other – which in itself [...] is a manifestation of the completely costly directedness to the other that is shown in God's act in Christ.

(Williams, 1998, p300)

We should add that this 'need to show in my choices the character of the God who has called me' isn't a set of choices, but an expression and a disclosure of the imitation of Christ. It's not an attempt to act according to Christian values, it's an outward proof of the profound, empathic relationship formed in deepening the communion with Christ. In this vernacular, West's desire to see the world through the eyes of the Cross isn't a mere sympathetic view of the downtrodden in society; it's a desire for communion with, and deepening of, the relationship with the same Christ whom Williams describes as having manifested the costly directedness to the other. Christ sees the world through the eyes of the Cross in a way we never can by merely *trying* to see things from his perspective. Only by existential appropriation can we ever hope to achieve this.

The self – *ourselves* – is formed in relation to God. And³⁸⁶ this is a relation to something deeply inclusive and relational. We make our decisions partly as a manifestation of God's selflessness: my actions become the visible actions of God's selflessness. And ethics, argues Williams, becomes part of our reflections on the nature of Christ. Where our relationships impinge on the secular world, as they must, our ethical behaviour becomes a reflection of our communion with the divine, both loving and other-directed.

Williams writes that he can't escape looking for Christ in the actions of other Christians. He can't escape trying to *empathise*. This empathy isn't only with one other individual: because of the relationships in which we all stand, and the empathies we all try to feel, it's the obligation to empathise *universally*.

³⁸⁵ And West and Dewey would doubtless agree!

³⁸⁶ Benton, 2017.

But this means taking cultural differences into account. As Williams puts it, Christians from around the world “speak Christianity with different accents”, accepting different norms and taking different things for granted, even coming to believe radically different things – about sexuality, pacifism, or literalism in the Bible; yet the democratisation of ever-widening hermeneutic discourse,³⁸⁷ governed by Christian norms, may help us understand each other’s “accents and dialects”.

Continuing the linguistic metaphor, Williams asks how we can know that the people in our communities ‘are speaking the same language’ (p304), and suggests trying to discern a ‘grammar of obedience’ -

to see if our [interlocutors] take the same kind of time, sense that they are under the same sort of judgment or scrutiny, and approach the issue with the same attempt to be dispossessed by the truth with which they are engaging. This will not guarantee agreement, but it might explain why we should always first be hesitant and attentive to each other.

(Williams, p304)

Being in, and formed by, a relationship with others means we’re a flavour of many ingredients, just like our peers. We don’t only speak Christianity with different accents and dialects; we decode the message in diverse ways. Phonologically, to risk stretching the metaphor beyond serviceability, we hear different things when we read the same scriptures.

Where the things we hear, and the dialects we speak, diverge, we’re often wounded. It saddens us to feel somebody’s reading the scriptures in such a way that they disagree with our own moral conclusions.³⁸⁸ We often feel hurt. In a community of love, these wounds become everybody’s wounds. Connecting to the Truth through empathy and imitation, we may be able to lovingly embrace the reality of a communion that’s divided, but whose nature is one of relationality. The wider community’s need for healing, love, and understanding is no different from *my* or anyone’s need for these same things. Loving God (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is loving the bondedness of difference. Being made in the image of God, loving God is the same as loving myself - and others.

Ultimately when Christians make moral decisions, the actions and the outcomes of the actions may well be the same as anybody else’s: simply looking at the actions says nothing about the moral motivations, though there’s something distinctive about what the Christian’s doing and what the non-Christian’s doing. This is in the love and bondedness that the Christian acts through, and acts out. The difference may not be obvious, but it’s what being a Christian, in this sense, *is*.

It’s also that the Christian can locate a culturally independent regulative norm that’s not easily accessible to others. This isn’t to claim that the *relationships* different

³⁸⁷ - as urged by Gadamer.

³⁸⁸ How many of us have felt upset when others produce good exegetic arguments saying that God “tortured Job to win a bet with the devil”, or that he commanded infanticide, etc? It would be strange, indeed, if we didn’t.

Christians form with God are culturally independent,³⁸⁹ far from it. It's no use pretending that modern Christians have the same kind of relationship with Jesus as their medieval counterparts did. Crusades, witch burning, and the punishment of heretics might seem anathema to many modern Christians; right-wing literalism, discomfort with female bishops, and scepticism about secular authorities (such as the secular scientific community) are often jarring to liberal Christians today, and vice-versa. What future Christians might think about us, God only knows.

It's not the relationships we're formed by that are culturally independent. They're as culturally accented as the people who form them. But a community bound by the love given through those relationships and regulated by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit might prevent itself from floundering on the rocks of cultural contingency. This community has an anchor, a guide, and one whose love acts as a thermostat rather than a mere ethical thermometer.³⁹⁰ That's more than the vulgar relativists West wishes to distance himself from can say.

And This is key. The question "How does a "pragmatist Christian"³⁹¹ act, morally?" is answered thus: "Through feeling *and authentically manifesting* the love of Christ", seeing the world through the lens of the Cross and feeling its suffering through the wounds of the Cross. She, like West, can't help putting the oppressed, depressed, and dispossessed, first. She empathises with the world as she empathises with Christ. Her Truth is the person of Christ, transcending and embracing all cultures equally. Her ethical regulative norm, inaccessible through third-person epistemology, allows her to avoid vulgar cultural relativism and the inequalities of those norms reached through the mechanics of power.

Like much which is identifiable as virtue ethics, this doesn't tell us what specific moral actions to take or which choices are better than others, but it embraces Gadamer's point that a lack of realism and ahistoricity³⁹² doesn't lead inexorably into vulgar relativism, allowing the Christian historicist the possibility of grounded moral progress free from "Archimedean objectivism",³⁹³ and "philosophical transcendentalism",³⁹⁴ in a world of nihilism and hopelessness.

And in the end, that – for us and for West – is truly what matters.

³⁸⁹ We could look, for instance, to Niklas Luhmann who, in works such as *Social Systems* (1996) and *Trust and Power* (2017) argued powerfully that interpersonal relationships are not at all "neutral" or independent of the social surroundings they occur in.

³⁹⁰ These are West's metaphors.

³⁹¹ Such as myself and, dare I suggest, West.

³⁹² West, 1988a, Gadamer, 2001.

³⁹³ West, 1980b.

³⁹⁴ West, 1986d.

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