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TRUTH AND IRONY: THE CONCEPTION OF TRUTH BEYOND BINARY PATTERNS AND THE USE OF IRONY FOR THEOLOGICAL REASONING

**Introduction**

The matter of truth presents itself as central to Christianity, since the Johannine Jesus presents himself as the “way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6). In the following we will pursue the question how today still an intellectually honest understanding of truth can show its everyday relevance.

First of all, reference is made to the First Vatican Council with the Constitution *Dei Filius*.<sup>1</sup> Here an understanding of revelation can be stated that understands God's revelation to man as primary communication of doctrines and statements of faith. *Dei Filius* speaks here of truths in plural, which through revelation are proportionally accessible to the human mind (as an intellectual object). The source of these truths is God himself, who has entrusted these doctrines and statements of faith to his Church in order to guard them faithfully and declare them infallible (DH 3020).<sup>2</sup>

The Second Vatican Council joins this plurality of doctrines and beliefs in *Unitatis Redintegratio* (UR 11), which are accessible through revelation (and also from tradition); but here it points to a qualitative weighting (for the ecumenical dialogue), because “there exists a 'hierarchy' of truths, since they vary in their relation to the fundamental Christian faith.”<sup>3</sup> In order to indicate the authoritative criterion for this order, the Constitution *Dei Verbum* of the same Council can be cited. Here, the Council speaks of truth as a singular and personal figure which is Jesus Christ as the self-revelation of God (DV 2).<sup>4</sup> Jesus Christ reveals himself to man in a personal way and

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<sup>1</sup> Previous to the doctrinal statements of Vatican I, the concept of truth is scarcely a topic of interest for the magisterium. When the relation of God and his true being comes into focus in the former declarations, he is declared as 'being the true God.' See Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matter of Faith and Morals*, ed. Robert Fastiggi and Anne Englund Nash, 34rd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius 2012), 50, 60, 125, 150, 800, 1862 (hereafter cited as DH).

<sup>2</sup> See

[https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19641121\\_unitatis-redintegratio\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html)

Max Seckler aptly characterized this understanding of revelation as instruction-theoretical, since here God gives man insight into the divine mysteries by communicating sentences that are not subject to any temporally relative validity and thus must be kept unconditionally. See Max Seckler, “Der Begriff der Offenbarung,” in *Handbuch der Fundamentaltheologie*, vol. 2: *Der Begriff der Offenbarung*, ed. Walter Kern, Hermann Pottmeyer, Max Seckler (Freiburg: Herder 1985), 41–61 at 45–47.

<sup>3</sup> See Bernd Jochen Hilberath, “Theologischer Kommentar zum Dekret über den Ökumenismus *Unitatis Redintegratio*,” in *Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil*, vol. 3, ed. Peter Hünemann and Bernd Jochen Hilberath (Freiburg: Herder 2004), 69–223 at 153.

<sup>4</sup> We can find the forerunner for this conception of God as the living truth in the encyclical writing *Pacem in terris* (DH 3973) that was published on the verge of

gives access in a communicative way to the one, divine truth in which man's salvation is to be found.<sup>5</sup>

Starting from the biblical and doctrinal foundation, the question arises for Catholic theology how an understanding of truth for the present is possible that does justice to both God's self-revelation and biblical witness, without stating a contradiction between the two councils. In order to keep the scope of such an understanding as open as possible, we do not approach truth in terms of analytical philosophy. Referring to theories of continental philosophy, we treat truth primarily in its existential dimension with regard to its subjective relevance in one's own life. Subsequently, it is up to theology to connect and process these insights for constructive theology. By doing so, we are taking truth as the establishing moment for a subjective perspective and validity for one's own life. To achieve this, we look into the philosophical interpretation of Paul by Giorgio Agamben. Then we try to connect our findings to Søren Kierkegaard's concept of irony and the subject studies of Michel Foucault, in order to identify the Church as a society of Christian Irony in commitment to (personal) truth. The aim is to overcome an understanding of truth that is coded purely in binary patterns (true/false), which is why we deploy a philosophical understanding of irony.

### **Paul and the Body of Christ**

For Paul, the question of truth was a decisive moment for human self-becoming, a point which has recently received enormous attention in continental political philosophy.<sup>6</sup> In Badiou's reading of Paul's letters, it becomes clear that philosophical truth as an abstract concept is not of particular interest to Paul. His disapproval of philosophical truth, understood as timeless wisdom, stems from the fact that neither the philosophers were able to recognize God by speculation on their own accord, nor that for them the revelation of Jesus Christ can prove to be incompatible with the wisdom of the world (1 Cor 1:18–25). According to Paul, there was in principle the intellectual possibility for people to recognize God as their Creator out of reason, but the refusal of intellectual belief led to a distorted and wrong perception of reality and thus also to a distorted ability to know (Rom 1:18–25).<sup>7</sup> Because, according to Paul, real insight comes from God and can also be traced back to him, and further, it can only happen in acknowledging agreement with him; those without faith are thus also excluded from insight.<sup>8</sup> The intellectual and existential refusal of God leads man, by his own choice, to have only an inauthentic knowledge of himself and the world. The revelation of Jesus Christ shows this discrepancy between worldly understanding and gracious insight in the clearest possible way: A comprehensive capturing of the world cannot

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Vatican II. Here, God is the founding principle for all subsequent orders that gives structure to all human relations.

<sup>5</sup> "This model of revelation can also be called a communicative theoretical concept, because, here, God does not reveal an unchanging abstract content, but Himself, and thus enters into communication with man." Christoph Böttigheimer, *Glauben verstehen: Eine Theologie des Glaubensaktes* (Freiburg: Herder 2012), 171–172.

<sup>6</sup> See Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford, CA: SUP 2003), 14–15.

<sup>7</sup> See Thomas R. Schreiner, "Understanding Truth according to Paul," in *Studies in the Pauline Epistles: Essays in honor of Douglas J. Moo*, ed. Matthew R. Harmon (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 2014), 259–273 at 263–267.

<sup>8</sup> See Schreiner, "Understanding Truth," 262.

be made from a merely worldly point of view, for only by including the universality of God as creator can an appropriate interpretation of the world succeed.<sup>9</sup> Between the philosophical reasoning of worldly wisdom and the gospel of Jesus Christ, there is a striking tension, which is why Alain Badiou also characterizes Paul as an anti-philosopher who rejects an understanding of truth that is not characterized by existential relevance.<sup>10</sup>

Yet, the rejection of a philosophical approach does not in any way mean that Paul rejects truth as a concept or the Christian claim to truth. On the contrary, he sees the truth as fundamentally connected with the self-revelation of Jesus Christ, who as ἀλήθεια is truth himself and witnesses the personal truth as such.<sup>11</sup> Christ as truth is thus inseparably connected with the revelation and disclosure of the μυστήριον of salvation history: It was God's free will to communicate to people in the end time and to announce their salvation in Christ.<sup>12</sup>

If we combine the Pauline idea of truth with (salvation) history, the parallel to the understanding of truth by Martin Heidegger becomes apparent, who likewise does not understand truth as timeless and as an intellectually always accessible abstraction, but knows truth (as ἀλήθεια) in connection with its disclosure or revelation. Following the early days of Western thinking, he understands truth as follows:

“Western thinking in its beginning conceived this open region as τὰ ἀλήθεια, the unconcealed. If we translate ἀλήθεια as ‘unconcealment’ rather than ‘truth,’ this translation is not merely ‘more literal’; it contains the directive to rethink the ordinary concept of truth in the sense of the correctness of statements and to think it back to that still uncomprehended disclosedness and disclosure of beings.”<sup>13</sup>

What proves to be crucial for Paul as a religious thinker in the Judeo-Christian framework is that he does not understand truth as an impersonal, faceless, and nameless idea. For him, truth is Jesus Christ, who reveals himself and is thus accessible to people. This truth is connected with man in a twofold way: On the one hand, Christ Jesus is the content of a confession of faith that a person can make. On the other hand, it is Christ Jesus himself who takes over the guarantee of the confession and as form and operator guarantees the correctness and truthfulness of the statement and makes it true.<sup>14</sup> Humanity (as sinful) can neither possess nor

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<sup>9</sup> However, this gifted interpretation of the world does not introduce into any obscure insight knowledge or lead to a divine point of view. Human knowledge remains limited and particular also for the believer, but the believer has a greater openness, which does not let an interpretation of the world remain closed inwardly. See Schreiner, “Understanding Truth,” 272.

<sup>10</sup> See Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 17: “Paul is a major figure of antiphilosophy. But it is of the essence of antiphilosophy that the subjective position figures as a decisive factor in discourse. Existential fragments, sometimes anecdotal in appearance, are elevated to the rank of guarantor of truth.”

<sup>11</sup> See Friedemann Rickert, *Platon und Christus: Antike Wurzeln des Neuen Testaments*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Darmstadt: WBG 2014), 46–47.

<sup>12</sup> See Michael Theobald, “Mysterium. II. Biblisch-theologisch,” in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, vol. 7, ed. Walter Kasper et al., 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Freiburg: Herder 2006), 577–579 at 578–579.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: CUP 1998), 144.

<sup>14</sup> See Rickert, *Platon und Christus*, 46–47. See also Otmar Meuffels, *Christsein im demokratischen Handeln. Trinitarische Einsichten – gesellschaftliche Interessen*, ed. Ingolf

manipulate the truth but can confess to it alone in a gesture of weakness: “Although everyone is a liar, let God be proved true” (Rom 3:4; NRSV, used throughout).

By confessing to Jesus Christ, there is a change with regard to the question of authority. Because such authority is not based in one’s own faculties of reason – or in the success and validity of one’s own life – but is discovered through a gesture of withdrawal and awareness of one’s weakness. The salvation of one’s existence, in other words, depends on Jesus Christ: “if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Rom 10:9) “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” (Gal 2:20)

For Paul, existence in Christ presents itself as a completely new way of living, which is opposed to the ordinary secular existence but does not contradict the world. This new way of living opens up a life in freedom and grace of justification, while living outside of the relationship with Christ is negatively determined by flesh, death, and sin (Rom 8:1–2, 10–11).<sup>15</sup> This relationship to Christ enables an existence which, however, places the individual in communion with Christ so that the community of the just makes up the body of Christ as a decidedly social entity (Rom 16:16; 1 Thes 2:14). According to Paul’s conception, the body of Christ as the Church of God must therefore not be understood in a way of individualistic salvation, because it is a social participation in the salvific fate of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 12:12–31a): Through the Holy Spirit, all believers were formed through baptism into a community that is the Church (1 Cor 12:13).

In clarifying the socio-political position of this community, the Pauline image of the Church is especially helpful. Paul does not think of the relationship between the world and the Church in simple pairs of oppositions, which is why he must use a more elaborate depiction of this relationship. An example of this is the letter to the Galatians:

“But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3:25–28)

Through baptism, a person is resituated within the world. The person is now incorporated into the body of Christ, but this does not lead to the person to renounce their participation in public life or withdraw from society. This person continues to be a part of the world and belongs to it; only his or her way of existence has changed radically by participating in the Church’s life where the unfolding of God’s kingdom becomes sacramentally visible. As we can see in Alison, a person is enabled by grace through faith to discontinue following excluding behavior patterns and

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U. Dalferth, *Religion in Philosophy and Theology* 96 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2018), 41, 98.

<sup>15</sup> The stance of the flesh (σάρξ) or the stance of the spirit (πνεῦμα) (Rom 8:1–11) are two metaphors that represent two ways of living in the world. And despite the conceptual dichotomy, they do not indicate a dualistic conception (in the sense of gnosis et cetera). See Thomas Pröpper, *Theologische Anthropologie*, vol. I. (Freiburg: Herder 2015), 140–141.

participate in the society of redemption.<sup>16</sup> This participation is no denunciation of living in the world; instead, it is a new way of living that is shaped by

“creating universality by transforming a particularity which holds its being over against the other, into a particularity which is complementary to the other. The Church is the particular tradition whose relation to its own particularity is that it is this particularity that makes it capable of universality, because its particularity is not defined over against any other particularity.”<sup>17</sup>

Returning to Paul’s themes of understanding human living, the determination of a person’s own existence by the flesh (σάρξ) or by the Spirit (πνεῦμα) represent different ways of living in this world (Rom 8:1–17; Gal 3:3). Therefore, life in the Spirit is not to be understood as an abjuration or a denunciation of the world.<sup>18</sup> The baptized person neither leaves the world nor is he or she driven out of the world by the Spirit.

Differences between a being in the ‘flesh’ and a being in the ‘spirit’ can nevertheless be described very well. Personal attributes and categories (such as [social] gender, status or nationality) do not disappear or become invisible within the Church. A baptized person is still branded with these markers and remains socially recognizable. But, through baptism, these markers have become meaningless and ineffective within the body of Christ.<sup>19</sup> The reason for this change of existence lies in baptism itself; because through dying, being buried, and rising in the New Adam (Rom 6), the baptized person puts on Christ like a garment, thus opening up an eschatological community in a unity never seen before.<sup>20</sup> Fixed markers of division and separation in the world cannot be harmonized with an eschatological model of life, and for this reason eschatological ethics should also arise from the grace of baptism.<sup>21</sup>

The formulaic language in Gal 3:26–28 suggests that the meaninglessness of the social markers is by no means to be attributed to the extreme position of Paul. Instead, it is a probable quotation from an early baptismal liturgy that Paul cites here.<sup>22</sup> The body of Christ as an eschatological community proves to be not a social sphere that erases the individual; we see this point in 1 Cor 12:12–31 as Paul stresses the importance of the gifts each person’s unique difference brings to the body of Christ (so that the body of Christ incorporates diversity and diversity incarnates God’s presence in the world). This charism-based space nevertheless does not adhere to the separation structures of the world; instead, the body of Christ provides a

<sup>16</sup> See James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes* (New York: Crossroad 2014), 169.

<sup>17</sup> Alison, *Joy*, 179.

<sup>18</sup> See Wilhelm Egger, “Galaterbrief. Phillipperbrief. Philemonbrief,” ed. Joachim Gnllka, *Neue Echter Bibel, Neues Testament*, vol. 9,11,15 (Würzburg: Echter 1988), 22.

<sup>19</sup> See Franz Mußner, “Der Galaterbrief,” ed. Joachim Gnllka et al, *Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, vol. 9 (Freiburg: Herder 1974), 264: “Of course the apostle does not mean by this that such differences outwardly no longer exist – man remains man and woman remains woman, even after baptism – but they have lost all meaning of salvation before God.”

<sup>20</sup> See Mußner, “Galaterbrief,” 263.

<sup>21</sup> See Richard N. Longenecker, “Galatians,” *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol 41 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson 1990), 157.

<sup>22</sup> See Longenecker, “Galatians,” 157–159.

space of perfection for the individual as a community being while including the other baptized persons at eye level, without a hierarchical separation. Within the Church, according to Paul, a successful existence of true humanity is possible, in which a person finds and can realize his or her own existence in *truth*:<sup>23</sup>

“‘Being in Christ’ is, for Paul, communion with Christ in the most intimate relationship imaginable, without ever destroying or minimizing – rather, only enhancing – the distinctive personalities of either Christian or Christ. It is ‘I – Thou’ communion at its highest ... .”<sup>24</sup>

Thus, this relational space of the Church does not represent an otherworldly sphere so that this relationship would be accessible only in a purely spiritual realm or only through the death of the respective person. This relationship takes place in the world and at the present time. The Pauline ecclesiology does not point to an afterlife existence as solely meaningful.

The baptized Christian continues to live in this world, inhabiting it and sharing in its social dimension as a communal realm, which involves precisely a shared living with the unbaptized and non-Christians. Within this shared space, the social markers of gender, status, and nationality are still visible and make a person socially discernible. However, according to Paul, these markers have become within the Church ineffective in their meaning towards salvation (1 Cor 12:12-14):<sup>25</sup> They have become ineffective in their distinguishing and differentiating or excluding dimension. The ecclesial abolition of these separation patterns makes Paul’s notion of the Church tend toward an egalitarian realm. Taken together, this means that the Church has neither left the world for a purely spiritual existence; nor does it identify itself with the earthly sphere and its rules and conditions. The Church is neither identical with this sphere of worldly sociality nor is it in contradictory opposition to it. It can therefore be said that it occupies an intermediate position.

The fact that this binary attribution of identity or antithetical patterns to describe the Church’s secular situation does not imply a genuine activity of the Church herself because this activity is the result of the sovereignty of Christ. Without the use of any force and through a gesture of apparent powerlessness, Christ’s death on the cross renders the validity of the law in the Hegelian sense invalid and makes the social separation schemes irrelevant. Balthasar captures this very weakness of the Trinitarian God that exceeds the sinful structures of the world in the neologism ‘Unmacht’ – it is a force that does not rely on violence; instead, it stems from the divine

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<sup>23</sup> See Colby Dickinson, *Words Fail: Theology, Poetry, and the Challenge of Representation* (Fordham, NY: FUP 2017), 4.

<sup>24</sup> Longenecker, “Galatians,” 154.

<sup>25</sup> Thus the social markers are comparable with the Law, whereby the Law is used alongside circumcision from the God’s side to distinguish the Jewish people from the gentiles. This possibility of distinction is thwarted by the salvific work of Christ on the cross. See Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (Stanford, CA: SUP 2005), 97–98: “This is the meaning of the verb *katargeo*: just as, in the *nomos*, the power of the promise was transposed onto works and mandatory precepts, so does the messianic now render these works inoperative; it gives potentiality back to them in the form of inoperativity and ineffectiveness. The messianic is not the destruction but the deactivation of the law, rendering the law inexecutable (*l’ineseguibilità della legge*).”

love.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, the embedding of the faithful in Christ through baptism cannot be located in any oppositional dimension towards the world, because through Christ's crucifixion and resurrection a concrete universality was established, which stands as an opposition to all oppositions and thus surpasses any oppositional functionality, as Alain Badiou indicates in his reading of Paul.<sup>27</sup>

This attitude of living redeemed cannot be reduced to an inward or outward existence but rather occupies the space in between and is bound with the commitment to a cursed person. We can describe this stance of living as *Christian Irony*. This Christian irony, therefore, neither gets lost in seriousness nor fundamentalisms. It presents itself as a gesture of avoiding violence but does not hide away from the world's violence.<sup>28</sup>

This ironic attitude not only questions social divisions without destroying them in a gesture of violence; it also approaches time under a different paradigm. With regard to the Messianic time as the time of eschatological completion, Giorgio Agamben turns in particular to the Pauline  $\acute{\omega}\varsigma \mu\eta$  (1 Cor 7:29–32), the 'as if' or 'as though.' Messianic time proves to be a process of transition at the end of time, which is neither (pending) expectation nor (closed, fixed) completion and thus cannot be translated into binary logic:

“The Pauline *hōs mē* seems to be a special type of tensor, for it does not push a concept's semantic field toward that of another concept. Instead, it sets it against itself in the form of the *as not*: weeping as not weeping. The messianic tension thus does not tend toward an elsewhere, nor does it exhaust itself in the indifference between one thing and its opposite. The apostle does not say: 'weeping as rejoicing' nor 'weeping as (meaning =) not weeping,' but 'weeping *as not* weeping.’”<sup>29</sup>

It is the messianic subject that is released from supposed certainty through its vocation (*klēsis*). The subject's perspective is shaped by a new openness, which is no longer marked by power struggle, autonomy through secular knowledge, and the standstill of social conditions. This subject instead puts the supposed validity into question in relation to the intrusive event of Jesus Christ.<sup>30</sup> Through the perspective of *hōs mē* the messianic vocation to be a disciple of turns the faithful into an *ironist*, which is why Martin Heidegger also describes this change of perspective following Paul as a new fundamental stance:

“The relational sense is not changed, and still less the content. Thus: the Christian does not step out of this world. If one is called as slave, he should not at all fall into the tendency (to suppose) that something could be won for his Being in the increase of his freedom ... It is a matter of indifference in which surrounding-worldly significance he stands. The slave as Christian is free from all bonds, but the free one as Christian becomes a slave before God. (The  $\gamma\epsilon\nu\epsilon\acute{\omicron}\theta\alpha\iota$  is a  $\delta\omicron\upsilon$ - $\lambda\epsilon\upsilon\epsilon\iota\nu$  before God.) These directions of sense which refer to the surrounding world, to one's

<sup>26</sup> See Hans Urs von Bathasar, *Theodramatik*: Vol. 3: Die Handlung (Einsiedeln: Johannes 1980), 306–307.

<sup>27</sup> See Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 42.

<sup>28</sup> See Vladimir Jankélévitch, *L'ironie* (Paris: Flammarion 1964), 181.

<sup>29</sup> Agamben, *Time*, 24.

<sup>30</sup> See Agamben, *Time*, 43.

vocation, and to that which one is (self-world) determine in no way the facticity of the Christian. Nonetheless they are there, they will be maintained and first authentically assigned (*zugeeignet*) there. The significances of the surrounding world become, through having-been, temporal possessions. The sense of facticity determines itself in this direction as temporality. Until now, the relational sense of the surrounding world and communal world was purely negatively determined. Insofar as these relations have no possibility at all to motivate the arch-ontic meaning of primordial Christian religiosity, the positive question arises regarding the relation of the Christian to the surrounding world and the communal world."<sup>31</sup>

### Theological use of irony

Following Paul's understanding of truth and existence, we can elaborate on irony as a reflexive stance, which aims at overly simplified understanding or inflexible knowledge, in order to re-fluidify interpretations of phenomena and to keep them open to a wider horizon.<sup>32</sup> Thus, irony also prevents that a person would fall into fideism, because irony entails a reflexive stance that permanently questions authority and interpretations for a greater insight into truth without cancelling the concept of truth in general. Passing this notion of irony onto the current time, it is still possible for the faithful to maintain a loyal relation to authoritative traditions and to be an ironist. The faithful ironist adheres to the legitimacy of the doctrinal statements in general, but she is aware that the doctrinal statements and the revelation of God are not identical.<sup>33</sup> Words cannot capture the being of God in an absolute manner; therefore, the ironist can question the authoritative tradition for gaining greater insight into the truth.

For this reason, the ironist occupies an intermediate place, whose statement is neither to be understood as a (static) oath nor as an (always false) lie. Also, her gesture of questioning does not eliminate the meaning of a statement. In a Socratic way, the ironist is aware of her inferior position in terms of knowledge, even while she questions the supposed evidence of other positions:

"In reality, irony is a false falsehood, a lie that destroys itself (as a lie) when used. It puts the lost ones back on track; it is the disentanglement of the entangled ones; or rather more, it provides the instruments for this disentanglement. ... irony does not want to be believed in – it wants to be comprehended. In other words, 'interpreted'. Irony makes us not believe in its words, but in its meaning."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life* (Bloomington, IN: IUP 2010), 85. N.B. The passage, that the slave should remain a slave, is omitted here, because of its misuse in previous times. It is possible to reconstruct its historical circumstances; however, for an approach in constructive theology, it is better to step aside from this very passage and focus on the part of the stance of emancipation within the Church.

<sup>32</sup> See Jankélévitch, *L'ironie*, 58.

<sup>33</sup> Karl Rahner, "What is a dogmatic statement?," in *Theological Investigations: Later Writings*, Vol. V, trans. Karl-H. Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966), 58.

<sup>34</sup> Jankelevitch, *L'ironie*, 60.



To clarify the use of irony further for a hermeneutical purpose, we can stress the relationship between conceptualizing in words and the perceived reality in epistemological matters. Because language is itself contingent and fragile, it is not possible to translate the perceived reality into an identical definition that would always be true and valid. Thus, on the meta-level of philosophical (and theological) theory formation, a binary categorization between right and wrong meaning proves to be misleading. This stems from the multitude of meanings a phrase can have in different times and contexts. A simple word will always surpass – epistemologically speaking – a single definition because of its surplus of meaning; a single word as signifier can point to a multitude of signified aspects. In other words, the contextual dependence of a word makes clinical objectivity impossible.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, irony offers itself as both an existential and hermeneutical instrument to open one's own horizon, in order to cope with wavering meaning without having to rely on the categories of true/false or real/inexistent.<sup>36</sup>

Given that an interpretation is never dispensable, it is up to a *subject* to do the interpretative work because worldly phenomena are neither evident nor do they carry their own interpretation. Phenomena appear in an equivocality that makes an interpretation absolutely necessary. Here, it also follows that an unambiguous interpretation is a self-contradiction because an interpretation only represents a subjective attempt to clarify the being of a thing. In order not to fall back on over-simplified arguments and thus to maintain an epistemic openness, it was a decisive concern of Socrates to question precipitate determinations in public. He wanted to be the midwife for his interlocutors in their search for truth.<sup>37</sup> He tried to help his interlocutors, as well as his students, to achieve intellectual liberation and freedom through his ironic inquiries, thus opening up intellectual freedom as a potential possibility for them.<sup>38</sup> This Socratic irony has a purifying function, but according to Kierkegaard, Socrates did not take responsibility for the life and thinking of his students. Since this new, negative freedom through irony came as a potential, it was up to each student to put this freedom into an actualization. In Kierkegaard, the relationship of Socrates to his students only took place in the realm of possibility or even only as a possibility (and thus not in concrete reality).<sup>39</sup> Because irony was not only a method for Socrates but rather his existential program, the ironic inquiry was not limited to a certain point of reality. Irony allowed Socrates to put knowledge itself into question: For him, beauty, truth, and goodness were liminal concepts of knowledge, which themselves had only a virtual or somewhat hypothetical validity.<sup>40</sup> Since knowledge will always lack an axiomatic point, actual knowledge was impossible for him and could only count as a possibility. Taken to the extreme, even death was meaningless for him, according to Kierkegaard. Socrates did not know death and did not gain any insight into death strictly speaking, so his negative freedom also

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<sup>35</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge 1978), 87–89.

<sup>36</sup> This does not mean, however, that these categories have become fully useless for discursive work in science or scholarship. They remain significant and useful, but the hermeneutic necessity will stay to transcend rigid definitions.

<sup>37</sup> See Jankélévitch, *L'ironie*, 12.

<sup>38</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony: With continual Reference to Socrates*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: PUP 1989), 191.

<sup>39</sup> See Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 192.

<sup>40</sup> See Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 196–197.

came with the fearlessness of death. This existential irony of Socrates limits his life, according to Kierkegaard, to a radical point of the virtual present.<sup>41</sup>

Despite this critical view on Socrates, Kierkegaard assigns Socrates a paradigmatic moment in human history that cannot be overestimated. Through Socrates, subjectivity appeared for the first time, and since then, this ongoing questioning shaped human self-relationship as self-reflection.<sup>42</sup>

Kierkegaard was particularly concerned with the danger of falling into pure negativity through the principal stance of infinite questioning through irony. By questioning everything in an unleashed manner, irony tends to collapse into a destructive form of nihilism. Kierkegaard opposes a form of irony that has only an end in itself and thus gets lost in excess of negativity because irony must be purposive. Relying on Kierkegaard, we can no longer call this actual irony, but only cynicism:

“Here, then, we have irony as the infinite absolute negativity. It is negativity, because it only negates; it is infinite, because it does not negate this or that phenomenon; it is absolute, because that by virtue of which it negates is a higher something that still is not. The irony establishes nothing, because that which is to be established lies behind it.”<sup>43</sup>

Instead of getting lost in the infinite movement of pure negativity, as Kierkegaard repeatedly criticizes Schlegel, Fichte, and Solger in particular,<sup>44</sup> Kierkegaard opts for *controlled irony* that is secured by an existential anchor.<sup>45</sup> To pursue an ironical existence, this anchor of meaning and orientation needs to occupy an axiomatic point that cannot be questioned or ironized. This axiom spares the ironist from falling into the abyss of endless negativity and, at the same time, serves as an excellent way to locate her own existence. Concerning this controlled irony, Liesbet Samyn raises the question of whether such a form of irony can still count as irony and whether this irony is still a philosophical method at all, or whether it represents a unique form of religiousness.<sup>46</sup> Without agreeing principally with Samyn’s concern and without dismissing irony from the realm of philosophy, the axiomatic center of meaning is indeed an object of faith, strictly speaking.

From a psychoanalytical point of view, Jacques Lacan states the necessity for human language<sup>47</sup> to have a center of meaning that cannot be deconstructed. This axiomatic center prevents human language from falling into meaninglessness and insignificance of a fragile, endless chain of

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<sup>41</sup> See Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 196, 214–215.

<sup>42</sup> See Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 242.

<sup>43</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 261. Irony must not be an end in itself; quite the opposite, irony in its controlled mode is much more a means to establish subjective orientation within the world. See also Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 326–328. See further Jankélévitch, *L’ironie*, 153.

<sup>44</sup> See Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 272–285. Kierkegaard addresses Socrates very critically about only having negative freedom. However, Kierkegaard does not explicitly see him on the same level of lost reality as the romantic ironists.

<sup>45</sup> See Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 327–328.

<sup>46</sup> See Liesbet Samyn, “How to Cure Despair. On Irony and the Unhappy Consciousness,” in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 2009: Kierkegaard’s Concept of irony*, ed. Niels Jørn Cappelørn, Herman Deuser, and Brian K. Söderquist (Berlin: De Gruyter 2009), 317–351 at 345–348.

<sup>47</sup> This necessity is equally valid for the complete human conceptual horizon.

signifiers: this is the Name-of-the-Father (*le nom-du-père*).<sup>48</sup> If we connect Lacan and Kierkegaard, it is possible to state that the Name-of-the-Father cannot be ironized. Thus, the Name-of-the-Father prevents human reflexivity from falling into the excess of infinite negativity that sees Kierkegaard given in the Romantic Ironists. Only through this center of anchoring all subsequent meaning, it is possible to interpret the world and its phenomena, to speak of them, and to keep these attempts of interpretation ironically open.

Continuing the before stated, we can elaborate a form of ironic theology and a theology of irony. We see, following Paul, how it is possible to argue for the avoidance and denunciation of binary categorizations. This gesture of refusal makes Paul appear as an exemplary representative of controlled irony in the sense of Kierkegaard.

### **Foucault and Agamben – of truth and truth-speaking**

Before going over to the field of truth and truth-speaking, we have to frame our approach by pointing to the matters of epistemology and hermeneutics. Considering these topics is crucial because, as mentioned above, the relation between language and perceived reality is precarious and does not yield to an objective notion of neutral perception. This relation becomes clearer when we acknowledge that phenomena, as observable things, appear without any explanation and their interpretation. Due to the necessity of a subjective interpreter to recognize a phenomenon as appearing, it is epistemologically impossible that phenomena could end with one single interpretation. Since every appearance of a phenomenon in the perceptive field of a person comes with at least a minimal deviation on account of different hermeneutical preconditions, this equally means that interpretations of a phenomenon can differ without contradicting each other. If, however, an interpreter considers his or her interpretation as the only possible one, this stance entails a binary scheme with an enormous dynamic of exclusion. True is contrary to false, good to evil, ill to healthy, and sane to insane. This binary scheme remains not limited to the intellectual sphere; its consequences go further. At the same time, these consequences impact daily life, insofar as whatever is considered wrong or illogical is excluded and silenced. Such interpretative patterns of binary conceptions generate mechanisms of exclusion within society, as Michel Foucault illustrated in the field of clinical insanity.<sup>49</sup>

If we continue this scheme of binary exclusions into the topic of truth, significant findings become manifest. The prominent theories of truth (theory of adequation, coherence, and consensus) attempt to determine via

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<sup>48</sup> See Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Company 2006), 481-482. Lacan sees it as the founding principle for humans living together and communicating the Name-of-the-Father. The Name-of-the-Father thereby becomes, through the murder of the real father who was the former bearer of the law, the foundation of the symbolic-legitimate order – the Name-of-the-Father (as an empty signifier) is the law itself. See also Florian Klug, *Sprache, Geist und Dogma: Über den Einbruch Gottes in die Wirklichkeit des Menschen und dessen sprachliche Aufarbeitung* (Paderborn: Schöningh 2016), 49-50.

<sup>49</sup> See Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Gallimard 1972), 41-125. See also Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 41-47.

asymptotic approximations of something true to the truth.<sup>50</sup> The attempt to bridge the gap between something *as true* and truth *as a horizon*. However, the interpretation (as intellectual perception and understanding) of a phenomenon in the binary categories of true and false must not be mistaken with truth itself; since these interpretations (in the plural!) of phenomena on the ontic level are something completely different than truth as the horizon of all being on the ontological level. As Heidegger puts it, it is the confusion of correctness and truth.<sup>51</sup> In other words, truth exceeds the total sum of all phenomena interpreted as true.<sup>52</sup> In the case of an asymptotic approach of equating propositions and this enabling horizon, this very idea is instead a category mistake.<sup>53</sup>

However, the decisive and thus much more serious problem is not the relationship of particular true propositions and their relation to truth. The much more weighty issue here concerns the human conditions of cognition. While a pre-critical philosophy still assumed unhindered and objective access of humanity to reality, the critical studies of Immanuel Kant (especially *Critique of Pure Reason*) could show that this unbiased access never existed. Rather, human perception is bound to a subjective perspective and thus has no neutral access to the phenomena in his world horizon. An appearing phenomenon does not show itself in a neutral way to the perceiving person but is always already framed and shaped by perspectivity. Therefore, perception always stands beyond a supposed neutrality. For humans, there is no *thing in itself*, which is why, in return, human perspectivity is an a priori, epistemological basic condition.<sup>54</sup>

Instead of separating subject and object through supposed neutrality, it is necessary to emphasize the relationality within the act of perception.<sup>55</sup> Through contingency, subjective perception means that there is no timeless, neutral, and unbiased access to reality. This brings a perceiving person always to have a specific place where perception happens and propositions are made:

“Strictly speaking, perspective is the condition of the possibility of truth. For a ‘view from nowhere,’ there is no truth, because nothing can be seen, understood, and judged as wrong. So, where falsehood does not only not exist factually, but cannot exist at all, there is no need for truth. Only under the conditions of contingency and perspectivity, truth matters. Only then, a person needs it, and only there, it does exist. Because only where it is possibly or actually endangered, there is a dispute about truth. And without this, there is no truth.”<sup>56</sup>

<sup>50</sup> See Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 138. See also Klaus Müller, Jürgen Werbick, “Wahrheit. II. Philosophie- und theologiegeschichtlich,” in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, vol. 10, ed. Walter Kasper et al., 3<sup>rd</sup> ed (Freiburg: Herder 2006), 929–933 at 929–930.

<sup>51</sup> See Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 138: “think truth as correctness [Richtigkeit].”

<sup>52</sup> See Aristotle: *Metaphysics*, 1041b.

<sup>53</sup> See Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 141–142.

<sup>54</sup> See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, transl. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: CUP 1998), 177–179 (A28–33/B 44–48).

<sup>55</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT 2006), 17, 224–225. See also Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology* (London: Verso 1999), 32–33.

<sup>56</sup> Ingolf U. Dalferth and Philipp Stoellger, “Perspektive und Wahrheit. Einleitende Hinweise auf eine klärungsbedürftige Problemgeschichte,” in *Wahrheit in Perspektiven: Probleme einer offenen Konstellation*, ed. Ingolf U. Dalferth and Philipp Stoellger, *Religion in Philosophy and Theology* 14 (Tübingen: Mohr 2004), 1–28 at 13.

Instead of trying to separate truth and perspectivity by a phantasm of neutrality and objectivity, both aspects mutually depend on each other. Thus, only from a subjective perspective, truth is recognizable. That is why also the Subject, in the sense of Badiou and Žižek, only comes into being by decidedly taking responsibility towards truth.<sup>57</sup> To elaborate his take on becoming a subject, Žižek cites Paul as a believer in Christ.<sup>58</sup> Accordingly, we can state that Paul's interpretation of Jesus Christ as risen from the dead cannot happen neutrally. This very belief in Jesus Christ involves the whole person of Paul existentially because faith in Christ counts here as an axiom.

This faith in Christ does not remain on a merely intellectual level; it needs to come into practice. Perception, recognition, and understanding of truth carry existential weight for the Subject who cannot stay unchanged. The acknowledged truth must also be applied (in the sense of *hermeneutical application*).<sup>59</sup> This is the reason why the Subject who knows about truth as a life-changing matter must remain faithful to it.<sup>60</sup> The truth event, like the resurrection of Christ, comes as a vocation that does not approach a person as a neutral object, but rather calls for taking responsibility and acting correspondingly.<sup>61</sup>

To outline a conception of truth that is aware of the possible category mistake and the epistemological conditions, and that takes into account the hermeneutical significance of subjectivity, the following can be said: Truth provides and is the *universal origin* (in Heidegger's sense of *Ursprung*) of *interpretation*.<sup>62</sup> Truth further calls for responsibility so that subjective interpretations and the respective actions can gain existential weight and stand out to be evaluated.

The conception of truth as the possibility for interpretation may sound weak and inappropriate for this existential matter. However, including the topic of justice to the matter of truth, the demand for responsibility makes sense. If a person is conscious about the in-deconstructable idea of justice and also knows about its relevance concerning his or her actions and their consequences,<sup>63</sup> truth becomes an obligation that, because of its universal scope, also includes justice. The individual is in commitment towards truth – he or she does not possess it, but being aware of this obligation, it is the only possibility to classify and interpret phenomena, and subsequently, to relate these interpretations to truth. In other words, truth is enabling for any interpretation by being a non-destructible anchor. In consequence, truth also appears as the horizon of responsibility, before which a Subject receives existential weight and the value of its actions matter. Such a conception of

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<sup>57</sup> See Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum 2006), 195–197. See also Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 141–144.

<sup>58</sup> See Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 145–151.

<sup>59</sup> See John D. Caputo, *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information* (London: Pelican 2018), 101, 112, 310.

<sup>60</sup> See Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso 2001), 67–71.

<sup>61</sup> See Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 90–92. See also Badiou, *Being and Event*, 396–400.

<sup>62</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. and ed. by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: CUP 2002), 46–49.

<sup>63</sup> It is Jacques Derrida himself as the theorist of deconstruction who identifies justice as indeconstructible and considers every single person as individually responsible through the call of justice. See Jacques Derrida, *Force de loi: Le 'Fondement mystique de l'autorité'* (Paris: éditions Galilée 1994), 35. See also Caputo, *Hermeneutics*, 205.

truth is neither cold nor abstract, but it raises awareness for individual responsibility.

Michel Foucault traced this connection between truth and existential dimension in his late studies on power and subjectivity by investigating Socratic and Cynical philosophy as well as early church spirituality about *parrhesia* as truth-telling or truthfulness. Foucault's former works focused specifically on the encompassing power structures that frame and shape human life within a society.<sup>64</sup> As a consequence of Foucault's investigations, it seems that only a vanishing amount of freedom emerges within daily life because the power relations that frame societal living are restricted neither to the state level nor to the sphere of concrete visibility. For example, Foucault's analysis of Bentham's panopticon exemplifies that the sources of power effects surpass the level of visibility insofar that, in the end, the prisoner internalizes the invisible surveillance and becomes his or her guard.<sup>65</sup> By referring to Bentham's panopticon, Foucault can adopt this mode of self-surveillance as a mode of living in modern society.<sup>66</sup>

Compared to his former works, his approach to *parrhesia* appears both as a consequent development as a form of (ethical) self-governance and as a departure from his work's institutional scope by focusing on the individual level. His former works draw a picture that societal and individual life is at an impasse by the inability to act freely. Through the concept of *parrhesia*, Foucault shows self-realization and individual responsibility can take place beyond and against the impasses of power structures by an individual relation to truth.

Foucault goes back to Greek antiquity as a paradigmatic place to investigate self-realization by individual responsibility for truth. At that time, a person's relationship to truth is not a theoretical or analytical matter but falls within the realm of practical life and self-realization. During the lifetime of Socrates and the heyday of Cynical philosophy, truth was treated in the strict context of the political public sphere and a person's self-understanding:<sup>67</sup> *Aletheia*, *politeia*, and *ethos* form a triad of a successful

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<sup>64</sup> See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books 1995).

<sup>65</sup> See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 201–202.

<sup>66</sup> See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 207–208.

<sup>67</sup> See Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2011), 66–68, 234.

life within society.<sup>68</sup> To uncover and repair an incongruity between a person's life and his or her relationship to truth, *parrhesia* is the discerning hinge by truth-telling. *Parrhesia*, therefore, has a pedagogical function in this context by taking care of the self-relationship of a person.<sup>69</sup> Foucault understands *parrhesia* as follows:

“parrhesia is a kind of verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness, a certain relationship to his own life through danger, a certain type of relation to himself or other people through criticism (self-criticism or criticism of other people), and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty. More precisely, parrhesia is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself). In parrhesia, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy.”<sup>70</sup>

Regarding *parrhesia*, Foucault's portrait of Socrates differs significantly from Kierkegaard's interpretation of Socrates, whereby Foucault acknowledges the Socratic irony but considers it solely as a means of helping his interlocutors find a harmonious relationship with truth.<sup>71</sup> Other than in Kierkegaard, the Socratic irony counts for Foucault not as an end in itself. Instead, in Foucault, his picturing of Socrates as the most distinguished truth-teller (*parrhesiastes*) deviates fundamentally from Kierkegaard's image of Socrates, instead of seeing Socrates alone stuck in pure negativity.<sup>72</sup> On the contrary, Foucault attests to him a harmonious relationship regarding truth while the public opinion acknowledges his way of living. According to Foucault, there is no discrepancy between his philosophical teaching and his related practicing: Socrates is not a liar,<sup>73</sup> but his libertarian appearance as an ironist meekly enables him to find an accurate form of living and a

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<sup>68</sup> We should be aware that the conception of individuality is a very modern notion that cannot be related to ancient societies. When looking at the treatment of a harmonious life in Greek antiquity, a person's existence is fundamentally linked to a specific society as a collective. Therefore, *parrhesia* is not in the same sense an individualistic matter as it would be in modernity, as Nancy Luxon emphasizes. See Nancy Luxon, “Ethics and Subjectivity: Practices of Self-Governance in the Late Lectures of Michel Foucault,” in *Political Theory*, No. 36/3 (Jun., 2008), 377–402, here at 391: “For such reflection to generate ethical values, the parrhesiastic mode of truth-telling would need to be brought to bear on other values—such as liberty or security—central to that community; such a relationship would enable this mode of truth-telling to be stable under reflection and to acquire value itself. The intuition here is that truth telling practices are collectively, not individually, maintained. Such public redescriptions test the truth content of these events and claims for the present of ‘now and around here’; the mode of truth-telling is resolutely local and articulated in terms of the community at hand. As historian Paul Veyne has commented, it is ‘less a philosophy of truth than of speaking truly.’ It offers a mode of truth-telling that results in the creation of an ethical structure capable of establishing and assessing a provisional harmony of words and deeds.”

<sup>69</sup> See Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) 2001), 114.

<sup>70</sup> Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 19–20.

<sup>71</sup> See Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 127.

<sup>72</sup> See Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 196–197.

<sup>73</sup> See Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 100.

harmonious relationship between his self-conception and his commitment to truth:<sup>74</sup> "Socrates is the parrhesiast."<sup>75</sup>

Socrates' harmonious relation of his deeds and words counts for Foucault as an existential expression of truthful living. This harmonious yet dangerous relation is a mode of existential veridiction outside the safeguard of an institutional framework.<sup>76</sup> Regarding the concept of truth, Foucault's investigation of *parrhesia* is not interested in a mere intellectual conception of truth that draws only on the epistemological side.<sup>77</sup> *Parrhesia* still encompasses an epistemological matter as a person's spoken words should not be lies or hide the truth (as *alēthēs logos*); furthermore, words ought to be an expression or a gesture of a truthful existence (as *alēthēs bios*).<sup>78</sup> In fact, Foucault does not endorse a general conception or regime of truth that would lead to a person's submission. In Foucault's understanding of *parrhesia*, there is no room for a regime of truth that entails an existential subjection (as epistemological repression) because the core idea of *parrhesia* is to be an ethics or a *téchne* (τέχνη) that enables subjectivation through the dangerous act of frank and daring truth-telling.<sup>79</sup>

Socrates' death paints a vivid picture that practicing *parrhesia* is not without danger. His condemnation and death impressively demonstrate that this frank and public disclosure of other persons' discrepancies in their relationship to truth is anything but a harmless undertaking: *Parrhesia* is a precarious and risk-soaked practice since it aims at changing the interlocutor's stance towards truth through the conversation for the better. This truth-telling differs from the harmless expression of a true statement ('Socrates is a human being') insofar that it requires courage to pursue this task because *parrhesia* can damage or destroy, on the one hand, the existing self-conception and public esteem. And on the other hand, it can ultimately result in death.<sup>80</sup> This frankness makes the *parrhesia* appear as a gesture of exposure because it comes with a constitutive binding of the own statement to the public display of a person. A person's truth-telling is accompanied by an existential weight and, therefore, deviates fundamentally from a purely rhetorical gesture, which only shows a loose connection between speaker and statement.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>74</sup> See Foucault, *Courage of Truth*, 160.

<sup>75</sup> Foucault, *Courage of Truth*, 26.

<sup>76</sup> This dangerous form of veridiction through a person's daring subjectivity appears as a form of critique to the disharmonious, non-truthful living of the common people. Here, we can clearly see a parallel between Heidegger's *Man* and Foucault's *parrhesia*. See Philipp Sarasin, *Michel Foucault zur Einführung*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Hamburg: Junius 2012), 197–201. For an in-depth discussion of Foucault's use of veridiction, see Andreas Folkers, "Veridiction und Denunziation: Foucaults Genealogie der Kritik und die Politik der Wahrheit," in *Foucault und das Politische: Transdisziplinäre Impulse für die politische Theorie der Gegenwart*, ed. Oliver Marchart, Renate Martensen (Wiesbaden: VS-Verlag), 87–107.

<sup>77</sup> See Sarasin, *Michel Foucault*, 203–204.

<sup>78</sup> See Foucault, *Courage of Truth*, 219–221.

<sup>79</sup> See Luxon, "Ethics and Subjectivity," 390–391. See also *ibid.*, 379: "by creating not a 'body of knowledge' but a 'body of practices'; and without reference to an external order (such as nature, custom, tradition, religion). *Parrhesia* 'educates,' rather than 'produces,' individuals. ... Rather than a 'knowing subject,' produced in reference to a defined body of knowledge and some external order, the 'expressive subject' draws on the structural dynamics of parrhesiastic relationships to give ethopoetic content to her actions. Rather than being urged 'dare to know,' individuals are encouraged to 'dare to act.'"

<sup>80</sup> See Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 15–17.

<sup>81</sup> See Foucault, *Courage of Truth*, 12–14.



Considering Giorgio Agamben's philosophical investigations into human speech and, in particular, the oath, parallels become apparent between Michel Foucault's late studies and Agamben's insights. Agamben understands human persons, by relying on Aristotle, not only as the speaking animal (ζῶον λόγον ἔχον)<sup>82</sup> but also through the act of speaking human self-becoming takes place.<sup>83</sup> In his investigation into the function of the oath, Agamben states that the current situation of human speech differs radically from previous ages since nowadays language is affected by a cancer-like growth of voidness and meaningless statements. Instead of having, as in previous times, the oath as a means of existential commitment, the bond between speaker and language has fallen apart.<sup>84</sup> Based on this finding, we can conclude with Heidegger that human persons get lost in chatter (*Gerede*).<sup>85</sup> We can clarify Agamben's concern by looking into the unstable being of man that finds itself thrown between potentiality and actuality. This impending danger of falling into voidness and chatter becomes more transparent when seeing the human person in reference to language itself: As every person's life is threatened by *Angst* of falling back into inauthenticity (*man*),<sup>86</sup> likewise every confession and oath are fundamentally at stake of turning into perjury or lie.<sup>87</sup> By swearing an oath, a person shows commitment to the given statement so that the speaker and statement are deeply related, without the possibility for the speaker to guarantee the validity and correctness of his oath. The speaker instead turns to God or the deity for guaranteeing the validity of his or her oath and endowing him or her with credibility:

"The oath, defined by the correspondence between words and actions, here performs an absolutely central function. This happens not only on the theological level, in that it defines God and his *logos*, but also on the anthropological level, since it relates human language to the paradigm of divine language. If the oath is, in fact, that language that is always realized in facts and this is the *logos* of God ..., the oath of men is thus the attempt to conform human language to this divine model, making it, as much as possible, *pistos*, credible."<sup>88</sup>

The oath is both a curse and a blessing, not only in the proverbial sense but also from its origin. Through the institution of the oath, the fragility of human language becomes fully apparent. However, at the same time, the oath serves as the very means to make this inherent fragility reliable in the name of God.<sup>89</sup> In doing so, the oath transcends human language and seeks to align it with divine language.<sup>90</sup> By examining this relation, it is important not to confuse the institution of the oath with magic and spells: Since magic and spells cut off the relationship with God and the public intelligibility through their exclusion from the public and their incomprehensibility (e.g.,

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<sup>82</sup> See Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a.

<sup>83</sup> See Colby Dickinson, *Agamben and Theology*, Philosophy and Theology (New York: t&t clark 2011), 18–24.

<sup>84</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language: An Archaeology of the Oath*, Homo Sacer II,3, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford, CA: SUP 2011), 69–72.

<sup>85</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 19<sup>th</sup> ed. (Tübingen: Niemeyer 2006), 167–169.

<sup>86</sup> See Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 180–196.

<sup>87</sup> See Agamben, *Sacrament of Language*, 7–8.

<sup>88</sup> Agamben, *Sacrament of Language*, 21.

<sup>89</sup> See Agamben, *Sacrament of Language*, 8, 21–22.

<sup>90</sup> See Agamben, *Sacrament of Language*, 22.

in the murmuring of hocus-pocus).<sup>91</sup> The relationship between God and a speaking person represents a core content of the oath: In the oath, it is not human language as such that renders the transition to the level of (infallible) divine language. Instead, the divine sphere takes part in it, which grants human language a new quality.<sup>92</sup>

By transcending the surface of human language, an oath can become a *sacrament* through the relationship with God.<sup>93</sup> In doing so, it is wrong to understand the sacrament in terms of vulgar theology because the core content of the sacramental event lies in the perception that an excess of divine presence takes place through a verbally coded, finite surface, which exceeds the purely human sphere. A human person is in the place of reception, while the active or enabling part is on God's side. Putting this relation in proper theological terms, the Second Vatican Council, in *Dei Verbum*, understands a sacrament in its innermost being as a relational event: It is "a sign and instrument ... of a very closely knit union with God" (DV 1).<sup>94</sup>

Nor is the oath, in its sacramental dimension, performed in isolation or in private seclusion, for the oath has its place in public. The oath may be heard, and the person who swears receives trust – if he or she enjoys credibility among those who hear. The listening public may believe and trust that the swearing person will keep his or her word and that deeds will follow accordingly. If the swearing person is credible, he or she holds *fides* towards the others who trust in him or her.<sup>95</sup> In doing so, the performing person exposes him or herself because he or she has no authority over the *fides* towards him or her, nor because he or she could guarantee the validity of his or her testimony. This person makes a direct connection between his or her statement and his or her own person: "The human being is that living being that, in order to speak, must say 'I' must 'take the word,' assume it and make it his own."<sup>96</sup> According to Agamben following Foucault, people risk themselves by swearing an oath; they put themselves in a precarious situation to become human beings in the first place as speakers and be human beings in community.<sup>97</sup> The oath, therefore, presents itself as a gesture of subjectivation *par excellence*. By its fragility, human language cannot guarantee anything and is always on the verge of falling into contradiction or collapsing into meaninglessness. In this very matter, the fragility of human existence and the fragility of language coincide.

Aligning this finding with our theological argument, it is once again crucial to state that a human being can neither guarantee the truth or the validity of a statement nor can he or she ever acquire or possess truth by a gesture of brute force. This dispossession stands in stark contrast, as recognized by Paul; Christ himself is the personal truth and stands up for truth, e.g., on

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<sup>91</sup> See Agamben, *Sacrament of Language*, 43.

<sup>92</sup> See Agamben, *Sacrament of Language*, 22: "In this way, however, not only human language but even God himself is irresistibly drawn into the sphere of the oath. On the one hand, in the oath human language communicates with that of God; on the other hand, if God is the being whose words are oaths, it is completely impossible to decide if he is reliable because of the oath or if the oath is reliable because of God."

<sup>93</sup> See Dickinson, *Words Fail*, 53.

<sup>94</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat\\_ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat_ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html)

<sup>95</sup> See Agamben, *Sacrament of Language*, 25–27.

<sup>96</sup> Agamben, *Sacrament of Language*, 71.

<sup>97</sup> See Agamben, *Sacrament of Language*, 69.

the cross. In matters of weakness, the Christian faith goes over to an even more exposed position, with the faithful confessing Christ's death as a cursed man. Christians testify in their confession of faith, without being able to guarantee, that Jesus Christ is the incarnated Son of God. This confession includes that He died on the cross and, contrary to all human reason, defeated death itself through the resurrection to break up the violent structures of the world from within out of the powerlessness of the cross and repeal this violence as meaningless (1 Cor 15:55). Here, the expressed faith in Jesus Christ not only resembles the oath in a formal sense, but it increases its weakness of language and communion with God in an unprecedented way. The confession of faith becomes a binding act of faith that links to salvation and thus includes a performative effect.<sup>98</sup> According to Agamben, a confession of faith does not present a denotative content because the resurrection cannot be represented, in terms of signification, or grasped conceptually. Still, in the confession, truth is announced in an auto-referential way, which testifies itself. This structure leads Agamben, following Foucault, to understand the Christian confession of faith as a form of *parrhesia par excellence*:

“This act [i.e. of confession] constitutes something like a performative, since, through confession, the subject is bound to the truth itself and changes his relation to others in addition to himself. ... This very form is the confession of faith documented in the Pauline passage on which we have been commenting. Between the performative of the oath and of penance, the *performativum fidei* defines the originary messianic – that is, Christian – experience of the word.”<sup>99</sup>

By this confession of faith, participation in the power of Christ takes place, whereby this confession gains an existential meaning and indicates that the violent structures of the world became meaningless in the personal as well as in the community framework.<sup>100</sup> Here, this very form of power works weakly and ironically because the truth of Christ does not expel a different opinion or worldview in a binary scheme of being false or untrue. And further, through the fragility of a confession, language itself surpasses its limits.<sup>101</sup> By linking to *parrhesia*, we can elaborate on the Christian confession as a means of truth-telling. It presents itself as an existential act that provides for a performative power in the crossing of language to take place. Here, language does not remain limited within the world, but as a sacrament of truth, a confession of faith becomes a pivotal point for truth itself to emerge.

### Conclusion

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<sup>98</sup> See Agamben, *Time*, 131: “the word of faith enacts its meaning through its utterance. When thinking of the nearness of the mouth and heart, we have to venture something like a performative efficacy of the word of faith realized in its very pronouncement.”

<sup>99</sup> Agamben, *Time*, 134. Here, Agamben refers to an aspect which Foucault only touched upon in his last public lectures. In his posthumous research, Foucault was able to give attention to this aspect on a larger scale. In this study, the Christian spirituality and way of life can be understood, according to Foucault, as genuine *Parrhesia*. See also Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité 4: Les aveux de la chair* (Paris: Gallimard 2018).

<sup>100</sup> See Agamben, *Time*, 12–13, 31–34.

<sup>101</sup> See Dickinson, *Agamben and Theology*, 126–128.

Irony and parrhesia are not contradictory in their approach because – as the illustration above could show – both relate to truth and address it without gestures of superiority or excluding authority. Here, the concept of truth is not an affair that remains limited to a correspondence between a thing and its mental representation; nor can truth be established by consensus-building. Here, in an attempt to avoid reductive definitions, the concept of truth appears as a perspective enabling matter. In being of existential worth, truth enables a person to question, evaluate, and interpret phenomena, whereby the person is also aware of the vocation of truth to take responsibility for his or her actions and attitude.

In this respect, irony stands in an essential relation to truth, because irony questions overly simplified interpretations of phenomena. And, at the same time, irony wants to keep the interpretive horizon open for a more appropriate interpretation. It differs, therefore, also fundamentally from cynicism because, contrary to the attitude of cynicism, irony displays a constructive approach to gaining knowledge. Far from being a nihilistic or cynical enterprise, irony aims at re-gaining the potentiality of equivocal meanings for an improved relation to truth and stepping aside from a deadlock of definitions in excluding actuality.<sup>102</sup> Although irony deploys a method of deconstruction, whereby deconstruction is not to be confused with destruction, irony knows itself in good company with postmodernism, according to Lyotard, who understands his approach in the tradition of the Enlightenment.<sup>103</sup> Irony represents an epistemological approach that is critical of knowledge but is nevertheless oriented towards further insight. According to Foucault, truth-telling means an existential obligation to truth, which not only encompasses a person's own life. Stemming from an attitude of courage, *parrhesia* also attempts to help fellow human beings by uncovering misalignments relating truth. Like the oath, *parrhesia* is also an existential gesture of exposure, since a person enters into a commitment to his or her statement, makes himself or herself publicly vulnerable, and takes a stand for truth itself. The parrhesiast commits to truth to announce it, whereby the swearing person risks being cursed and binds his or her oath to his or her person to open up a sacramental presence for truth to take place.

If we combine these thoughts and apply them to Pauline ecclesiology, it is possible to interpret the Church as an ironic society of truth-telling. According to Paul, the separations of gender, nationality, and class no longer prevail because of Christ's resurrection and the subsequent incorporation into the body of Christ through baptism. Social markers became ineffective but were not destroyed violently. Therefore, James Alison is able to describe the ecclesial life as 'most subversive' by dismantling violent patterns of exclusion without relying on any use of violence at all.<sup>104</sup> This new quality of acting and living within this ecclesial society becomes apparent by confessing to Jesus Christ. He experienced the violent mechanisms of the world in an agonizing way and rendered them ineffective through resurrection. Thus, the confession of the Church from

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<sup>102</sup> See Dickinson, *Agamben and Theology*, 42–49.

<sup>103</sup> See Peter Engelmann, "Einführung: Postmoderne und Dekonstruktion: Zwei Stichwörter zur zeitgenössischen Philosophie," in *Postmoderne und Dekonstruktion: Texte französischer Philosophen der Gegenwart*, ed. Peter Engelmann (Stuttgart: Reclam 2007), 5–32, here at 16. Even if postmodernism and deconstruction are conceptually distinct, the explicit reference to the Enlightenment by Lyotard is taken here as an opportunity to attest the same concern as in irony.

<sup>104</sup> Alison, *Joy*, 179.

weakness to the overcomer of death can be easily understood with Giorgio Agamben as “sublime irony,”<sup>105</sup> where the personal truth of God can take place in uttermost proximity to his creation.

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<sup>105</sup> Agamben, *Time*, 136.