

The Doctrine of Voices

The doctrine of the voices is very simple: every voice speaks the truth. I did not write *a truth*, as though the truth were partial, but *the* truth, to indicate something stronger. A baby cries because her diaper is wet. A toddler whines when he wants more candy. Two eleven-year-olds furtively discuss where babies come from. A teenager yells at his parents—he needs privacy. A college student demonstrates against male violence. A young warehouseman objects to gun control. A mom asks her gay cousin not to bring his partner to the barbecue. “Think of the children,” she moans. A lawyer disputes her colleague’s insistence that the wealthy deserve tax breaks because they are “job creators.” An elderly man ominously tells his young niece, “We’re all aging at the same rate, my dear.”

Some of these truths are obvious, others are obscure. The baby is saying, “My diaper is wet; it’s irritating my skin. Please, come change me.” But what are the eleven-year-olds saying about themselves and their understanding of the world when they exchange falsehoods about procreation and sex? Is the teenager’s demand for privacy existential or a result of his desire to masturbate in peace? Does the college student feel threatened by male violence, or by males themselves? Whatever the case, every voice, whenever spoken, speaks

some fundamental truth about the speaker, about the speaker's understanding of the world, and, therefore, about the world itself.

Indeed, this is true even when the voice is uttering a material or logical falsehood. A six-year-old girl says, "The clouds are made of cotton candy." Clearly they're not, but the truth here has something to do with the girl's guileless, perhaps psychedelic attitude toward the cosmos. "Black people take more illegal drugs than white people; just witness the disproportionate number of blacks in prison for drug offenses." The first clause is false, and it does not follow logically from the second clause (black people are just *arrested* for drug offenses more often than white people). Nevertheless, the statement potentially reveals volumes about how the speaker feels about black people, and what black people represent to his psyche.

This doctrine is nothing more than a restatement of Freud's (and all subsequent psychology's) most basic principle. The psychologist will probably want to assert that the truth being expressed by a voice is usually mysterious. However, at 115 years since the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, we have had a lot of practice figuring these things out. And as psychology suggests, conversing about the utterances of various voices can reveal plenty about the truths being expressed.

The truth in question may be material, logical, psychological, emotional, pathological, spiritual, whatever. Almost always, multiple possibilities mix into a soup of revelation. "The national debt is now higher than it's ever been in the history of the United States. We should balance the budget, even if it means slashing spending on important government functions." The first statement is materially true. But does the second statement follow logically from the first? It does if you accept a hidden assumption of the voice: debt is bad. Most

economists will dispute this statement. Debt, in certain circumstances, like a strong ability to repay the debt, can be good. “Debt is bad” is a *psychological* complaint. It says, “I know what it feels like to be in over one’s head. It’s the worst thing in the world. We must avoid even approaching that, at any cost.” So, the original voice was speaking material truths; logical truths (if you agree with “debt is bad”); and psychological truths simultaneously.

I’d like to explore a more complicated example of the doctrine in action. My analysis is not exhaustive. I intend only to illustrate the practice of using the doctrine to elucidate some voices’ possible truths, and to point to possible means of reconciling conflicting truths.

On June 17, 2015, Dylann Roof, a twenty-one-year-old white boy, entered the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church (a two hundred year old, African-American congregation in Charleston, South Carolina) and shot nine black people dead. The shooting was racially motivated. Immediately after the event, anti-gun liberals and pro-gun conservatives began a battle of words. The president and the National Rifle Association (NRA) both made statements. Perhaps it wasn’t appropriate to make political hay out of this profound tragedy, but that’s how America works.

We actually have conflicting voices on two issues here: white-on-black violence and gun control. The boy uttered racial invective as he shot the people in the church. Why? Was he saying that black people represented a threat to his own and his supporters’ elevated whiteness? Does the “otherness” of black people, with its apparently unknown quality, mean something sinister to him? Does the earthiness of black culture symbolize a libidinal impulse in himself of which he is afraid? Perhaps all of these or more.

The boy was insane. You may believe he knew right from wrong when he blew his victims away. You may believe he is

criminally responsible for his actions, and should get the death penalty. But the boy's thinking was clearly pathological. Mental illness speaks the truth, just as acutely as a well-adjusted voice. The truth may be twisted and obscure. It may take the same kinds of artful, convoluted contemplation to figure the truth out that it takes to interpret a wild dream. But underneath the chaotic rubble of a dissociated mind lies honesty.

Some of the Christian black people from the church spoke of forgiveness. In the face of all that raging hatred, they could forgive him. Are they sick too? Notice that both the boy and the congregants expressed emotional truths. "I hate you" and "I forgive you" are emotional facts. But while the boy was primarily revealing psychological malnourishment, the congregants displayed a *spiritual* truth. God forgave the boy, instantaneously, when Christ died on the cross. The Christians need to forgive this hapless boy, in spite of the extreme loss they have faced.

The conflict between "I hate you" and "I forgive you" *should* have spotlighted this tragedy. It did not. Instead, President Obama made a statement in favor of gun control, and the NRA shot back. Other major countries don't have this sort of gun violence so frequently, Obama said. We must make it much more difficult to get a gun. The NRA responded that had the congregants been armed, they would have been able to shoot the shooter, and so many people wouldn't have died. We must make it easier to get a gun.

What truths are the pro-gun folks speaking? "Liberal overreach is threatening my way of life. You've been telling me how to supervise my community, how to run my business, how to manage my family, and how to think about my spiritual life—and now you want to prevent me from defending myself with a gun. I am under siege. You menace my very masculinity, the power of which is symbolized by my gun. *You're trying to cut my dick off.*" My reasoning about the pro-

gun truth may seem like something out of PSYCH101, but that doesn't mean it's not profoundly active in the pro-gun unconscious. Furthermore, nothing here is all that contrived. When we tell states they have to marry gay people, we're supervising their communities. When we tell businessmen they have to give paid maternity leave, we're running their businesses. When we impose useful sex education on high school students, we're managing their families. When we tell white people they have to embrace black and Hispanic folks as neighbors, we're telling them how to think about their spiritual life. They *are* under siege.

The gun epitomizes the last weapon in the fight against the besiegers. I contend that a real fear of castration is the ultimate, operative psychological structure here, but you do not need to buy that to understand the truths that the pro-gun voices speak.

What truths are the anti-gun folks speaking? Many groups of people have been traditionally suppressed by dominant groups: racial minorities, the underclass, women, sexual minorities, immigrants—even artists and poets. We need to regulate public life in such a way that we give a leg up to these groups, even if it means diminishing some of the muscularity of the dominants. White men and boys who use guns in mass shootings are frequently dominants, maladjusted to the new circumstance. The way to overcome this is to regulate guns.

There's nothing contrived about this message either. Oppression is a regrettable fact of life. We must welcome efforts to ameliorate that. Most anti-gun liberals *sincerely* wish to make ours a better world, at least a more peaceful America in which some oppressed people have a chance at a good life.

However, liberals want to make the world better and more peaceful even if it kills us. There should be no acknowledged differences between groups of people, despite talk of diversity. Business should be heavily regulated to ensure a diverse

workforce, fair wages and benefits, and, in general, desirable economic outcomes. We should regulate our diets, according to the latest scientific studies, and eschew smoking and promiscuity, to lead healthy lives. *They want to compel us to obey.* And taking guns out of the hands of the citizenry symbolizes that effort to compel. They *want* to cut our dicks off.

Both sides in the gun dispute feel like the biblical David. The pro-gun folks feel like the nasty liberal federal government is tyrannizing them. The anti-gun folks feel like the nasty, omnipotent white male establishment, which historically has owned and controled almost everything, threatens them and their constituency. Which one is correct is probably so complex a question that it cannot be answered, but all that matters is that both sides are expressing psychological *truths*, supported by material and logical evidence, about contemporary American life.

How can contradictory “truths” *both* be true? Logically, they can’t be. But I was careful to discuss truth in a broad sense. Psychologically, or emotionally, or spiritually, contradictions matter not. These kinds of contradictions are bipolar tensions. Truth occupies an ideational gamut from left anti-gun ideas to right pro-gun ideas. This offers a one-dimensional dynamic, but two- or three-dimensional schemes might work well too. The concept of bipolar tension suggests that the nature of ultimate truth is synthetic. A glass is composed of a bipolar tension between the glass outside and the emptiness inside. No glass exterior—liquid seeps out all over. No empty interior—nothing for the liquid to fill. A glass is only useful when the substance and the emptiness are brought together. Only when your head reconciles pro- *and* anti-gun voices, acknowledging and incorporating both in your personal solution, does the castration anxiety subside.

Some may object that psychological truths tell us nothing about the world at large. “You’re threatening me” tells us only

something about you, and maybe me. But our experience of threat tells us something about threats in general. We can suppose that other people feel threats the same way we do. “When you threaten to cut off the dicks of male animals, bad things happen.” That is a maxim we can discover in our analysis of the liberal/conservative conundrum. Liberals will only overcome resistance to their efforts when they find ways to make proposals less threatening to conservatives.

How does this look for the nation? How can we make a combative America more well-functioning? More people have to embrace synthetic truth, have to sit down with one another, express themselves, and listen for the psychological, emotional, and spiritual truths expressed. How can a liberal address the castration anxiety of a conservative? How can conservatives apply themselves to legitimate liberal aims? Cooperation comes from acknowledgment of our opponent’s truths. Where there is conciliation, no one feels like David. Now I’m starting to sound like a Christian. Doesn’t “love thy neighbor” imply a mutual, tacit acceptance of my neighbor’s differences? Let the doctrine of voices nourish our efforts to love our neighbors.