

WE HOLD THESE TRUTHS:

OBJECTIVE TRUTH, REASONED CONVICTION, AND THE SURVIVAL OF DEMOCRACY

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1. Introduction

The full title of this essay is, perhaps, even more contrived than the one that appears above; it is: “We (well, some of us) ... Hold (well, sort of) ... These Truths (well, at least ostensibly).” In order to justify this contrivance on these famous words from the Declaration of Independence, the first section of this paper explores the general significance of language used in human verbal communication. The second section ponders the interpretations and complications that result when these insights about language are applied to the expression: “We Hold These Truths.” The conclusion of this paper reflects upon Jacques Maritain’s essay, “The Philosopher in Society,” and the practical significance of his words for the present world situation.

2. Words and Human Linguistic Communication

All human linguistic communication has at least three elements or “moments:” 1) what is meant by the one who speaks or writes, 2) what is said or written—the words used to convey that meaning, and 3) what is read or heard by the one who receives these words. These three components may or may not coincide—such are the delicacies and perils of human linguistic communication.

In the first “moment,” the expression “what is meant,” refers to the meaning or understanding of something that the speaker or writer has in mind when he or she desires to communicate.

In the second moment, this thought, meaning or insight, needs to be expressed in “adequate” language—those chosen words and expressions which the speaker or writer intends to capture and convey that meaning. It is interesting to note, however, as Suzanne Langer

points out in *Philosophy In A New Key*, *meaning* is often like the clothes we wear—layered and all at once. The “*language*” we use to express that meaning, however, is like those same clothes strung out consecutively on a clothesline—they are then something noticeably different than when we wore them.¹ Moreover, as Ludwig Wittgenstein has observed, our words do not have “*meaning*” *per se*, but rather a “*use*” in a context.² Thus, the difficulties of human linguistic communication are often found not only in the poverty of our vocabulary and poor word choices, but also in the way in which we use language to express ourselves. Surprisingly, this difficulty comes from the richness of the words and symbols themselves. That is, since the connotation of a word or term refers to all of the attendant meanings that are connected to it, we sometimes end up “*saying*” even *more* or *less* than we intended. Additionally, is it not also true that we are sometimes obscure even to ourselves? We know “*what we think we want to say*,” but we still may not be completely sure or clear about the words and expressions that we should employ in order to best capture that meaning. We may know we “*haven’t gotten it quite right*,” or sometimes we may even experience that someone else standing nearby expresses more aptly the thoughts that we have in our mind!

Finally, as if this process of human linguistic communication were not already fragile enough, then comes the reception of these words by “*the Other*,” this human person, in the vast depth of richness that constitutes his or her own historical, intellectual, and spiritual self. For beyond the sameness of the potentialities of our human nature are all of the nurtural differences of an individual’s environment, upbringing, past experiences, and material/genetic makeup, including our predispositions, formed predilections, tastes, opinions, affections, prejudices, etc. Thus, not uncommonly, what someone *hears* (#3), in what was *said* (#2), may be different from what was *meant* (#1)!

With all of these delicacies of human linguistic communication in mind, we may now apply these insights to the expression “*We Hold*

¹ Suzanne K. Langer, *Philosophy In A New Key* (New York: The New American Library, 1951), p. 77.

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), p. 20.

These Truths” and ask: first, what are we to understand by the word, “We?” What might the Framers have meant by it? How do we understand it today, and in what ways, if any, has that meaning shifted from when it was first penned? Secondly, what is meant by the word “Hold?” Is there any significance to be found in the writer’s choice of that term? Thirdly, what of the term “Truth” or “Truths?” Isn’t it possible that, especially today, different people may hear that term to mean different things? And finally, we should ask, what bearing do these considerations have on the meaning of the expression as a whole, and for our understanding of democracy, both our own and others, in the world today?

3. “We,” “Hold,” and “Truths”

Question: “Who are “We?” Answer: “...the people.” But who are “*the people*?” Answer: the body politic; the citizens of the nation. This definition, though simple, can have several interpretations. For example, first, in the broadest sense, “the people” refers to all of the inhabitants who have citizenship by birthright or by legal bestowal. Secondly, in a more restrictive sense, “the people” might refer only to those who are active *participants* in the process of government. A third sense (one worthy of mention but beyond the scope of this paper) may be implied when these terms are used rhetorically by the officers of government to obscure the line between the second sense and their own decisions. For example, on September 1, 2004, at the Republican National Convention, Vice President Dick Cheney used the expression, “We will decide,” in a series of rhetorically effective ways that concealed a subtle shift of meaning and an intentional ambiguity: in one usage, his expression meant: “we, *the people of the United States* will decide;” but on a different occasion, he used it in such a way that it obscured a reference to a unilateral, purely executive decision: “we, *the President and I*, will decide.”

In any case, in the first sense of the uses just mentioned, all citizens, including children, minors, the mentally disabled, and those who are not registered voters, are included; in the second sense, they are not. The second sense refers to those who, in Lincoln’s celebrated expression, constitute a democratic government “*of the people, by the people,*” while the first sense would refer to and include those excluded

in the second sense, when it refers to a government that is “for the people.”

Historically, this notion of “the people” has changed since the country’s early beginnings. Then, African Americans were counted as only a percentage of a “whole man” (for census-taking and population representation), and they and women did not have the right to vote nor could they actively participate in government. Both of these groups were originally part of “the people” in the first sense, although not in the second. Although the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth and Nineteenth Amendments would officially or technically right these wrongs, it would still take many decades for these freedoms to be available in fact. In addition, ignorance, apathy, political pessimism, and a lack of will also keep a large percentage of “the people” from registering to vote and/or from exercising their privilege and responsibility. Moreover, language barriers, poverty, and illiteracy also contribute to the lack of participation by many citizens in their own governmental self-determination. These forms of self-disenfranchisement keep vast numbers of people from moving themselves from the broad sense of “we, the people” to the narrow, more restrictive sense. As a result, democratic government today appears to be more like a government “of some of the people, by some of the people, for all of the people.” As we shall see, the voluntary (and sometimes involuntary) lack of participation and involvement will play a considerable part in threatening the very foundation of democracy itself.

The understanding of the second term, “Hold,” is simpler to explore. On the one hand, a physical holding of something means to grasp it, to support it, to have in one’s possession. By extension, when one “holds” something as a truth, it too becomes something that one grasps, supports and embraces. However, given the disparity between the first two senses of the word “people” or “We,” and given the pluralistic nature of our current multicultural democracy, it is often times quite difficult to assess and understand the degree of intellectual conviction that “hold” signifies in the expression “We Hold These Truths.”

The last term, “Truths” (or “Truth” in general), is the term most fraught with confusion and misunderstanding today; it is also the most important. On the surface, it, too, appears quite simple: the Framers

had in mind certain values or ideals, which they understood to be essential for the foundation and sustenance of the new democratic government they sought to establish through the principles of the Constitution. These principles or ideals include not only life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, but imbedded in both the Declaration and the Constitution are the assumed or implied values that, as Jacques Maritain says, are the “moral tenants...on which democracy presupposes common consent.”³ What is interesting to observe in this discussion is the word that the Framers used to refer to these “moral tenants.” They did not say “We Hold These *Values*,” or “We Hold These *Ideals*,” but “We Hold These *Truths*.” Of course, they could not have known what a source of contention the word “truth” would occasion in a post-modern world! Had they used the terms “values” or “ideals,” there likely would be no problem today, since, for most people, these terms have a kind of moral, metaphysical, or epistemological ambiguity. There are indeed all kinds of values and ideals that one might embrace today, and judgments about them are, generally, considered to be “value-neutral.” Not so with the word of choice: truth; truth-claims imply that any opposing or contrary value or ideal must be *false*. The Framers *did* use the word “truth” and, by it, we can legitimately conclude that they *did* intend the objective validity of these truths. These are the “moral tenants” without which, Maritain warns, “democracy cannot survive.”⁴

But what if it is the case that, today, these so-called “truths” receive only patriotic lip service and become occasions for flag-waving celebrations where the citizenry display, as Maritain says, a “deep-seated devotion to...values in which their intellect has ceased to believe?”⁵ What if there should come a time when the vast majority of a democracy’s citizens are “at a loss to find any rational justification”⁶ for democracy’s founding ideals? Has that time come? What if these ideals should lose their objective truth and unconditional value? Has that

³ Jacques Maritain, “The Philosopher in Society,” in *On The Uses Of Philosophy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 12.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 11.

⁶ Ibid., p. 12.

moment in history arrived? And if so, what, we might speculate, are the practical implications of this collective amnesia for the survival of democracy?

4. Objective Truth, Reasoned Conviction and The Survival of Democracy

When we reflect on the life of most Americans today (especially when contrasted with life in the many other troubled regions of the world), it is all too easy for us to take our abundant blessings for granted and to lose sight of the philosophical underpinnings of the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution, those principles upon which this nation was built, and which ought not to be overlooked or forgotten. As Maritain's essay challenges us to consider, what if a time should come when citizens of a nation such as ours today should "suffer a cleavage"⁷ between the philosophical foundations of their ideals (what he refers to as "the inner cast of mind"⁸) and the ideals themselves? Then, might we not continue to *talk* about such things as rights and freedoms all the while that we have no idea about the true meaning (i.e., the philosophical underpinnings) of these foundational values and principles? If this indeed were to become the case, we then might continue to embrace the appearance of these ideals out of the habit of inherited tradition (what Maritain calls "the memory of past experiences"⁹) even though we may be "at a loss to find any rational justification for" them. "These things," Maritain stresses, would "no longer have for [our] minds any objective and unconditional value."¹⁰ Is there a danger in this? Maritain certainly thinks so:

There are a certain number of moral [and metaphysical] tenets—about the dignity of the human person, human rights, human equality, freedom, law, mutual respect and tolerance, the unity of mankind and the ideal of peace among men—on which democracy presupposes common consent; without a general,

⁷ Ibid., p. 11.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 12.

firm, and *reasoned-out* conviction concerning such tenets, *democracy cannot survive*.¹¹

Maritain's practical challenge is as real and serious today as it was when he first wrote down these thoughts in the early fifties; perhaps, even more so. Given present-day current events, is it not the case that the partisan patriotism concerning our present military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan is reminiscent of that team-spirit brouhaha that accompanies the send up to, and then the contest itself, found in rival athletic competitions? Do we really comprehend the gravity of our actions? Or, do we party-loving Americans wave our flags, enjoy our Memorial Day barbecues and 4th of July fireworks, all the while that, as a nation, we have lost any real sense of the true meaning of these ideals and hence may easily tire of some steady stream of bad news and body counts? Is our conviction based upon a commitment to realistic and meaningful principles, or do we too easily become weary through a lack of true conviction? In the enjoyment of the benefits that accompany the varying degrees of our economic prosperity, have we lost the intellectual understanding of the truth of those ideals that undergird the government's role and responsibility in helping its constituents to make a good life for themselves? These ideals include: the inherent dignity and sanctity of the human person, mutual tolerance and respect, human rights, equality, and freedom, respect for the rule of law, and the unity and peace of all humankind. Without these, Maritain's admonition remains clear, provocative, and disquietingly ominous; and as such, it bears repeating: "without a general, firm, and reasoned-out conviction concerning [these] tenets," he warns, "democracy cannot survive."¹²

¹¹ Ibid.; emphasis added.

¹² Ibid.