On the Frank Speech of Cornel West’s Prophetic Witness

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This article looks at the work of Cornel West with respect to his description of the social function played by the prophetic witness. West’s account of the prophet’s unique brand of truth-telling is introduced by first examining Michel Foucault’s description of the capacity of parrhesia, or frank speech, in antiquity. The frank speech of the prophetic witness as described by West is a more pertinent model of truth-telling for the present day’s social, political, and philosophical concerns.

1. Introduction

For a scholar of an almost unparalleled philosophical literacy, it is remarkable how little Cornel West succumbs in his writings to producing a sustained philosophical argument. This is true even, or perhaps especially, when his avowed subject is philosophy. As West himself tells us, this peculiar evasion (or approach-avoidance as it would be known to the psychological literature) has a long history in American philosophy, perhaps one which is even synonymous with the notion of “American philosophy” itself. One is reminded of Dewey’s comment when lecturing in Japan on the topic of William James as a great contemporary philosopher that none of James’ books could actually be called works of philosophy. We do not know if at the time of this statement Dewey was aware of the philosophical textbook at which James was at work towards the end of his life, a project which remained unfinished. Given the conclusions which James reached in that work regarding his topic, I doubt very much that Dewey would have revised his statement, if he was even unaware of the work in the first place.

Interestingly, in West’s interview with George Yancy for the latter’s book African-American Philosophers, in response to the question of whether or not there is such a thing as an “African-American philosophy,” West cannot answer the question without echoing the definition of philosophy James gives in his textbook:
So much would hinge upon what we mean by “philosophy.” If we understand philosophy as a type of autonomous discourse that somehow transcends history, I would say no, because I don’t think that there is such a thing in general. If, however, we understand it as a certain cultural response to the world and trying to come up with holistic views, synoptic visions and synthetic images of how things hang together, then certainly there is an Afro-American philosophical tradition, I believe, most definitely. But also I tend to be rather Jamesian in my understanding of philosophy. I think that philosophy is in one sense connected to certain temperaments and that we see those temperaments through images of the world. In this case, the notion of an image has to do with philosophical articulation, a *Weltanschaung*, a worldview and so forth.¹

In refusing (along with James) any and all constructions of a “philosophy in general” thought as a substantive, West instead opts for what we might call a notion of the philosophic, which is thought as both an adjective and adverb. Accordingly, by denoting something as philosophic, we may be offering a description of certain behaviors, inclinations, and/or habits and/or suggesting a modification of certain actions. In short, the philosophic is a “temperament” – or as Dewey would have put it, a “character” – a similar mode of approaching our different engagements in the world. As such, the philosophic is never strictly apart from the activity or entity which it at once describes and modifies, but there is a certain “family resemblance” to the descriptions and modifications it prescribes across differing contexts and situations. In fact, this statement regarding the family resemblance among philosophic processes can be called a tautological truth in that such a trait is recognized largely in the manner in which the temperaments in question demonstrate comparable investigations into “how things hang together”: a recognition of likeness, interrelation, and contamination which is shot through with the respect for difference. Any genealogy hangs together as much by positing breaks and disruptions in lines of ascendancy as it does by outlining paths of causality, and the ever-evolving modality of the philosophic is no different.

Viewed against this background, Cornel West’s unflagging insistence upon refusing the label of “philosopher” makes a great deal of sense. Despite receiving his Ph.D. in the subject and having written on an array of philosophic topics in the ancient, Continental, analytic, and pragmatist traditions, West has never held an appointment in a philosophy department. His philosophic writings often seem as if they are a step removed from the battlefield of ideas in which the arguments he discusses are themselves enunciated. Instead of asking whether or not a given theory is true or a given description or characterization is adequate unto itself, instead West prefers to ask (again, along with James), what are this idea’s consequences, what difference does this idea make, how and for whom does an argument as to the idea’s importance appear as legitimate.