How to tell the truth about climate change

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ABSTRACT
Scientific knowledge, it is argued, is insufficient to overcome climate skepticism. Spiritual truth is proposed as a way to do so. First, the cases of Eric Holthaus and Paul Kingsnorth are examined. Though they knew about climate change, they were only able to tell the truth and act on it after a personal collapse that transformed them. Telling the truth in this way carried a political force that their previous advocacy did not. These figures help animate and adapt Foucault's notion of spiritual truth for climate change. Finally, this theory of spiritual truth is compared to Naomi Klein's argument that climate science determines political truth and Bruno Latour's argument that politics should decide the truth of climate science. Spiritual truth accommodates the insights these perspectives provide while adding transformation as a key element for telling the truth about climate change.

In his 2013 Gifford Lectures, Bruno Latour unsettled the easy divide between those who think climate science is true and the 'skeptics' who deny it.

> Let's confess that *we are all climato-skeptics*. I certainly am. And so is this climatologist I was interviewing a few months back, a remarkably sad scientist who, as he ended the description of his beautiful discipline, had to sigh: "But in practice, I am a skeptic nonetheless, since, from the fully objective knowledge I contribute to producing, I do nothing to protect my kids from what is coming". (Latour 2013a)

What does it mean if a scientist and a social scientist both working on climate change find it necessary to call themselves skeptics?

Though Latour separates rational scientific skepticism from the kind practiced by those better designated as climate denialists, his skepticism is neither scientific nor denialist. Rather, it calls into question the link between knowledge about climate change and ethical action based on that knowledge. This link is the basis of Vanderheiden's *Climate Justice*, in which he argues that '[t]he most defensible starting point for assessing

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moral responsibility for historical emissions is the year 1990, with the publication of the IPCC's first assessment report' (Vanderheiden 2008, 190). Vanderheiden expects appropriate action to follow once a consensus concerning knowledge about climate change has been reached and disseminated. Yet Latour's skepticism suggests that knowledge may not be substantial enough to enable responsiveness to climate change.

The problem of being unable to respond to momentous events despite knowing about them was analyzed by Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morals*.

> We knowers are unknown to ourselves.… As a man divinely abstracted and self-absorbed into whose ears the bell has just drummed the twelve strokes of noon will suddenly awake with a start and ask himself what hour has actually struck, we sometimes rub our ears after the event and ask ourselves, astonished and at a loss, 'What have we really experienced' – or rather, 'Who are we, really?' And we recount the twelve tremulous strokes of our experience, our life, our being, but unfortunately count wrong. (Nietzsche 1956, p. 147)

For Nietzsche, while we may be good at collecting and assembling knowledge about the world, we often fail to think about what we are and what our role in constituting the world is. He was concerned with the inertia of ossified forms of Christian morality and the way they might transfer their inflexibility and otherworldly abstraction to some versions of scientific knowledge. For Nietzsche, such truths were insufficient when they remained disconnected from an interruptive force that could spur people to rethink their established way of being and place in the world. George Marshall urges such a rethinking in his study of the psychology of climate change (Marshall 2014, p. 2–3). Responding to climate change may require finding ways to connect to its interruptive force, thereby moving beyond the inflexibility of knowledge as truth.

This inflexibility takes many forms such as the ethical demand that action follow from knowledge or the exclusion of those who fail to adopt the same relation to knowledge as irrational. One problematic knot formed by the inflexibility of knowledge concerns the truth of climate change. First, concern and energy for the issue are siphoned into the debate over whether anthropogenic climate change is real or not. Then, the commitment to winning this debate impedes further action on climate change, even as all inaction is attributed to denialists. The result is a practical climate skepticism in which one knows about climate change and may even feel engaged, but does not act on it, in part because knowledge becomes a substitute for action. As Nietzsche suggests, the more strongly knowledge calls us – and what greater lure could there be than truth – the less we attend to our actions and how we live.

I will discuss how to overcome practical climate skepticism and enable responsiveness through a different notion of truth. First, I will look at the

cases of meteorologist Eric Holthaus and writer Paul Kingsnorth. Their stories both follow a trajectory that begins with them being skeptics who knew the truth about climate change. Each endured a personal collapse that prompted a transformation in how he saw his life and place in the world. These transformations enabled them to express the truth about climate change, including enacting it in their lives. This way of telling the truth carries a political force that their previous advocacy did not. I will then argue that the cases of Holthaus and Kingsnorth help animate and adapt Foucault's notion of spiritual truth for the contemporary issue of climate change. Finally, I will compare this Foucauldian notion of truth to two others that have come forward in climate change discussions: Naomi Klein's argument that science grounds political truth and Bruno Latour's argument that politics should decide the truth of climate science. Spiritual truth acknowledges the insights that both of these perspectives provide while adding transformation as a key element for telling the truth about climate change. The point is not to insist on one model of truth but to augment existing models to better respond to climate change.

Eric Holthaus

On 27 September 2013, after an all-night session, The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released a report detailing the state of climate science. Later that morning, meteorologist Eric Holthaus published a short article on the report entitled: 'The world's best scientists agree: on our current path, global warming is irreversible – and getting worse' (Holthaus 2013a). He found it a straightforward, perhaps even routine task to convey the information contained in the report: that humans cause global warming, that severe impacts are on the horizon, that geoengineering is not an option, and that something must be done immediately. Later in the day, he began 'thinking about the report more existentially. Any hope for a healthy planet seemed to be dwindling, a death warrant written in stark, black-and-white data. It came as a shock' (Holthaus 2013b). After switching from a scientific, analytical, and journalistic mode of thinking to an existential one, he understood climate change differently. The data printed across the page had been transfigured into a death warrant in which everyday human action authorized sovereign nature to execute the species.

What then happened in a boarding area in San Francisco International Airport has been described as an 'epiphany' and a 'meltdown,' though Holthaus calls it a 'hopeless moment' (Goldenberg 2013, Holthaus 2014). While talking to his wife on the phone, he suddenly found himself weeping. Shortly afterward, he sent the following tweet: 'I just broke down in tears in boarding area at SFO while on phone with

my wife. I've never cried because of a science report before. #IPCC.' Two minutes later, he tweeted: 'I realized, just now: This has to be the last flight I ever take. I'm committing right now to stop flying. It's not worth the climate' (Holthaus 2013b). The following tweets document mixed emotions, consideration of a vasectomy, and a willingness to go extinct (Olson 2013).

Efforts to promote carbon reduction were not new to Holthaus. He already engaged in green behavior such as recycling, turning off the lights, and using reusable bags. He had also adopted a couple of more substantial commitments: being vegetarian and car sharing. But he still traveled extensively by plane (Holthaus 2013b). The dangerous effects of climate change were also known to him. Holthaus gained notoriety for his reporting during Hurricane Sandy. His coverage was notable for the links he drew between the storm and climate change (Berger 2013). Before his transformation he thought he was acting responsibly yet at the same time he knew it was not enough.

Holthaus's transformation through which he connected to the truth of climate change produced a number of material and political effects. The emotional interruption that he felt was transferred to others through his speech and action. This can be seen in the responses to Holthaus's twitter announcement. Some people expressed support and admiration or felt compelled to make pledges to cut their carbon footprint. Yet others expressed disdain, suggesting that Holthaus was a 'beta male' or that he should commit suicide (Holthaus 2014). Some climate writers argued that his emotional reaction had compromised his professionalism and objectivity, or that he was overreacting to the IPCC report (Samenow 2013). Thus he pushed a broader group of people to confront climate change in an uncomfortable way.

Beyond his words, Holthaus's actions also had a ripple effect. He notes a few of the most significant ways his commitment to stop flying reorganized his life: he gave up forms of leisure dependent on long-distance travel, risked losing a job that up to that point had required regular travel, reorganized his volunteer work mitigating the impacts of climate change in Africa and the Caribbean, and began to consider the impact on the economy if many people were to dramatically curtail their flying habits or consumption in general (Holthaus 2013b, 2014). His family and employer had to come to terms with his response to climate change, just as others who are trying to understand the issue might too. Institutionalized comforts, vocations, comprehension, habits, and norms became destabilized through Holthaus's intense moment of hopelessness. These effects give a feeling of connection to the truth that motivates them and demonstrate the positive efficacy of individual actions, imbuing them with a broader sense of social consciousness.

Paul Kingsnorth

Paul Kingsnorth became an environmentalist as a young adult, vowing 'that this would be my life's work: saving nature from people' (Kingsnorth 2010a). His actions ranged from writing to obstructing the construction of highways, and lasted for over 20 years. Then, in 2010, he published 'Confessions of a recovering environmentalist.' In that essay, he declared his withdrawal from the environmental movement, arguing that under the banner of sustainability, it had become more about protecting a comfortable lifestyle than saving nature. He did not simply withdraw, but put his effort into founding The Dark Mountain Project with Dougauld Hine.

The Dark Mountain Project is an attempt to tell the truth. For Kingsnorth, withdrawing from environmentalism was a way to stop lying. 'I do feel the need to be honest with myself, which is where the "walking away" comes in. I am trying to walk away from dishonesty, my own included' (Stephenson 2012). Once he had walked away, it became possible to try to tell the truth. The project is to produce a narrative that honestly portrays the current human relation to the natural world, how we arrived at this point, where we are likely to end up, and why. To do so, they want to take a

> cold, hard look at the human predicament, without necessarily being obliged to have a "solution" to offer … to examine this process, and our place in it, and to do so from beyond the framework of our current cultural assumptions. (Kingsnorth 2010b)

Kingsnorth does not seek any new information that enables him to tell the truth. Rather, he is changing his relation to the information that he already has by reexamining what it means in its personal, cultural, and planetary context.

This changed relation to environmentalism emerged through 'a collapse in belief.… More specifically, I had stopped believing that it was possible to prevent many of the global crises we were bent on preventing.… It was climate change that really made up my mind' (Kingsnorth 2010b). Kingsnorth already knew that in addition to a host of other environmental crises, climate change had put humanity and the biosphere in a dire situation. Whereas previously that knowledge had been channeled into activism by his life commitment to the environment, once he confronted climate change that commitment gave way.

Thus he came to formulate climate change as a problem of what humans are today. 'We are all climate change.… We are all of us part of that destruction. This is the great, conflicted, complex situation we find ourselves in. I am climate change. You are climate change. Our culture is climate change.' (Stephenson 2012). If everyone, particularly in the West,

drives climate change through their life activities, then denial is a problem of identity and understanding our place in the world. Coming to see how he had shared in that denial, Kingsnorth needed to connect his way of telling the truth to a way of behaving.

> We all like to attack climate sceptics for being "in denial". But we are all of us living in denial … it took me a long time to accept the logic of my own conclusion, and what it would mean for me on a personal level. When I finally did accept it, I had to ask myself a question: what would I do if I really believed this? How would I live? (Kingsnorth 2010b)

Environmental activism seemed to be a denial of how deeply implicated in climate change human life is. So he had to develop a new way of living that would help him tell the truth about our planetary quandary.

The course of action was not to cut himself off from society and live out the decline. Instead, Kingsnorth wanted to write and publish the truth that we are all part of climate change, that it will not be overcome, and that the environmentalist narrative is harmful and needs to be abandoned. He is aware that there are many varieties of environmentalism, but he objects to what he sees as the movement's main preoccupations today: a focus on maintaining a specific strain of human civilization rather than asking what is best for the web of life, and the insistence that it is still possible to prevent many of the global environmental crises currently underway (Kingsnorth 2010b). While earning a variety of dismissive labels such as Luddite, nihilist, romantic, utopian, and misanthropic, The Dark Mountain Project garnered global media attention. Environmentalists tended to be the most critical. 'When I talk like this to people, and especially environmentalists, they react badly. They don't want to hear it' (Kingsnorth 2010b). Rather than try to understand his criticism, environmentalists tended to see him as dangerous. Yet hundreds of people also emailed with positive responses, which helped propel the assembly of multiple volumes of fiction, essays, and art engaged in the attempt to produce a narrative that clarifies the environmental predicament. The Dark Mountain Project has also organized festivals, retreats, and workshops, and the project continues in an open-ended form, adjusting to what seems to be necessary.

Kingsnorth has adopted a few experimental exercises to help him understand and tell the truth. Withdrawal is one that he urges others to try as well.

> [T]ake part in a very ancient practical and spiritual tradition: withdrawing from the fray.… Withdraw so that you can allow yourself to sit back quietly and feel, intuit, work out what is right for you and what nature might need from you. Withdraw because refusing to help the machine advance – refusing to tighten the ratchet further – is a deeply moral position. Withdraw because action is not always more effective than inaction. Withdraw to examine your worldview: the cosmology, the paradigm, the assumptions, the direction of travel. All real change starts with withdrawal. (Kingsnorth 2013)

Withdrawing is not inaction, but an alternative form of action. It is a refusal to participate in the most prominent expressions of a destructive culture. Being in the impossible position of wanting to avert climate change and yet still embodying climate change pushed Kingsnorth out of his established ways of thinking and acting. He had to withdraw to accept climate change. This enabled him to reflect on his own position in relation to nature and nature's relation to him. Withdrawal is also about clearing space from which further action can arise.

Another exercise that Kingsnorth practices and teaches is scything. This activity produces a mind-set of 'relaxed focus' that opens connections with nature.

> Using a scythe properly is a meditation: your body in tune with the tool, your tool in tune with the land. You concentrate without thinking, you follow the lay of the ground with the face of your blade, you are aware of the keenness of its edge, you can hear the birds, see things moving through the grass ahead of you. Everything is connected to everything else, and if it isn't, it doesn't work. (Kingsnorth 2013)

Kingsnorth intersperses his writing on this exercise with reflections on the shortcomings of the environmental movement, its resonance with neoliberalism, technology fetishism, convivial modes of living, time, progress, and possible courses of action. He ties all of these to scything, bringing his expanded connection with nature back to entrenched cultural drives and assumptions.

Kingsnorth resists organized religion and new-age notions of the sacred, yet he feels increasingly compelled to bring spirituality into ecological discussions. For him, spending time in the wilderness is a key aspect of undergoing spiritual transformations through which humans come to understand their place in the world. He does not see wilderness as pristine or prehuman, but rather as something 'self-willed. It is lived in and from by humans, but it is not created or controlled by them. It teems with a great, shifting, complex diversity of both human and non-human life, and no species dominates the mix' (Kingsnorth 2013). Thus Kingsnorth calls for those who also feel that nature is greater than them or even sacred to try to speak truthfully about it.

> I know there are others who feel like this, and I know there are others who don't. It is not a position to be argued from.… But here's my suggestion: this feeling is not an awkward and embarrassing stumbling block in the way of a rational assessment of the reality of ecosystems.… And those of us who do feel it … have a duty to talk about it, openly, calmly, incisively. (Kingsnorth 2014)

Kingsnorth points to the shortcomings of reason to speak to connectivity, arguing that there is an element of truth to this spiritual dimension. In his activities and writing, he seeks to bring it forward as a crucial element for communicating the truth of climate change.

Spiritual truth and transformation

Neither Holthaus nor Kingsnorth indicates that they have read Foucault. Foucault did not have the limitations of scientific evidence as a mechanism of veridiction for climate change in mind when he examined the problem of truth in his lectures on *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*. In those lectures, Foucault sought to interrupt the modern way of being, defined by what he calls the 'Cartesian moment,' which is not a specific point, but a gradual transition. This 'modern age of the history of truth begins when knowledge itself and knowledge alone gives access to the truth' (Foucault 2005, p. 17). He challenges Cartesian truth with the notion of spiritual truth, which uses care of the self rather than knowledge to access truth.[1] Foucault does not argue that spiritual truth is the only or best form of truth, nor does he reject 'Cartesian' truth based on knowledge. Rather, he shows that modern truth has become disconnected from spiritual practices and that we may need to find ways to reforge that connection.

Though the term 'spiritual' carries many connotations, what Foucault means is that the truth cannot simply be known, but requires a transformation in order to have access to it. 'The *epimeleia heautou* (care of the self) designates precisely the set of conditions of spirituality, the set of transformations of the self, that are necessary conditions for having access to the truth' (Foucault 2005, p. 17). Foucault outlines three characteristics of spiritual truth, but argues against simply adopting the ancient spiritual techniques he examines for today. The cases of Holthaus and Kingsnorth, however, resonate with his discussion. Each experienced a spiritual collapse, after which each could speak about climate change through their way of life rather than knowledge. Indeed, their experiences suggest the importance of spiritual truth today while showing that it is not sufficient to just care for oneself and reach one's own truth. Under the conditions of climate change, one must carry that truth to the social and planetary domains as well. They also emphasize the importance of the process of transformation, rather than the solidity of the result. This enables responsiveness when scientists are increasingly aware of the risks that climate change poses and the uncertainty of how those risks will manifest in complex interacting natural and social systems. The ability to transform to engage this uncertainty is the critical task today. I will discuss five characteristics of caring for oneself that Holthaus and Kingsnorth help us draw from Foucault's study, which might enable us to do so.

First, it is important to adopt a positive relation to interruptive events by incorporating the expectation of periodic surprise into one's existential ethos. This begins with situating oneself by examining the things that interrupt life, how they do so, and various responses to such provocations (Foucault 2005, p. 459). Thus one gauges the impact of the event to see to

what extent it governs a resistant self and to what extent the self is able to respond freely to it. Foucault lists some of the negative events to which ancient philosophers tried to cultivate responsiveness: shipwrecks, earthquakes, fires, encounters with bandits, death threats, imprisonment, and enslavement (Foucault 2005, p. 449). Today we might add symptoms of climate change such as forced migration, changed agricultural conditions, increased storm intensity, or the spread of disease to this list. The ancients experimented with different techniques to develop behavior appropriate living in a world containing such events.

Paraskeuē is one such technique. It is a matter of equipping and preparing the self to better encounter unforeseen events through hearing, understanding, and learning a series of discourses. These discourses are ideas, phrases, behavioral guides, and principles 'with a material existence' that become a 'permanent virtual and effective presence, which enables immediate recourse to them when necessary' (Foucault 2005, p. 322–4). They are not true because they are known, but become true when they infuse and motivate bodies, thoughts, practices, and modes of living. In this way, 'the saying can be integrated into the individual and control his action, becoming part, as it were, of his muscles and nerves' (Foucault 2005, p. 326). Thus these principles can guide the action of the subject at crucial moments. Both Holthaus and Kingsnorth have repeatedly returned to statements of their transformative moments to guide their behavior. They seek to incorporate that shock into their outlook and use the principles they have forged from it to help navigate developing manifestations of climate change and the impulsions of contemporary life.

Another characteristic of caring for oneself is that it transforms the self. Kingsnorth and Holthaus both experienced breakdowns that were also transformative moments out of which emerged a new need to connect to the truth of climate change. In spiritual truth,

> for the subject to have right of access to the truth he must be changed, transformed, shifted, and become, to some extent and up to a certain point, other than himself. The truth is only given to the subject at a price that brings the subject's being into play. For as he is, the subject is not capable of truth. (Foucault 2005, p. 15)

Reshaping the subject does not lead to a feeling of moral redemption, but is difficult and discomforting. It entails the removal of characteristics and modes of action that define who one is. Thus Holthaus and Kingsnorth had to change the way they existed. Holthaus's commitment dramatically rearranged the comfortable life he had been living. Kingsnorth gave up the cause to which he had devoted his life.

Holthaus' and Kingsnorth's desire to remain attached to a world they saw as increasingly uncertain and threatening draws out a third

characteristic of care of the self: it connects the subject to the world. Foucault discusses this through Seneca's 'punctualizing' technique (Foucault 2005, p. 278). This technique attends to the interconnectedness of the self, to question the way self-oriented reason prioritizes a certain way of living. It is described as a movement that on one hand takes a deeper perspective by looking at interconnection and particularity, and on the other moves to a higher perspective on the world where each thing has it place (Foucault 2005, p. 276). Liberated from a narrow focus on the self, a sense of belonging to the larger world emerges.

> Wealth, pleasure, glory: all these transitory events will take on their real proportions.… Reaching this point enables us to dismiss and exclude all the false values and all the false dealings in which we are caught up, to gauge what we really are on the earth, and to take the measure of our existence – of this existence that is just a point in space and time – and of our smallness. (Foucault 2005, p. 277)

Holthaus and Kingsnorth each reevaluated his place in the world. Some pleasures could no longer be maintained due to the costs they impose on others. Some forms of action appeared ineffective while others became more urgent. Holthaus discovered his local Midwestern environment, which he normally flew over. Kingsnorth formed a new focus on inter-connection and biodiversity beyond the human sphere. For Foucault, this is an important way to affirm belonging to this unruly world with its events, joys, and uncertainty (Foucault 2005, p. 284–5). Though Holthaus feels more optimistic about our ability to confront climate change, both he and Kingsnorth affirm being part of a world capable of the dramatic and uncertain shifts brought on by climate change.

The fourth characteristic is that care of the self is a way of living. Practices and principles reach into the regularized habits and expectations of daily life (Foucault 2005, p. 448). The result of caring for oneself is that one lives the truth that one knows. Foucault uses *parrhēsia* to elucidate this. *Parrhēsia* is a form of free and open speech characterized primarily by a realization of spiritual truth.

> What must be shown is not just that this is right, the truth, but also that I who am speaking am the person who judges these thoughts to be really true.… What characterizes *parrhēsia, libertas*, is this perfect fit between the subject who speaks, or the subject of enunciation, and the subject of conduct. (Foucault 2005, p. 405–6)

A conduct or mode of being becomes a living truth because it has been developed and incorporated by a subject who speaks for the truth of it. That person vouches for those truths with their existence since it really is the life that they are living. But when one's actions and their claims about truth do not line up, it is clear that one is not caring for oneself. Holthaus

reorganized his job, volunteering, and leisure to live the truth of climate change. Likewise, Kingsnorth adopted practices including withdrawal and scything to support the truth he wanted to tell. While spiritual truth does align action and belief, it is not limited to the politics of sincerity that has rightly come under criticism (Ghosh 2016). Rather, it is the transformation, of which one effect is a greater degree of sincerity, which is key.

Finally, Holthaus and Kingsnorth carry further Foucault's argument that care of the self is political. For Foucault, caring for oneself is 'an urgent, fundamental, and politically indispensable task, if it is true after all that there is no first or final point of resistance to political power other than in the relationship one has to oneself' (Foucault 2005, p. 252). If governmentality always has to pass through the relation one has with oneself, then the self is one important node of political intervention. This can be seen in the extent to which the contemporary political milieu valorizes individual success that simultaneously furthers systemic inequality and exclusion. Climate change intensifies these processes. Before their transformations, Holthaus's and Kingsnorth's *knowledge* of the truth of climate change allowed them to continue comfortably participating in its intensification, even as they cited studies, wrote reports, and joined movements. Through their transformations, each became acutely aware of how they *were* climate change. Each found it necessary to further delink from the production of climate change while also looking for new ways to actively respond to it.

The ways that Holthaus and Kingsnorth spoke and enacted the spiritual truth of climate change had a number of political effects. First, was the reconfiguration of the self in order to withdraw support from problematic activities, to be more politically consistent by better connecting thought and action, and to have more resolve for engaging in social and political action. Thus Foucauldian personal responsiveness can go beyond depoliticized individual responses in order to nurture and sustain resistance to environmental destruction (Macgregor 2014, Luke 2016). Second, Holthaus and Kingsnorth upset not just the media, but also the social and institutional milieus in which they had comfortably taken part. For Foucault, opening oneself to unknown social and political risks is one of the defining characteristics of spiritual truth since the risk binds the speaker's life to what they advocate (Foucault 2011, Chapters 3 and 4). George Monbiot attests to how powerfully he was affected by such advocacy, which he admired for its commitment to the truth despite consequences, and feared because of how it exposed his own hypocrisy (Monbiot 2007, p. ix). Finally, Holthaus and Kingsnorth inspired positive responses as well, catalyzing further engagement. William E. Connolly has drawn on Foucault to show how 'specific citizens' located within a milieu of institutions and knowledges can strategically reconfigure those established modes of being to participate in a politics of swarming that 'is composed of multiple constituencies, regions,

levels, processes of communication, and modes of action, each carrying some potential to augment and intensify the others with which it becomes associated' (Connolly 2017, p. 125–6). This approach institutes change where it can and pushes for change in contexts where individual agency is insufficient. For Holthaus and Kingsnorth, this entails personal advocacy, the mode of life to support that advocacy, and the social engagements that promote an alternative social vision.

Nonetheless, some critics will question forms of politics in which the individual is a significant point of action. They argue that such action is compromised because the individual is still part of a larger systemic problem that continues despite individual action, or is a form of quietism that excuses the individual from politics, or that it is not worthwhile because it does not guarantee a solution, or that it individualizes responsibility and so lets corporations among others off the hook, or that it is useless because any decrease in destructive consumption will be taken up by others due to price or efficiency gains, or that it pursues personal purity while ignoring the greater social problematic and thereby stifles further questioning, or that positive actions end up justifying other problematic behaviors. Connolly persuasively argues that such admonishments create a

> double bind, the first bind of which is to neutralize the desire to take any action and the second of which is to demoralize you so that you do not expose publicly how the first bind works. The effect of such a double bind, when not identified and resisted, is to render specific citizens zombies who obediently play their assigned roles even when they know that those roles project a future that cannot be. (Connolly 2017, p. 128)

While neither Holthaus, nor Kingsnorth, nor Foucault has a perfect solution, focusing on the individual, for a time, as a critical site where the political is articulated enables examination of and work on elements that flow between the individual and various collectives. Though Latour ties his climate skepticism to 'an attitude that represents most of the developed world right now … that could be called climate-quietism' (Latour 2013c, p. 4), Holthaus and Kingsnorth seem to have moved beyond this attitude in connecting their knowledge to a way of life. Their approach can be fruitfully understood in comparison with other attempts to tell the truth about climate change.

Politics and the truth of climate change

Does the notion of spiritual truth concede too much? If truth is political, does that not legitimize the views of denialists who reject climate science? These are serious concerns and yet the issue cannot be reduced to politically relativizing truth, as two recent discussions of the truth of climate change demonstrate. First, Naomi Klein argues that the science itself contains a

political position. Alternatively, Bruno Latour suggests that it may be necessary for politics to decide what the true position is. I will argue, however, that while both of these positions help clarify the climate predicament, the cases of Kingsnorth, Holthaus, and Foucault suggest that there is a truth to climate change that cannot be grasped solely through either politics or science. Such a truth requires a transformation on our part, worthy of the transformation that is climate change.

Naomi Klein ties politics to science when she argues that 'science is telling us all to revolt' (Klein 2013). To make this point she draws on complex systems researcher Brad Werner, whose 'research shows that our entire economic paradigm is a threat to ecological stability. And indeed that challenging this economic paradigm – through mass-movement counter-pressure – is humanity's best shot at avoiding catastrophe' (Klein 2013). It is worth noting that this entails political behavior that goes beyond formal mechanisms and includes illegal protest and resistance. Yet Werner's paper is not a call for action or revolt. Rather, by looking at multiple interacting human and natural systems, their tendencies, imbrications, and rates of change, his research shows that an abnormal mode of human collective behavior is necessary to stop a dynamic of rapid ecological destruction. It 'is not a matter of opinion, but "really a geophysics problem"' (Klein 2013). In this understanding, scientific truth itself includes the urgent need for human political action to combat climate change. The objective knowledge of climate change includes a true form of political action.

In a different vision of the political truth of climate change, Bruno Latour argues that the Anthropocene has made it clear that we can no longer rely on science for the truth. The human beliefs and actions that constitute the social world have become too enmeshed with the natural world to clearly delineate a set of values on one side and a set of facts on the other. Latour takes seriously the reality that climate denialists include a small group of credentialed scientists, though they generally do not specialize in the areas relevant to climate science. 'We cannot hide behind the verdict of the "scientific community" taken as a whole. The novelty is that we have to choose, *inside* the disciplines, *among* the specialties, which segment of the population we will trust' (Latour 2013c, p. 52). Truth will not be reached by the neutral process of science, but must be decided.

Latour connects the need to make a decision on the scientific facts to the political situation of war, where there is no legal arbiter to state the correct course of action. In doing so, he intensifies the decision we must make.

> Do you consider that those who are on the opposite sides of the ecological issues in which you are engaged directly or indirectly are irrational beings that should be resisted, disciplined, maybe punished, or at least enlightened

and reeducated? Or do you consider that *they are your enemies* that have to be won over through a trial the outcome of which is unknown *as long as you have not succeeded*?… The objective statement 'industrial civilization passed the 400ppm of CO2 threshold in Spring 2013′ directs toward either action or inaction which is fully *political* not only in the sense of being practical or of mobilizing heads of state, but in that this action or inaction amounts to a kind of – there is no other word for it – *civil war*. Sides have to be taken. Decisions have to be made … you have to choose. (Latour 2013c, p. 61)

Denying that there is a war underway may be appeasement of those who deny that climate change is a serious issue, since the stakes are vital: What is being decided is the nature and future of the earth, the populations and species that may live and die, the interests on each side, the resources to be mobilized, and so on (Latour 2015, p. 152–3). Thus Latour argues that when it comes to climate change, truth will not be reached by science, but is a political decision made under conditions of war. Once a person has chosen sides and understood that her vision of the world and the future is under attack, she will be compelled to take action.

This does not mean that there is only one truth of climate change or that climate science is no longer needed, as the differences between Latour's notions of objectivity, certainty, and truth show. The sciences still produce objectivity about the world, but that does not translate into certainty about what to do with that objective knowledge. It even makes the situation more uncertain. 'Political ecology … *suspends* our certainties about the sovereign good of humans and things, ends and means' (Latour, B. 2004, p. 21). As for truth, each domain such as law, religion, science, and politics has its own mode of veridiction that establishes 'the conditions that must be met for someone to speak truths or untruths' (Latour 2013b, p. 56). Latour seems to suggest that when it comes to climate change, we should set scientific truth to the side and take up political truth.

Political truth is defined by the capacity to obtain 'a unified will from a sum of recriminations' and to pass 'from provisional unity to the implementation of decisions, to the obedience of those who had been uttering recriminations' (Latour 2013b, p. 133–4). The truth of politics is thus determined by its capacity to effectively compose a group long enough to produce laws for society. Political truth is frustrating because of how unstable and uncertain it is. It entails 'ceaselessly retracing one's steps in a movement of *envelopment* that always has to be begun again in order to sketch the moving form of a group endowed with its own will and capable of simultaneous freedom and obedience' (Latour 2013b, p. 134). By pushing us to make a political decision about the sciences, Latour pushes us to take up the work of composing a provisional unity that acts on climate change. Science will continue to determine its own truth about climate change. It may even do so better if a successful political program succeeds in

increasing funding for studies. But for those not in the laboratory, and perhaps even for those who are, political truth should become, for the time being, the mode of veridiction that can define the situation.

In contrast to both Klein and Latour, however, I argue that it is possible to affirm the truth of climate change without using scientific knowledge as an index of that truth. Neither Holthaus nor Kingsnorth expressed the truth of climate change by realizing the true political content of the science or by politicizing a version of the science as the true one. Rather the truth emerged through their respective transformations. Foucault argues that truth is not about knowledge, but about the transformation that a person undergoes to become capable of it. This does not exclude knowledge and science, as the role of the IPCC report in Holthaus's transformation shows. Rather, the point is that the capacity for transformation may be a useful index of truth for engaging climate change. The characteristics of spiritual truth identified in the previous section – openness to interruptive events, connecting to the world, the production of a new way of living, and its correlate political effects – are all structured around transformation.

This theory of truth clarifies those put forward by Klein and Latour. The view put forward by Klein is productive in showing how the discoveries of climate science are so disruptive as to unsettle the traditional image of what science is. This is apparent when scientists give conference papers with titles like 'Is Earth F**ked?' (Klein 2013). At the same time, Foucault's vision of truth allows us to see how Klein still maintains a strong notion of causality (science says x so politics must do y) that, while potentially politically persuasive, fails to honestly deal with how radical, novel, and uncertain climate change is and what solutions may be the most useful. Climate change extends beyond an economic or even a political frame since it affects identities, aspirations, power relations, ethics, and assumptions about our place in the world.

Latour's argument leaves no space for such strong causality. He replaces a hard notion of truth with a political decision. For him, this is not relativism, but war (Latour 2015). There is some truth to this, since scientists who receive death threats simply for doing their research appear to be at war (Mann 2013). Climate change also increasingly contributes to many other forms of violence, some of which take the form of war (Welzer 2012). Latour wants to catalyze political action by getting people to decide what climate truth they are committed to so that battle lines can be drawn and diplomacy can begin as a way toward peace. This is true to the situation in that it moves beyond the notion that we have to continue waiting for consensus to take action, but it also seems to come up short, in making those who deny climate change just as legitimate as those seeking to respond to it. Even if it is not relativism, both sides have their forces and whichever triumphs will have given legitimacy to their vision of climate change.

Foucault's vision of truth allows us to acknowledge the political stakes and relations of power on each side, while adding a new criterion to evaluate truth telling about climate change. It is the case both that the science indicates a general direction for action and that many scientists and citizens have failed to come to terms with the fact that this is a political battle in which the denialists are already mobilized. Yet when transformation is applied as a criterion of truth, denialists cannot appear as anything but lazy, self-interested or even cruel, and incapable of change in the face of a new terrestrial-existential dynamic. Their very recalcitrance is an index of the lie they live. Yet it is not just denialists, but those who know the truth – including Latour and the climate scientist he interviewed – who are still skeptics and incapable of the truth.

Nietzsche called this inability to change, when life calls for transformation, decadence.[2] Climate change is bringing on a dramatic transformation. Yet by and large the response is an inability to change. Among environmentalists who were upset by Holthaus 'compromising his objectivity' or Kingsnorth 'demotivating the movement,' what predominates is a vision that humans do not really have to change because scientific reason can still comprehend and find a solution that preserves the contemporary way of living in the West. It is significant that Kingsnorth and Holthaus actually have different dispositions toward this transformation. Holthaus can be described as positive and Kingsnorth as negative. What they share is the truth that climate change means the transformation of life and of the western way of life in particular.[3]

This shows the falsity of the denialist position in a way that goes beyond what Latour's model of truth can show. Latour holds that it is possible that the denialists will win out politically or at least achieve major concessions, and that this would settle the matter. What Holthaus and Kingsnorth reveal, however, is that even if the denialists win politically, climate change will transform their way of life. Such inertia is likely more susceptible to painful upheaval, as global disruptions to climate and the entailed disruptions to economies, societies, and politics will make the current way of life impossible. The truth of climate change is best understood by changing our ways of life.

However, as Nietzsche suggests, even after undergoing transformations people remain unknown to themselves and their actions filter both inward and outward in uncertain ways. Spiritual truth can only be maintained by remaining attentive to this uncertainty. Holthaus may not have explicitly embraced uncertainty, but Kingsnorth and The Dark Mountain Project frame their work as a series of transformations in progress. They hope to 'redraw the maps … by which we navigate all areas of life.… Our maps must be the kind sketched in the dust with a stick, washed away by the next rain' (Kingsnorth and Hine 2009). The uncertain developments of climate change entail the need

to continue remaking and transforming ways of living. If the existing stories, explanations, and commitments only propel us along a fateful and false course, then new ones are needed which reshape life. Like Foucault's notion of a subject that periodically undergoes change, these maps are temporary and should sketch new life paths, while pushing for future changes as well.

Notes

1. Much work has been done on what Foucault's notion of care of the self can contribute to environmental politics. Most relevant for this study is Timothy Luke's 'Caring for the low-carbon self' (Luke 2016). My focus, however, is on the question of truth, which, despite being central in both the climate controversy and Foucault's lectures on care of the self, has gone unaddressed. So the characteristics outlined in this section focus on the question of spiritual truth rather than the broader notion of caring for oneself.
2. Nietzsche uses the term 'decadence' throughout his work to various ends, including in the sense of an inability to accommodate new life pressures (Nietzsche 2008, p. 11–15).
3. A Bangladeshi peasant need not tell the truth in the same way as an American suburban software engineer. If truth is a function of transformation, those most vulnerable to climate change may only need to recount their experience to tell the truth since they already are undergoing transformations in the way they live. Thus it is critical for carbon-intensive individuals such as middle and upper class white men who disproportionately produce climate change to strive to tell the truth about it. Such individuals tend to be buffered against forced transformations.

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Disclosure statement

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