

Robert Talisse [00:00:09] Hello and welcome to the Why We Argue podcast, The Future of Truth Edition, this season of the podcast is produced by The Future of Truth, which is a project based at the University of Connecticut Humanities Institute. It explores what truth is, where it's going, and why it matters in democracy. This project is made possible by generous funding from University of Connecticut and the Henry Luce Foundation. It features discussions with publicly minded thinkers about the cultural and political role of concepts like truth, fact, and information. Today, my guest is Cornel West. Cornel is the Dietrich Bonhoeffer professor at Union Theological Seminary. As listeners no doubt will know, Professor West is among the nation's most distinguished philosophers. For several decades running, Cornel has infused into public life reflections on love, justice, grace, liberation, beauty, dignity and truth. To be blunt, words fail me. No introduction I could offer really would adequately encapsulate Professor West's contributions to the American spirit. So let's just jump in. Hello, Cornel.

Cornel West [00:01:22] Always a blessing to be here, my dear brother Robert. Appreciate the work, the philosophical and the intellectual, more broadly intellectual, work that you have done on pluralism. And you know, in part because of my dear brother Paul Taylor, we're able to come together. He told me, "Brother West, don't miss brother Robert, you going to have a good time with him." And it's already proven to be the case, the blessing to be with you, man.

Robert Talisse [00:01:49] You are so kind. Thank you so much. So I invited you on the program mainly to talk about the importance of social critique in a democratic society, as well as some of its risks. But let's start with the importance of social critique. Now, anyone who's been following your work, I think should have noticed that you can be counted on to be a social critic. Almost no matter who holds power politically. Now in reflecting on some of the philosophical and democratic touchstones that I know you and I share, I suspect that this stance emerges from a principle that I embrace—and I believe you do to, correct me if I'm wrong—according to which power as such stands in need of critique, that vulnerability to critique is what validates, legitimates power. Now, if I'm right about that principle, can you tell us a little bit about how you understand it and how you embrace it in your public engagement?

Cornel West [00:02:56] I do appreciate the question? I mean, for me, it comes down in part to Socrates versus Thrasymachus in Plato's Republic. And Thrasymachus believes that might makes right, that power dictates morality, that one can do anything that one wants to do or say, anything one wants to say, in order to get over—obsessed with that 11th commandment, thou shall not get caught. And Socrates is tied to notions of integrity and honesty, a certain kind of consistency and incoherence, or at least a quest for it. And the Socratic position, Socratic energy, is always weak and feeble in any historical moment of the species because the hounds of hell, which is greed, which are greed and hatred and contempt and envy and resentment, they're always overflowing. So these flickering candles in the dark have to do with the Socrates here, a Jesus there, an Esther an Amos, or a Baal Shem Tov or a Martin King or a Dorothy Day, all trying to be exemplars over against Thrasymachus, over against might makes right. And both examples, negative and positive. They come in all colors, all genders, all sexual

orientation, all national identities. It's a human thing. It just goes all the way down. And in that regard, you know, the kind of calling and vocation that you and I have is really to try to make sure that our cause is not reduced to a brand, because the commodification is a certain kind of version of Thrasymachus these days. Everybody's for sale, everything is for sale. People will say almost anything in order to gain access to money and status and power and spectacle. And Socrates is saying, well, there's something called intellectual integrity that seems to be outdated and antiquated. But actually, it's one of the most precious forces in the world because it keeps alive a light, keeps alive a possibility for quest for truth and beauty and goodness and myself as a revolutionary Christian, a sense of the holy. It flows right out of prophetic Judaism in Hebrew scripture tied to a Palestinian Jew named Jesus.

Robert Talisse [00:05:18] Right. So do you think, though, that that Socratic stance is tied to a more maybe contemporary conception of democracy as an ongoing moral project, right, that the need for critique is the need for a constant struggle to perfect, to achieve, you know, as Richard Rorty, but to achieve the country.

Cornel West [00:05:48] [Laughs] We love Brother Dick. We miss him too.

Robert Talisse [00:05:54] I agree.

Cornel West [00:05:55] But one of the things that was so salutary about Rorty's version of pragmatism was the central idea of fallibilism and the centrality of imagination, trying to authorize alternative realities to the present. That's why he's tied to the artist. That's why art, I think, is so very important. Dewey understood this in ways and James did, too, in his own way. But at the same time, I think it's important to keep in mind that when the Socratic energies that can flow from Athens in pre-modern times to our late modern, our postmodern times, there are some deep continuities. You know, it's not as if we moderns have some special insight in terms of what critique, K R I T T I Q U E, really is. With Immanuel Kant, we started something new and grand and distinctive: critique. Well, if we read John Ruskin close enough, if you read Mary Wollstonecraft close enough. They didn't need to read Adorno to know what critique was. So that in that sense, I tend to look at it much more as a matter of just Socratic energy unleashed, which has had to do an intellectual integrity. And I would say the same thing about the moral revolution of people of scripture and the species. That it unleashes this direction of loving kindness toward the weak and the vulnerable. And you see, this is a major move in the history of the species in terms of a conception of what it is to be human. It's not going to be tied to the heroic activities of Achilles and so forth that you get in Homer. If something new is going on, that's tied to the poor. It's tied to the vulnerable, that's tied to the weak. That's tied to those who will view as invisible, whose humanity is overlooked and concealed and so on. And in that sense, I think that the Athens Jerusalem dialectic that you get among many conservative thinkers, Neil Strauss and others, are ones that I take quite seriously.

Robert Talisse [00:07:58] Fabulous, fabulous. Let me ask a question about Thrasymachus. You know I'm a failed classicist. [Laughs] I don't know if you knew that

about me. [Laughs] I started working in Ancient and my Greek, just never got good enough, you know? So...[laughs].

Cornel West [00:08:16] That's all right, my brother.

Robert Talisse [00:08:20] What do you make of, you know, what do you make of the end of that first book of the Republic where Socrates basically just shames Thrasymachus, doesn't refute him so much, is just embarrasses him. What do you think of that?

Cornel West [00:08:35] Well, it's a little bit like Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed* of the Devils that the younger generation looking to the older generation for guidance and counsel Thrasymachus is the one who has this unbelievable energy and intensity, vitality, vibrancy. And, you know, Cephalus, the old man says, look, you know, I ain't got time for this. My little definition is not working, so I just got to go off and take a nap. And Glaucon and Adeimantus are coming: we're hungry and thirsty to be taught. And so all Socrates can do initially is to say—because remember Thrasymachus unwraps himself like a lion or some animal, you remember.

Robert Talisse [00:09:18] Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Cornel West [00:09:20] Absolutely. And so, you know, you wonder whether, in fact, in Plato's genius, beyond genius, he is quite remarkable because there's a sense in which Thrasymachus is presenting not just an argument, but he's presenting major forces that seem to be overwhelming in the history of our species in terms of providing some way of snuffing out Socratic energy, snuffing out the quest for truth, snuffing out quest for beauty and goodness. And so the cynicism that flows there from, oh, I see those naive ones still opting for Socrates, the childish ones still thinking that morality has a place as opposed to just power dictating morality and so on. And that's very real and it's artistic. It's not just discursive, but it's metaphoric. It's tied to various really, I mean, tropes. And certainly to use some rhetorical language here. And there is... I do believe that Socratic energy remains a kind of flickering candle in the world of barbaric darkness. Now, that may seem a little exaggerated in in the United States, where we don't often recognize just how fragile democratic experiments are or how fragile, honest criticism is vis à vis any arbitrary use of power, any party, any gender, any race, or any class or whatever.

Robert Talisse [00:10:59] Right. So would it be right then to say that the significance and the necessity of social critique has to do with confronting the tendency of exercises of power to be arbitrary? Right.

Cornel West [00:11:13] Absolutely.

Robert Talisse [00:11:13] That's it. Good.

Cornel West [00:11:15] And and the need for effective mechanisms of accountability and answerability—to use Brandom's language—and responsibility.

Robert Talisse [00:11:25] Yeah. Yeah. Great, great. So that raises a challenge. I think one of the risks, I think, of social critique understood as that essential democratic mechanism for accountability, responsibility, the anti arbitrariness of exercise of power. There's a risk, though, right? And I think it's a risk that if I can just formulate it this way, I think it's a risk that we in the United States are sort of in the grip of right now in this political moment. You know, one optimistic thought about the country is that we're attempting to recover.

Cornel West [00:12:04] Right.

Robert Talisse [00:12:05] So I see the dilemma looming. And let me lay it out like this. The recovery of our democratic ethos, we might say, will require critical reflection on a social critique, even a critique of the people who seem to be committed to the ideals that we ourselves embrace, because critique, even among friends, is democratically vital. However, it seems to me that part of what America is attempting to recover from is widespread disillusionment, distrust in democracy as such, in democratic forms as such. So I worry that the kind of social criticism that we need as a society to recover our democratic spirit will also fuel certain kinds of political cynicism that favor the forces of authoritarianism, exclusion, nationalism of the sort that the country is trying to recover from. So let me put it in a DuBoisian way maybe.

Cornel West [00:13:18] Yeah. Yeah.

Robert Talisse [00:13:19] Now, the democratic hope is leaving me a little unhopeful, we might say. So I see a risk in this. Do you?

Cornel West [00:13:30] Yeah, no, that's a wonderful question thought, brother, because you see, on the one hand, I mean, cynicism, like nihilism, like skepticism can never be refuted. It's only by example that you simply choose to opt for it because it's too slippery and there's too many holes in any argument and counterargument to really think that there's a rational road to overcoming skepticism, nihilism, and cynicism. You remember in a wonderful essay by Bernyeat, can a skeptic ever live his or her skepticism?

Robert Talisse [00:14:09] Oh, yeah.

Cornel West [00:14:09] You can't. The truth and skepticism that Cavell taught us is one in which the retail skepticism provides insights into wholesale skepticism, provides a spectatorial status that we can never hope. We never can be spectators all the way down. The death of a mosquito on the wall will never have the status of death of one's mother. And if it does, it's nothing to brag about it. So that sooner or later you can't be a spectator and a cynic too, cause cynicism is the flip side of sentimentalism. And so the cynic will always carry a certain kind of truth-telling capacity because human beings are who we are. You know, we're walking disaster. We're walking wanderers at the same time. And if the just a matter of pointing out the disaster and the skeptics are going to win, but when it comes to, well, is something else beyond the disaster in the same

person, you got to be kidding. Oh, Ibsen may have had a point. Even Eugene O'Neill may have gone too far. There's some possibility. There's some overflow, there's some excess. There's something beyond just the worst. And then you bring that to the skeptics. The cynics don't like, oh, I saw you listen to Coltrane last night with that smile. But that's not a skepticism, a cynicism all the way down, is it? Something is being appealed to beyond just this narrow, reductionist view that everything is so awful and disastrous all the time. Oh, interesting. I'm going to critique that work, right?

Robert Talisse [00:15:41] That's right.

Cornel West [00:15:42] Critique that work. I saw you crying at your mother's funeral. Oh, I see. So death does have value and significance given those deep memories of attachment you have been growing up. We understand that you're a participant just like us. You're not a spectator all the time, as it were. But back to your question. Part of our problem is, you know, we're in an empire that's experienced such massive spiritual dechambeau decrepitude, that the crisis of credibility and the crisis of legitimacy in the institutions and in the forms of criticism aligned with those institutions, make it difficult for any genuine democratic criticism to be taken seriously beyond just power playing games. Now, that is a dilemma. It really is. And I don't think there's a way out other than—you tell me what you think about this—other than examples tied to waves of moral and spiritual renaissance. And what I mean by that—and politically it means social movements of sorts, but it's more than just social movements. It's more than just talk about justice. It's about a renaissance of care and concern for poor people, a renaissance of a care and concern for the wretched of the earth, in Fanon's language, or anybody who's suffering, anybody who's wrestling with arbitrary power, unjustified pain, and unwarranted hurt. And these waves are not predictable. No one has control over this. It's only by our examples can you actually see the kind of shifts that are required. It's like a Rabbi Heschel and in the 60s. Right. That he can exemplify something that has something to do with very, very deep strands within the prophetic legacy of Jerusalem tied to prophetic Judaism and the young folk who look around and say, oh, he's got something going on. We might not like that particular version of Judaism that he's got, so orthodox, but that empiric, that ethical juice that's flowing, the moral concerns that are so genuine, it exemplifies can have tremendous impact. And so the renaissance that we're talking about tied to social movements takes a variety of different forms from religious to non-religious to intellectual to artistic, especially

Robert Talisse [00:18:17] Sure. So just to go back to Thrasymachus then, because some worry, though, that the part of the decrepitude that you mentioned that the country is suffering from is a series of attitudes and dispositions that are invested in the denial that the moral sentiments, the modes of attachment that people have to one another qua human being, are important.

Cornel West [00:18:51] Right. Right.

Robert Talisse [00:18:51] Right. So we've got a vernacular, at least in the borders of the politics of the body politic that treats feelings as something to be discounted, set

over and above logic and fact. We've got the idea of liberal tears and snowflakes and anybody who shows sensibility of a moral kind towards the weak, the vulnerable is, in some quarters of the public discourse even, is treated as some kind of like what Thrasymachus wants to say of Socrates—go get someone to wipe your nose for you because you've just been duped, you know you're a sucker, right?

Cornel West [00:19:31] That's right. That's right.

Robert Talisse [00:19:31] The vernacular is almost... We are sort of living the first book of the Republic in a way now. Right. So the vernacular is so interested in discounting and derogating the idea of care for one another that I worry that the exemplar story that you want to tell, which I'm deeply attracted to.

Cornel West [00:19:55] Yeah.

Robert Talisse [00:19:56] That's spun back into, you know, it's a sort of a machine that can just always churn whatever, you know, whatever that's human that you put into it. It's more fuel for resentment and indignation

Cornel West [00:20:12] It's a powerful, powerful question and set of questions, really. Let me just say a quick word, though, based on my own personal experience over the last few years, I'm thinking back of my time at Charlottesville. We got some very, very sick neo-Nazi Ku Klux Klan brothers. You got twenty-one right wing groups come together, first time in over 50 years. Some of them are listening to Motown as I walk by, and I say, this is very American, you'll listen to Black music and you come to trans black folk, and Jewish folk, and gays and lesbians. And so I approached to have a conversation. And of course, their view is something that I had to take seriously, their view is that they are the weak and the vulnerable, they are the victims. So they're actually following through on my own conception of how I try to live a morally decent life.

Robert Talisse [00:21:20] Right. Right.

Cornel West [00:21:21] So then I had to engage them and say, whoa, whoa, whoa, wait a minute, let's look at the various lands. Well, no, they're replacing us and so forth. And so so you have a serious conversation possibility in terms of how could it be that, you know, Thrasymachus would view himself as the victim, even as he's empowering himself and getting ready to crush the folk who are being victimized. Well say that's a serious dialog that needs to take place. That's one. But the second one, even more so, is that some of the people who are trashing, even the neo-Nazis are trashing them in such a way that they're viewed as less than human. So that's the possibility of liberal self-righteousness, that's the possibility of radical self-righteousness, that's the possibility of the Manichean thinking—all the goods on one side, all the evils on the other. We're pure over here at MSNBC and CNN and we say, get off the crack pipe. Ya'll don't say a mumbling word about empire, you don't say a mumbling word about drones and don't say a mumbling word about critiques of Wall Street. You've got some wonderful criticisms of Fox News, but there's certain taboo issues that you don't want to

come to terms with. So somehow we've got to try to be consistent even when we're dealing with these sick, pathological, xenophobic fellow human beings. Well, many of whom are following Trump, some of whom are even more far out than Trump in terms of their hatred and contempt for Black people and Jews and others, so that it's a way of trying to situate and map some of these possibilities that will provide breakthroughs because none of these folks are static. They're all in motion. A slice of them even voted for my dear brother Bernie. Because of the critique Wall Street and NAFTA and so forth, but they've got deep xenophobic sensibilities you can't overlook. And what have you, right. So the question becomes then, well, in the end, how do you attempt to be a kind of fallible exemplar who's wedded to integrity, honesty, decency, truth telling and joy spreading in a moment in which so much is dim and grim and dark? And that's just what it is to live in an empire in decline and decay. It's just a very, very bleak moment. And it doesn't mean the bleakness has the last word. There's a lot of joy, there's a lot of struggle, there's a lot of strife. There's some ecstasy and there's some bliss still to be had. But generally speaking, you know, it's the late imperial moment in which we find ourselves,

Robert Talisse [00:24:26] And I take it that the prescription then, what you're recommending, is something on the order of the Jamesian strenuous mood. There are real goods and evils and you've got to fight it out, right, because victory is assured on neither side. And attitudes of despair, which I just heard you attaching, is a despairing attitude, the fundamental thought that our political foes, even our political enemies, are ipso facto irredeemable, that that is itself a kind of a kind of pessimism. Is that right?

Cornel West [00:25:07] That is both pessimism, but it's also an adolescent pessimism, which is this is not mature. I mean, mature pessimism, like Leopardi. I can I can understand because Leopardi can look honestly at the falsity and futility of certain kinds of pessimism and still overcome it in the forms of the unbelievable linguistic creativity and his sense of calling and vocation, back to what we talked about before. And as long as you are holding on to that vocation and calling, then you're going to be able to unleash the energy and vitality that is not crushed by certain kinds of pessimism and cynicism and nihilism. See, I believe that nihilism, cynicism, skepticism are always already skeletons hanging in our closet. And if you're not in tune to what's in your closet, then your room is going to be a very, very vacuous place. [Laughs]

Robert Talisse [00:26:20] Cornel, we can talk for a very... You've been very generous with your time. You know, we can cont..

Cornel West [00:26:26] It's so much for talking with you, brother. I can tell you that this is very, very, very rich stuff that we're talking about. And the fact that, you know, both of us come out of philosophical traditions, of earlier exemplars. The Jameses and the Deweys and the Susanne Langers and the Whiteheads and others all the way up to Paul Taylor, you know, Lucius Outlaw and the others.

Robert Talisse [00:26:53] [Laughs] You just named two of my favorite colleagues.

Cornel West [00:26:56] You are very blessed and they are blessed to have you. But who can look unflinchingly at the night side of the human condition, but still muster the courage to engage in their own distinctive forms of quest for truth and beauty and goodness and for some of them, even the holy.

Robert Talisse [00:27:16] Yeah. Well, Cornel, thank you so much for your time. Let me say a few parting words to our audience about the podcast and then we'll... I will thank you again. And yes, fellows in the audience you've been listening to the Why We Argue podcast, The Future of Truth Edition. I've been talking to Professor Cornel West and having an absolutely wonderful time sharing ideas with him. I want to thank before we end the episode though, our podcast team. These are people who are very hard at producing this endeavor. Toby Napoletano at the University of California at Merced handles our sound production. Elizabeth Della Zazzera of the University of Connecticut Humanities Institute is our communications director. Andrew Johnson handles the research that helps me, at the University of Connecticut. The podcast, I will remind you, is produced by the University of Connecticut Humanities Institute's The Future Truth Project. It has generous funding from University of Connecticut and the Henry Luce Foundation. Thank you all for listening and bye for now.