

DE OMNI RE SCIBILI: KEVIN HART PHILOSOPHER,
THEOLOGIAN, POET

Christopher Watkin

In 1486 Giovanni Pico della Mirandola compiled nine hundred theses which dealt, or so he claimed, *De omni re scibili*, “On Everything Knowable.”¹ It is a claim that might cause even the most audacious thinker to blush just a little, and it would smack of presumption to more circumspect souls. In an attempt to speak about everything Pico’s theses intermingled philosophy and theology, and it is no secret that these two rival queens of the sciences, not to mention poetry and literature, mathematics and physics have, both before and since Pico’s theses, maintained a simmering disagreement about how “everything knowable” ought to be known and spoken.

This rivalry is fuelled when we insist on seeing each discipline as occupying a determinate space on some notional map of all human knowledge. We will call this the topographical model. In this model, each discourse is exhaustive in its own domain, able to say everything that is to be said, but impotent outside its own bounds. Mathematics says all there is to say about pure numbers, physics about forces, theology about God, and so on, and the rivalry comes when one discipline seeks to exert what it sees as its own sovereign right over all or part of a foreign disciplinary territory. One of the most valuable traits of Kevin Hart’s work viewed as a whole is that it undercuts any such parochial beating of the bounds between philosophy, theology and poetry, and offers us a much more adequate and interesting approach than that contained in the territorial response to the question of how to speak of everything knowable.

In an article from 2004 entitled “The right to say everything,”² Hart Discusses Blanchot’s and Derrida’s responses to two related questions: 1) can we say everything? and 2) do we have the right to say everything? In his engagement with Blanchot and Derrida in the article, Hart deals in the main with the second of the two questions. It is our contention that an exploration of the first question, “can we say everything?”, provides us with a way of reading across Hart’s own poetic, philosophical and theological work and understanding how these different discourses relate to each other without either treating them as incommensurable or claiming to be able unproblematically to translate between them.

Hart quite rightly points out that our response to the questions largely depends on what we mean by “everything”. Evoking Whitehead’s *bon mot* that the whole of Western philosophy can be considered as footnotes to Plato,³ Hart asks: does this mean that Plato has said everything? “Cervantes and Shakespeare, for example, are most certainly not contained in Plato and cannot merely be added to the dialogues.”⁴ Returning later in the same article to the relation between literary and philosophical discourse, this time in the course of a discussion of Derrida’s treatment of the right to say everything, Hart quotes an interview with Derrick Attridge from 1992:

he [Derrida] further admits different ways of saying everything. “I know that everything is in Shakespeare,” he says, “everything and the rest, so everything or nearly.” And he goes on: “But after all, everything is also in Celan, and in the same way, although differently, and in Plato or in Joyce, in the Bible, in Vico or in Kafka, not to mention those still living, everywhere, well, almost everywhere ...”⁵

What is at stake here turns on the meaning of “everything.” If it is taken to mean “anything that comes into one’s head” in a loose sense, then the claim that we can say everything is as relatively uncontroversial as it is relatively uninteresting. If it is taken to mean “everything, however unacceptable to public taste,” as Hart explores in relation to Blanchot’s writing on Sade, then it is widely assumed but hard to prove.

There are two further senses of “everything” that might be understood here, however, and it is the difference between the two that can help us to understand Hart’s own corpus as a whole. First, there is the extensive sense of “everything”: there is no aspect of human life or existence which is off limits to a particular discourse. In addition to Derrida’s examples mentioned above, we could think of Roland Barthes’ evocation of Proust in an interview from 1974, in which he claims that the author of *A la recherche* provides a complete system for reading the world: there is nothing in our everyday life that does not refer to Proust: “Proust can be my memory, my culture, my language” says Barthes.⁶ And if this is true of great literature then it is also true of great philosophy. Paul Ricoeur argues that

all great philosophies [...] are *de omni re scibili*, about everything knowable, but each in accordance with the unique perspective of its thetic act and of the strategy it selects to continue the positing act.⁷

Plato can be my memory, my culture, my language. As can Marx, as can the bible, and as can Shakespeare. Each of these can be adequate to everything. Every great philosophy, as well as all great literature, is about everything knowable.

The second sense of “everything” is the exhaustive sense: everything can be said in a way that exhausts all that can be said and leaves nothing left to say on a particular subject. Taken in this topographical sense, it is false to claim that we can say everything. No one discourse can exhaust everything that is to be said, otherwise we needn’t bother wasting our time with *Romeo and Juliet* once we have read the *Republic*, or vice versa.

These two latter senses of “everything” are not synonymous, for “everything” can be extensive without being exhaustive. For example there is no human pursuit, no engagement with the world, no aspect of society which cannot be addressed in a Marxist register. There is nothing about which the Marxist is forced to admit “I have nothing to say on that subject,” from cookery to set theory to professional sport. It does not follow from this, however, that once the Marxist has engaged with the subject there is nothing left for the Freudian, or the Christian, or the Derridean, or the poet, to say. Marxist discourse can speak about everything without exception, but does not exhaust all there is to say about any one thing. Each discourse, in short, has a legitimate and non-exclusive claim to speak *de omni re scibili*. Whereas in the topographical model each discourse is exhaustive in its own domain but does not extend beyond it, in this model—we could call it the aspectual model—each discourse extends to everything but does not exhaust all that can be said about any one thing.

But if we remain at the level of discourses we have yet to grasp the subtlety of the relation between poetry, philosophy and theology as it bodies forth in Kevin Hart's work. Each of these discourses, as Barthes and Ricœur already hint, is not merely a way of talking about everything, but a way of experiencing everything, a way of holding oneself in the world. In an interview published in 2010, Kevin Hart is asked this question: "You have written for many years. How important a part of your life is writing poetry?" Here is the response in full:

Writing poetry is a qualitative limit that runs throughout my life; it's a "how" of my being. And that's been true for so long that I cannot separate "writing poems" from "living." I don't have a life apart from writing poems. Of course, I have other things in my life that are extremely important to me—my family and friends, my work as a theologian—but my life simply wouldn't be my life without writing poems. Exactly the same would be true if you asked how important a part of my life is being a Christian. It's not a part of my life at all; it's a "how" of the whole thing.⁸

Two points from this answer are particularly relevant for our argument. First, in the way it is described here writing poetry is not a local, topographically restricted pursuit; it is not one piece of a grand jigsaw puzzle making a portrait of Kevin Hart. Rather, it is a mode of the whole. Secondly, what Hart calls a "'how' of the whole thing" is a composite. If writing poetry is the "how" of one's being, it does not follow that one is honour bound to renounce philosophy, theology or whatever else might also shape one's "how". Elsewhere he makes a similar comment about prayer: it is not a part of life but a way of conducting the whole of life.⁹ Similarly, in a third interview he talks about the experience of God that is "not grasped in terms of a positive or a negative content; it is given by way of a new structure, a fresh way of being in relation with God and with others."¹⁰

It is this coextensivity without exhaustivity that seems to be missed by the reviewer who puzzles aloud over Hart's Blanchot monograph *The Dark Gaze* in the following terms:

But beyond pedagogical lessons to be drawn, the question still remains why a poet and a Christian believer would undertake the intellectual, existential, and even spiritual labouring (I would even say kenosis) necessary for this pursuit of the dark gaze.¹¹

Hart's engagement as a theologian with Blanchot, or as a poet with theology, is not just about pedagogical lessons, about what philosophy might learn from poetry, or how philosophy can show theology a thing or two; it is rather each time about everything, about the "how" of everything. What we witness in Hart's work is not a dialogue between philosophy, poetry and theology, because the metaphor of dialogue figures the conversation partners both as too self-contained and as too internally homogeneous to capture the subtlety and the value of their complex relation.¹² What we have in each case is a "'how' of the whole thing," and we might add that in each case one is likely to find Hart's readings compelling or not depending on one's own disposition, one's own "'how' of the whole thing."

At some point in history, a wit who found himself piqued by Pico della Mirandola's intellectual bravura (some say it was Voltaire) added an ironic addendum to the claim to speak "de omni re scibili," namely "et quibusdam aliis": "and of certain other things besides," suggesting that "everything" might not have been quite enough to satisfy Pico's intellectual appetite. But with tongue firmly out of cheek we can say that this supplement to Pico's title captures well the extensive but not exhaustive nature of the "everything" that can be said in philosophy, theology and poetry. By this "et quibusdam aliis" I refer to Prof Hart's interest in and engagement with that which cannot be captured in any discourse or discourses. In "The right to say everything" he evokes Blanchot's *Outside, Neutral, Imaginary and Impossible*, insisting that "the writer who reduces the distance between his or her voice and its eternal murmur is the one who draws close to saying everything."¹³ Similarly, in relation to the mystical tradition of Christian thought and experience he argues that "God is not an object that can be received and internalised by a subject,"¹⁴ that "no gaze can contain divinity,"¹⁵ and again that "Not all of our relations with God [...] can be captured in propositions."¹⁶

CHRISTOPHER WATKIN

Neither philosophy nor theology nor poetry can internalise, contain or capture its object exhaustively and each individually (or indeed all together) in speaking of “everything knowable” always leaves “more besides.” Even when one has spoken of everything, in the extensive sense, indeed especially when one has spoken of everything, there yet remains to the phenomena a “more besides.” Kevin Hart not only discusses this relation between the “everything” and the “more” in his phenomenological engagements with Blanchot and Derrida, but he also instantiates it in the admirable breath of his own philosophical, theological and poetic “how.”

CHRISTOPHER WATKIN is Senior Lecturer in French Studies at Monash University.

NOTES

1. See *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486): The Evolution of Traditional Religious and Philosophical Systems*. Ed. and Trans. Stephen A. Farmer. Tempe: MRTS, 1998.
2. Kevin Hart, "The right to say everything." *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms* 9:1 (2004): 7-17.
3. Hart, "The right to say everything", 8.
4. Hart, "The right to say everything", 8.
5. Derek Attridge, "'This Strange Institution Called Literature': An Interview with Jacques Derrida." *Jacques Derrida, Acts of Literature*. Ed. Derek Attridge. New York: Routledge, 1992, 67. As quoted in Hart, "The right to say everything", 13.
6. "Proust is a complete systems for reading the world. [...] In our daily lives there is no incident, meeting, trait or situation that does not refer to Proust: Proust can be my memory, my culture, my language; I can remember Proust at all times, like the narrator's grandmother with Madame de Sévigné. The pleasure of reading Proust—or rather of re-reading him—has something therefore, at least in terms of sacredness and respect, of consulting the bible." Claude Jannoud, entretien avec Roland Barthes, *Le Figaro* (27 juillet 1974), in Roland Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*. Éd. Eric Marty. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002, 4:569. Author's translation.
7. Paul Ricœur, "Irrationality and the Plurality of Philosophical Systems." *Dialectica* 39:4 (1985): 309.
8. Pradeep Trikha, "Receiving Unintended Gifts: An Interview with Kevin Hart." *Antipodes* 24:1 (2010): 65.
9. "When I was in my early 20s I converted to Catholicism after a long period of searching. What I think drew me to the Catholic church is that in Catholicism, prayer suffuses all of one's life by virtue of the sacraments. Prayer is not something which occurs just on Sunday, it doesn't occur only at particular moments of intensity or by particular conventions, one's whole life is given up to prayer in many, many modes. And so everything to do with the faith is trying to put you in relationship with God and trying to make that relationship grow deeper and more mature." "Encounter: The Poetry and Prayers of Kevin Hart." ABC Radio National, June 5 2011. Transcript available at <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/encounter/the-poetry-and-prayers-of-kevin-hart/2953494>.
10. "Encounter: The Experience of God." ABC Radio National, June 18 2000. Transcript available at <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/encounter/the-experience-of-god/3468150>.
11. Graham Ward, review of Kevin Hart, *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred*, *The Journal of Religion* 86:3 (July 2006): 500.
12. It would be profitable to develop this thought through Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of *corpus*, an open-ended juxtaposition of disparate and connected 'parts' that form a discernible but infinitely modulable body: "There would have to be a *corpus* of such infinite simplicity: a drop-by-drop nomenclature of bodies, a list of their entries, a recitation itself enunciated out of nowhere, and not even enunciated, but announced, recorded, and repeated, as if I say: foot, belly, mouth, nail, wound, hitting, sperm, breast, tattoo, eating, nerve, touching, knee, fatigue... It goes without saying that failure is part of the intention." Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008, 57.
13. Hart, "The right to say everything", 10.
14. See "Encounter: The Experience of God."
15. Kevin Hart, "The Kingdom and the Trinity." *Religious Experience and the End of Metaphysics*. Ed. Jeffrey Bloechel. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003, 162.
16. Hart, "The Kingdom and the Trinity", 153.