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PLAYING WITH CULTURE AND TRUTH: THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE “CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS”

On September 22, 1998, then-President of Iran Mohammed Khatami called on the General Assembly of the United Nations to pursue a “dialogue among civilizations.”¹ Khatami’s proposal was a response to Samuel Huntington’s notion of an inevitable “clash of civilizations” that would supposedly characterize international relations after the end of the clash of superpowers that was the Cold War.² In a later affirmation of his argument, Khatami called on scholars to protect the concept of dialogue among civilizations from “the onslaught of dogmatic enmity to any possibility of reaching truth” that he associated with postmodern critique.³ While the unity of something called postmodernism might well be debated, the more significant aspect of his latter statement is the correlation Khatami envisions between truth and a dialogue among civilizations. Such dialogue offers a viable, and vital, alternative to the clash of civilizations hypothesis, but the vitality of this global conversation may be located precisely in its renunciation of truth.

Even before the articulation of a renewed “war on terrorism” following the attacks on September 11, 2001, American scholars and government officials had speculated about the possibility of a “clash of civilizations” between Western nations (primarily the United States and Europe) and the various manifestations of Islamic fundamentalism found in parts of the Middle East.⁴ Scholars such as Huntington characterized this potential conflict as a manifestation of foundational cultural differences between Western secular democracy and Middle Eastern Islamic theocracy; the “clash of civilizations” was thus often seen as a “clash of cultures.” Significantly, this theory of cultural clash assumes that cultural difference is necessarily navigated through competition, and, more specifically, violent competition. In part, this paper argues that expectations of modern civilizational clash are rooted in a particular philosophy of culture that understands the United States and the Middle East in terms of diametrically opposed cultural “truths.” Consequently, while considering the prospect of an alternative in the dialogue among civilizations, this paper also concludes that the sophisticated rejection of objective truth, against Plato’s transcendental epistemology, offers a philosophy of culture more amenable to Khatami’s dialogue. The culture of competition in classical Greece, and the ways in which Plato and the sophists differently addressed the function of truth within that competitive framework, offer useful approaches to rethinking the philosophical underpinnings of modern cultural clash.

Classical Greece offers a useful resource for thinking about the relationship between culture and competition. As John Poulakos has observed, a variety of cultural practices in Athens created the conditions out of which the sophistic “movement” emerged.⁵ He notes in particular the centrality of competition in classical Athenian culture; perhaps most visible in the Olympic Games, a valorization of competition extended to virtually all areas of life. And as Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, the Athenian culture of competition privileged the possibility of the

game itself above any particular winner. Beyond competitive sport, the agon of the contest was seen as a stimulant to political advancement. The “core of the Hellenic notion of the contest...desires, as a *protection* against the genius, another genius”; the singularity of a winner risked the complacency in politics of a citizenry so satisfied with the victory of the status quo that the *polis* would succumb to inertia.⁶ Thus, the one fundamental condition of the game, the contingency of the position of the victor, was seen by the Greeks as a constant incitement to perpetual civic engagement. This cultural attitude toward competition both produced and encouraged the agonistic rhetorical theories and practices of the sophists.⁷ Plato himself acknowledged that sophistical rhetoric was fundamentally based on an ethic of competition, and it is difficult to deny the conclusion that Socrates too sought to win in the exchanges narrativized in Plato’s dialogues.⁸ We will return to the topic of competition momentarily, but it will be helpful first to note another related, but distinct, perspective on culture evident in the reception of the sophists in classical Athens.

One reason Athenians welcomed the sophists, to greater or lesser degrees, is that the itinerant rhetoricians were seen as contributing to what Poulakos terms “the cultural exuberance of the city.” Often hailing from foreign lands originally and traveling throughout their careers, the sophists brought experiences of diverse cultures to the attention of Athenians, both enriching and challenging understandings of Athenian culture. Yet, even when the sophists were appreciated for their worldliness in their ability to share ideas about “other societal and political arrangements,” Poulakos argues, “[t]he bet...was that the Athenians would perceive the differences between their city and others, and conclude that, compared to their near or distant neighbors, they were better off.”⁹ Foreshadowing contemporary notions that Western culture is superior to all others, the classical Greeks demonstrated a commitment to differentiating their

own culture by ranking it hierarchically above the rest (which it explicitly marginalized). While we might examine the sophists' impact on Athenian culture by speaking of their role in intercultural exchange, a different perspective can be achieved by considering what the sophistic culture of rhetorical competition can teach us about the nature of intercultural competition and civilizational clash.

Although an Athenian culture of competition enabled the emergence of sophistic practice as discursive conflict, the sophists' commitment to public argumentation also reinforced the validity of that framework of competition for understanding culture. In Poulakos' words, "one not only agrees to play a particular game but also endorses the tacit understandings that have made the game possible."¹⁰ The very different ideas held by Plato and the sophists about the game of sophistic rhetoric, and particularly the role of truth in that game, help to explain their very different views about the cultural role played by the sophists in classical Greece. For some of the sophists, the role of truth was simply its nonexistence within a rhetorical game characterized by epistemological relativism; objective undecidability manifested itself in the possibility of an infinity of differing perspectives, none of which are objectively superior (true).¹¹ For other sophists, one need not go so far as relativism to recognize in the concept of *dissoi logoi*, a key premise of the competitive argumentation that was sophistic rhetoric, at least a skepticism toward absolute truth in the very possibility of contradictory arguments within language games.¹² In either case, to the sophists, the possibility of the game itself, even more than winning the argument, was the point of rhetoric. Poulakos suggests that even Plato's portrayal of Socrates and the sophists in various dialogues displays a concern "not so much with who won a particular discursive contest but with whether the participants competed fairly

(rationally).”¹³ Here, Plato too seems to be less interested in winning the argumentative competition than in playing the game properly according to the rules of logic.

Plato’s commitment to discerning absolute truth through the dialectic portrayed in the dialogues, however, indicates that Plato’s game involves more than methodological rules; Socrates in fact betrays an inescapable commitment to “winning” the discursive contests in which he engages. For example, Poulakos also notes how, despite Plato’s depiction of Socrates in dialectical (and therefore in a certain sense rhetorical) competition with the sophists, such competition is always resolved by the end of the dialogue. Whether Socrates’ interlocutor has cooperated in discovering a truth or reached a state of aporia, the purpose of the latter is still merely to serve as a signpost on the way to truth.¹⁴ Competition is thus always resolved in favor, to varying degrees of success, of a singular truth. As Poulakos suggests, Socrates’ victories over the sophists do serve as a validation (one might say an argument) for particular rules of the game of discourse: “the philosopher’s hunting method is always and in all cases successful because it is scientific and systematic.”¹⁵ More than simply a methodology, however, these rules also carry assumptions about the nature of knowledge; they require both the existence of objective truth and its linguistic accessibility via the naming practices of dialectical philosophy.

While conformity to the rules of rationality may be of greater importance than winning a particular dialectical exchange, Plato’s epistemological commitment to objective truth as the goal of such discursive combat also reflects an attitude toward rhetorical competition, and therefore ultimately toward culture, very different from that of the sophists. To Plato, the sophistic competition of rhetoric was an obstacle to be overcome as one progressed toward the goal of achieving true knowledge.¹⁶ For the sophists, competition, the possibility of competition because of the infinity of *dissoi logoi*, was itself the goal; although argumentation in a particular

situation will usually result in a winner and one or more losers, what matters most “is the continuation of the game.”¹⁷ These differing attitudes toward rhetorical competition exactly parallel Platonic and sophistic attitudes toward culture. For Plato, the sophists threatened to corrupt Athenian culture because the foreign cultures they represented were necessarily inferior to the “truth” of Athenian greatness. For many sophists, epistemological relativism entailed cultural relativism; because nothing could be considered objectively true knowledge, no culture could claim objective superiority in relation to any other. The sophists celebrated cultural pluralism because sophistic philosophy celebrated the play of difference in general—in argumentation, in politics, and in culture. Platonic philosophy could not abide the playfulness of difference, whether in the sophists’ rhetorical practice or in their cultural diversity. The concept of a “clash of civilizations” in the contemporary world displays a similarly Platonic philosophy of culture.

Samuel Huntington became famous for predicting in the mid-1990s that the post-Cold War world would be marked by a “clash of civilizations,” most notably violent conflict between a “Western civilization” and an “Islamic civilization.” Huntington sees competition between civilizations as both inevitable and as inherently zero-sum, which is to say concerned with *winning* in such a competition.¹⁸ More importantly, for the purposes of this paper, Huntington’s analysis relies on a peculiar philosophy of culture reminiscent of Plato’s. Huntington describes as an “unfortunate *truth*” the condition that “[w]e know who we are only when we know who we are not and often only when we know whom we are against.”¹⁹ At first glance, this claim may seem to echo a well accepted, or at least often articulated, view of subjectivity where the Self is defined in and through its opposition to the Other. However, Huntington takes this claimed truth

of the subject and elaborates it into several claims about the truth of culture and civilizations, or we might say into a philosophy of culture rooted in civilizational clash.

Whereas Socrates erases difference dialectically, Huntington tends to do so linguistically by equating “civilization” and “culture,” especially by sublating all of the myriad aspects of, and differences within, culture under reductive terms then used to define particular “civilizations.” For example, Huntington identifies “Islamic culture” as one of nine discrete “civilizations” in the post-Cold War world,²⁰ utilizing a religious commonality as a synecdochical description of a diverse array of cultural practices that extend far beyond religion. As Michael Shapiro notes, for Huntington, culture is “a more or less fixed civilizational characteristic.”²¹ The vision of Islam contained by Huntington’s civilizational geography is a homogenous one, conveying in the name a unitary culture that can be captured adequately by its linguistic representation.²² The synecdoche of “Islamic civilization” reduces culture to geographic territory by visually mapping “Islamic civilization” as a spatially bounded territory on the globe.²³ The result of Huntington’s characterization of an Islamic civilization is the production of “the Muslim world...as more or less a monolith.”²⁴ A later example is especially illustrative. Huntington describes an “Islamic Resurgence” at the end of the twentieth century, accompanied by a note justifying the capitalization of “Resurgence” on the analogy to the traditional capitalization of the American Revolution, the Russian Revolution, and the Protestant Reformation.²⁵ Huntington’s reasoning is that the “resurgent” interest in and power of Islam today is of parallel significance to those other capitalized events. His search for a proper noun to encapsulate contemporary Islam, however, ignores the fact that all of the aforementioned phenomena can be traced to discrete historical events, whereas Huntington reduces the heterogeneous history of numerous cultures

over the last two decades of the twentieth century to a singular synecdoche that is conveniently coextensive with one of the civilizations he is attempting to philosophize.

At the same time that Huntington's reduction of the world to civilizations caricatures an "Islamic world" as a homogenous entity, so too does this notion elide vast differences within what is labeled "Western civilization." As William Connolly observes, Huntington's formulation "obscure[s] and contain[s] pluralities *within* western states."²⁶ Some synecdoche is a necessary function of all language, to the extent that one must always reduce the complexity of reality to capture it, however inadequately, in words. However, a danger that is not merely academic arises when such homogenization occurs uncritically, particularly when generalizations that vilify foreign Others are used as the basis for making foreign policy. An example taken from the foreign policy rhetoric of one of Iran's most belligerent religious leaders may help to illustrate the risks of relying upon homogenized group identities. As Salman Sayyid has written, the Ayatollah Khomeini's description of the United States as "The Great Satan" is also guilty of the essentialism involved in dividing reality into diametrically opposed identities.²⁷ Khomeini's reductive framing of the United States as a monolith is in many ways very similar to Huntington's carving of the world into homogenous civilizations, albeit with a different valence attached to each.

To be fair, Huntington admits that the notion of a "clash of civilizations" as a geopolitical ontology for the post-Cold War world "omits," "distorts," and "obscures" many complexities of international relations, but he concludes that some sort of "paradigm" "is necessary," specifically because it affords a "simplified map of reality" according to which we can understand geopolitics and then design foreign policy.²⁸ Yet, it is in this caveat that Huntington best displays his philosophical commitment to a "truth" of culture remarkably akin to that earlier

identified with Plato. As Shapiro discerns, Huntington's civilizational geography belies an epistemological assumption of "perspicuous knowledge," wherein the analyst of international relations is privileged with transparent, direct access to the essence of geopolitical phenomena.²⁹ According to Huntington, the certainty of a "geopolitical cartography" makes possible the "causal theories" that might serve as "guides to international politics."³⁰ The lines on the map thus fix the geopolitical truth of the geographic names to which the lines correspond. The positivist epistemological conceit underlying Huntington's analysis can be seen in the assumption that his description of civilizational geopolitics is not only neutral and value-free but also adequate and complete, describing the world as it really is. The theory of language implied by Huntington's analysis parallels exactly Plato's epistemology in the confidence that true knowledge of the world is both accessible to humans and capable of being represented adequately in language. As Jean-François Lyotard has argued, a key characteristic of Platonic discourse is that the manifest object of it is taken as its referent; in other words, for Plato, the naming of an object presumes the *a priori* correspondence between the name and the object. The purpose is to make assertions about the referent's nature through the seemingly denotative language in which it is articulated.³¹ For Huntington, the naming and reduction of civilizations to generalized cultural traits is plausible in the first place because of a Platonic philosophy of culture that posits an objective (and unitary) truth of culture.

Recalling the point above that Huntington tends to reduce all of culture in this particular case to the specifically religious element of Islam, we can discern a rather clear example of his philosophical commitment to culture as singular truth in his description of a "Muslim propensity toward violent conflict."³² The "truth" of "Islamic culture," for Huntington, is its violence and intrinsic opposition to "Western civilization," in contrast to what otherwise might be

characterized as an incredible intracultural pluralism, much of which in fact abhors violence as contrary to the teachings of Mohammed. Again, we should note the Platonic philosophy of culture informing Huntington's thesis of a "clash of civilizations" rooted in the objective nature of those cultural groups; as Lyotard remarked, there is a "deep conviction" in Plato, like Marx and many others, "that there is a true being of society."³³ In order to fully understand the significance of Huntington's philosophical commitments, it is additionally incumbent upon students of philosophy as well as international relations to recognize that while such a philosophy of culture can be traced to Plato, it would be a mistake to lay responsibility entirely at his feet. For, as Fred Dallmayr has noted, the philosophical underpinnings of the drive to categorize the world into discrete (and opposed) civilizations, founded on a will to knowledge as absolute and objectively founded truth, is "the heart of traditional Western metaphysics."³⁴ Thus, while Platonic philosophy can serve as a useful reference point for understanding the implications of the philosophy of culture in the analysis and practice of international relations, it is the notion of objective truth and the epistemological faith that it can be captured by human perception that we must interrogate carefully. Before we turn to the sophists' "playful" alternative to absolute truth, we need to consider the geopolitical consequences that attend Huntington's philosophy of culture.

At the same time that Huntington constructs "Islamic civilization" as a unitary, objective cultural truth, the intellectual construct of a "clash of civilizations" also belies a commitment to "Western civilization" as inherently superior to all others. While scholars have noted that "the division of humanity into discrete units called civilizations" relies upon a "dialectic of identification and exclusion,"³⁵ it is crucial that we also recognize that the "clash of civilizations" hypothesis is not a benign exercise in categorical differentiation. Connolly, for

instance, notes the element of American exceptionalism in Huntington's notion of "western civilization" as a "historically unique achievement."³⁶ The juxtaposition of "Western civilization" to "Islamic civilization," through an epistemology that treats the Islamic Other as an object of the West's knowledge, serves to consolidate the West's identity as "a Christian/European civilized society."³⁷ "Western civilization" thus comes to represent an absolute "truth" in the form of an ideal "civilized" culture against which the inferior "Other" is opposed. Unlike the negative characteristics said to comprise the "truth" of "Islamic civilization" (e.g., its violence, according to Huntington), "Western civilization" is portrayed as peaceful, democratic, and devoted to human rights. The significance of the philosophical commitments underlying the "clash of civilizations" is not merely academic. Although officials in the administration of U.S. President George W. Bush emphasized in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks that America was targeting "extremists" rather than "Islam" or "Arabs," and that the war on terrorism was not a "clash of civilizations,"³⁸ some elements of Huntington's civilizational philosophy of culture are easily discernable in key speeches by Bush. For example, Bush described terrorism as "a threat to our way of life," against which were juxtaposed "the values of America" and the "civilization" that would wage a war on terrorism. Such rhetoric neatly speaks of "civilization" in the singular, rather than Huntington's plurals, but more importantly equates that singular "civilization" threatened by terrorism with the specifically American manifestation of democracy and capitalism. The framework of a "clash of civilizations" articulated by Huntington and reinforced by Bush thus exemplifies a philosophy of culture, specifically a Platonic philosophy of culture that imagines one "true culture" that is identical with both "Western civilization" and American culture, because in post-Cold War American foreign policy rhetoric these are the same thing.

The philosophical commitment to a cultural truth, especially a truth inflected by the ideology of American exceptionalism, raises serious concerns about the prospects for success in a “war on terrorism” waged within the context of a “clash of civilizations.” The conviction that one knows truth, in the absolute, objective sense, is intimately connected to the conviction that one has the right, and often the responsibility, to manage the world according to the dictates of that truth. Moreover, the axiological hierarchy that seems to accompany the faith in absolute truth, that one’s possession of truth corresponds to superiority over others, then becomes the warrant for intervening in the world to repair deviations from that truth. Nietzsche observes, for instance, that “[w]herever Socratism turns its searching eyes it sees a lack of insight and the power of illusion; and from this lack it infers the essential perversity and reprehensibility of what exists. Basing himself on this point, Socrates conceives it to be his duty to correct existence.”³⁹ As Dana Cloud concludes, the concept of civilizational clash often contains a moralized universalization of Western virtue, justifying intervention (clash) on the need to save “people from themselves,” especially “inferior Others requiring policing.”⁴⁰ While Huntington acknowledges that the belief in the universality of one’s own culture, and the obligation to spread it, is responsible for putting both Islam and the West on a collision course,⁴¹ such a caveat remains inadequate to the extent that the philosophical assumptions informing Huntington’s entire analysis contribute to the further entrenchment of American exceptionalism and the notion that a necessary binary opposition exists between cultures.

Returning to the analogy between rhetorical competition and civilizational clash, we see in both seemingly disparate cases a similar philosophical commitment to objective truth and an epistemological commitment to language’s ability to capture it. Such connections are significant, because the rhetorical alternative to Platonic philosophy advanced by the sophists

might offer insight to the search for alternatives to the Platonic philosophy of culture that both enables and perpetuates the concept of a purported “clash of civilizations.” The sophists’ rhetorical alternative was at bottom an alternative vision of competition. For the sophists, rhetoric exemplified competition for the sake of playing the game, because one could. While there were unquestionably abuses of sophistical rhetoric, there was also what we might call an exuberant rhetoricality; the freedom that accompanies epistemological uncertainty (anything can be argued because things may always be otherwise) must at times encourage a playful joy in arguing *just because one can*. Plato’s vision of discursive competition hoped that “Truth” (with a capital “T”) would someday win, the only sure way to end the game itself.

When thinking about culture, and especially the notion that there are “truths” of culture dictating a “clash of civilizations,” we might instead look for an alternative vision of cultural competition that renounces truth in favor of dialogue. Former Iranian President Mohammed Khatami’s proposal for a dialogue of civilizations offers a contemporary manifestation of the sophistic philosophy of culture, in contrast to the Platonic philosophy to be found at the root of the “clash of civilizations.” Such a global conversation cannot start from premises of “truth,” neither the objective truth of one interlocutor’s position nor the unitary “truth” of a culture implied by facile proper nouns (e.g., “Islamic civilization”) devoid of historicized complexity. Such a dialogue may well be competitive, but peaceful competition between cultures (not “civilizations”) requires an ethic of play, a commitment to “the continuation of the game” rather than the winning of it. It is specifically this philosophical orientation of Khatami’s anticipated conversation among scholars, artists, and private citizens, among people committed to cultural understanding rather than negotiating the best deal for “national interest,” which distinguishes dialogue from diplomacy. As Marc Lynch emphasizes, arguments committed to the *a priori*

truth of one's position, as is the case with traditional international diplomacy where "the actor does not herself expect to change her preferences," fail to "challenge basic conceptions of international politics."⁴² Instead, interlocutors in the dialogue among civilizations would refuse to begin the conversation committed to a truth, so that "we can play with what we are talking about," which requires above all a "tolerance...of one's own ignorance."⁴³ To treat cultural dialogue as a language game means to privilege above all the possibility of competing arguments, rather than the truth of any of them. Various statements by Khatami exemplify the kind of ideas about which many Americans would have to be willing to admit ignorance, to play with the possibility that certain "truths" embedded in the ideology of American exceptionalism are not, in fact, objective truths about the world.

Khatami provides an illustration of this sort of dialogue with the example of the 1979 Iranian Revolution during an interview with CNN reporter Christiane Amanpour. Then-President Khatami described the history of U.S. intervention in Iranian politics, including the long-term American support for the Shah's oppressive regime, such that the 1979 Revolution and hostage crisis should be understood as expressions of counter-hegemonic struggle.⁴⁴ For too many Americans, the Cold War history of U.S. support for autocratic governments is not familiar, and these details tend to be elided in the current political discourse that portrays Iran only as one pole in an "axis of evil."⁴⁵ Khatami's point is one that requires a commitment on the part of American participants in the dialogue of civilizations to eschew cultural "truths" proclaiming that the United States is only capable of spreading democracy and freedom throughout the world; rather, honest dialogue may require the recognition of some U.S. responsibility in fomenting the sort of counter-hegemonic resentment that gave birth to the events of 1979 and the subsequent reign of the ayatollahs. In that same interview, Khatami also

offered a rereading of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* that identified certain common values between that canonical description of American politics and Iranian politics. The very comparison and connection between these disparate governments, as Sayyid observes, highlights the "contingent...character of the western enterprise."⁴⁶ The supposed "truth" of the uniqueness of American culture posited by Huntington's "clash of civilizations," among other discourses of American exceptionalism, is thus incompatible with a sincerely self-reflexive dialogue among civilizations.

A similar prompt for dialogue can be discerned in Khatami's call for a global commitment "to eliminate all existing arsenals of weapons of mass destruction [WMD]" during his speech to the United Nations on the prospect of civilizational dialogue.⁴⁷ The emphasis on the elimination of *all* WMD requires that American interlocutors give up the facile distinction between U.S. nuclear weapons and enemy WMD. The implicit "truth" in American culture that only evil Others possess weapons of mass destruction is a fiction that must be acknowledged as such before any serious dialogue about the problem of WMD proliferation can occur. Khatami's statements demonstrate the impossibility of maintaining *a priori* truths about one's culture when entering into a dialogic game in which the one inviolable rule is the possibility that received truths must be up for debate. It is in this sense that Sayyid perceives in Khatami's challenges to the aforementioned American cultural truths "an attempt to break the 'Plato to NATO' sequence of historical narrative which grounds Westernese [i.e., the language and rhetoric of American exceptionalism], by grafting on it another reading interrupting its teleology."⁴⁸

Khatami's call for dialogue was undeniably argumentative. But it was a spirited argument that introduced complexity to the context in which we speak of "civilizations." By adding the complexity of competing historical narratives into the dialogue about U.S. foreign

policy, in contrast to the generally uncomplicated official narrative of American exceptionalism, Khatami's foray into a dialogue among civilizations exemplifies the "playful" argumentation of agonistic rhetoric. His simultaneous praise of the premise of American democracy with extended reference to Tocqueville represents a philosophy of culture far more epistemologically "playful" than Huntington's ahistoric homogenization of Western liberal democracy and "Islamic civilization."

At the same time that Khatami's call for a dialogue among civilizations presents a useful guide to how we might avoid the self-fulfilling prophecy of Huntington's "clash of civilizations" hypothesis, we must also turn a critical eye toward the ways in which Khatami's elaboration of his proposal seem in some ways entrenched in a commitment to truth still reminiscent of Platonic philosophy. For instance, although Khatami is attentive to the pluralism within "civilizations," his discourse still displays a tendency to homogenize cultural groups through the synecdoche of the "Islamic revolution" with which he identifies post-1979 Iran.⁴⁹ More explicitly, Khatami evinces a Habermasian confidence that dialogue will move us "closer to truth and achieving understanding," but he complicates this epistemological commitment when he also declares that true dialogue stands against "those claiming monopoly over truth."⁵⁰ In a related fashion, Khatami names the search for "a priori and comprehensive general axioms" as the basis for a dialogue among civilizations, but he then emphasizes that "[s]uch axioms...are as much in conflict with the dogmatic axioms of positivists and the absolutes of modernists as they are with the unlimited skepticisms of the post-moderns."⁵¹ While Khatami's reference to anything *a priori* conjures images of Platonic philosophy, we might credibly interpret this statement as more a defense of the sophisticated epistemology that valorized rhetoric in the possibility of competing

arguments *because there was no objective truth that would obviate the need for such arguments*. For most of the sophists, the one irreducible truth was the language game.

Privileging an understanding of rhetoric on the model of sophistic gaming obviously carries its own set of risks. As Samuel Weber observes in an elegant commentary on Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud's *Just Gaming*, there is some risk of reproducing "the imperialism of the totalizing perspective [found in Plato]" in conclusions about the irreducibility of language games.⁵² To the extent that any of the preceding arguments about the dangers attending objectivist ontology and epistemology are valid, then we must remain vigilant that a commitment to the impossibility of objective cultural truths does not become a radical relativism unable to make judgments about cultural horrors like genocide. Yet a true dialogue among civilizations may ultimately require that participants move beyond the concept of truth. As Connolly notes, an "appreciation of plurality within the state" requires the recognition that even the most cherished truths "rest upon profoundly contestable judgments."⁵³ The possibility of contesting any judgment may thus be the heart of the dialogue among civilizations, and this was certainly the heart of the sophists' perspective on rhetorical competition.

Competition, rhetorical or Olympic, was itself valued by the ancient Greeks as a practical ethic vital to Greek society. Nietzsche explains how the ancient Greeks saw contest as necessary to the health of the polity, with respect for gaming reflected in their commitment to the agonistics of the game above the valorization of any particular winner. In his words, "Why should no one be the best? Because then the contest would come to an end."⁵⁴ While a contestant might win an Olympic event or a particular politician win an election, in neither case was such a victory final. To have a permanent victor would breed complacency and political stagnation; it was the continuation of competition in perpetuity that offered the only hope of

continual societal advancement through the unending striving required by the nature of the game itself. Weber reads in Nietzsche a basis for the ancient Greeks' successful (and generally peaceful) vision of competition in their ability to recognize "their identity as players as the *effect of an irreducible otherness*" in relation to the gods. According to Nietzsche, the ancient Greeks, at their best, saw competition as a necessary condition of existence rather than a deficiency to be overcome, for absolute superiority was the province only of the gods. The failure of such recognition would lead to hubris, or "the desire to withdraw from the game."⁵⁵ Mohammed Khatami's proposal for an anti-foundationalist dialogue among civilizations echoes the sophists' philosophy of rhetorical competition and thus may enable a parallel understanding of cultural competition as a game to be played rather than a game to be won.

In conclusion, we might consider one final manifestation of the supposed "clash of civilizations," terrorism, through the philosophical lens advanced in this paper. Taking the very possibility of playing language games, the freedom to argue and express agency through rhetorical competition, as the realization of justice, Lyotard suggests that what makes the violence of terrorism especially objectionable is that it treats people as means to an end. The coercive violence of terrorism removes from humans the ability to play the game.⁵⁶ Lyotard's gaming metaphor should not be interpreted as a trivialization of the tragedy of terror; rather, Lyotard recognizes that what makes human life worthwhile is the possibility of play, in the sense that competition evoked as the spirit of play exemplifies the recognition of every person as an agent whose *right* to advance her or his own ideas cannot be subsumed under anyone else's notion of absolute truth (especially a truth enforced through violence). A potentially controversial, yet vital, corollary to Lyotard's observation is that this critique of terrorism also applies to certain aspects of the "war on terrorism." As Khatami's CNN interview mentioned,

too often elements of *realpolitik* in U.S. foreign policy rely on utilitarian calculations of American “national interest” while instrumentalizing foreign peoples—the citizens of Iran under the Shah, the civilians in Afghanistan and Iraq killed by military action in the war on terrorism yet not even counted by the United States military because they are “collateral damage.” The point here is not in any way to suggest a moral equivalence between Al Qaeda’s terrorism and efforts to prevent future terrorist attacks, but rather to draw attention to the ways in which some aspects of American foreign policy also deny people the ability to play the game. While one could object and say that people living under oppressive regimes are not truly enfranchised and able to play language games, one must reflect honestly (and philosophically) and ask whether *a priori* assumptions about the “truth” of American culture empower or stifle the open competition of ideas. As Khatami concludes, the condition of dialogue among civilizations is that U.S. foreign policy eschews treating others as “instruments” in favor of “communicative rationality” as a guide to international relations.⁵⁷

The epistemological skepticism of the sophists led to their view of rhetoric as a game in which rhetors argued to win, but without any expectation that the competition would be resolved in terms of a truth settled for all time. Sophistical rhetoric thus approached the Greek culture of competition with a fundamental respect for play; the winning of an argument was at best temporary within a sophistical philosophy that privileged the endless play of differing arguments rather than the truth of any one of them. Applied to the modern worry about a “clash of civilizations” in a globalized world, the playful competition characterized by sophistical rhetoric may provide the basis for a less belligerent philosophy of cultural conflict rooted in respect for the irreducible play of cultural difference.

Notes

- ¹ Mohammed Khatami, “Remarks by Iranian President Mohammed Khatami before the United Nations General Assembly,” *Federal News Service* (22 September 1998). Available online at <http://www.lexis-nexis.com>
- ² Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).
- ³ Seyed Mohammed Khatami, “Dialogue among Civilizations and Cultures,” in *After Terror: Promoting Dialogue among Civilizations*, ed. Akbar Ahmed and Brian Forst (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2005), 76.
- ⁴ Dana L. Cloud, for example, notes the long history of the concept of civilizational clash in the history of U.S. imperialism. “‘To Veil the Threat of Terror’: Afghan Women and the <Clash of Civilizations> in the Imagery of the U.S. War on Terrorism,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90 (August 2004): 286. Cloud, however, reads the concept of a “clash of civilizations” as an “ideograph,” a term “through which ideologies or unconsciously shared idea systems that organize consent to a particular social system become rhetorically effective” (288). Cloud identifies various elements of ideology underlying notions of a clash of civilizations—commitment to democracy, an active role for the United States in world affairs, and certain implicit assumptions about “racial and national hierarchy”—but we must also look for the particular *philosophy* of culture at work here.
- ⁵ John Poulakos, *Sophistical Rhetoric in Classical Greece* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 12. As Poulakos writes, while there are clearly many differences among the individual sophists, it is certainly possible to identify certain intellectual themes common among them as well (46, note 1).
- ⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Homer’s Contest,” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 37. Italics in original.
- ⁷ Poulakos, 32-34.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 37-38.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.
- ¹¹ Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, trans. Wlad Gadzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 17.
- ¹² Poulakos, 58-59.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 104.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 102-03.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.
- ¹⁶ As Poulakos puts it, “Plato must ultimately subordinate the sophists’ rhetorical competitiveness to dialogical cooperation in search of the truth.” *Ibid.*, 103.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.
- ¹⁸ Huntington, 207-08.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 20-21. Italics added.

- ²⁰ Ibid., 29.
- ²¹ Michael J. Shapiro, "Samuel Huntington's Moral Geography," *Theory and Event* 2, no. 4 (1999): ¶ 19-21. Available online at <http://www.muse.jhu.edu>
- ²² Ibid., ¶ 11.
- ²³ Huntington, 26-27.
- ²⁴ Bruce Mazlish, *Civilization and Its Contents* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 115.
- ²⁵ Huntington, 109.
- ²⁶ William E. Connolly, "The New Cult of Civilizational Superiority," *Theory and Event* 2, no. 4 (1999): ¶ 4. Available online at <http://www.muse.jhu.edu>. Italics in original.
- ²⁷ Salman Sayyid, "After Babel: Dialogue, Difference and Demons," *Social Identities* 12 (January 2006): 5.
- ²⁸ Huntington, 29.
- ²⁹ Shapiro, ¶ 25.
- ³⁰ Huntington, 30.
- ³¹ Lyotard and Thébaud, 21.
- ³² Huntington, 258.
- ³³ Lyotard and Thébaud, 23.
- ³⁴ Fred Dallmayr, *Dialogue Among Civilizations: Some Exemplary Voices* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 33.
- ³⁵ Sayyid, 5.
- ³⁶ Connolly, ¶ 3.
- ³⁷ Mazlish, 9.
- ³⁸ Condoleezza Rice, "Condoleezza Rice Holds News Briefing," *FDCH Political Transcripts* (19 September 2001). See also "Special Defense Briefing," *Federal News Service* (20 September 2001), and "Terrorist Attack," *ABC News: Nightline* (12 September 2001).
- ³⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 87.
- ⁴⁰ Cloud, 286.
- ⁴¹ Huntington, 217-18.
- ⁴² Marc Lynch, "The Dialogue of Civilisations and International Public Spheres," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 29, no. 2 (2000): 313.
- ⁴³ Cyril Welch, "Talking," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 18, no. 4 (1985): 217, 218.
- ⁴⁴ Mohammed Khatami, "Listening to a New Point of View from Iran," interview with Christiane Amanpour, *CNN* (7 January 1998). Available online at <http://www.lexis-nexis.com>
- ⁴⁵ George W. Bush, "President Delivers State of the Union Address," *Office of the Press Secretary* (29 January 2002). Available online at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>
- ⁴⁶ Sayyid, 10.
- ⁴⁷ Khatami, "Remarks by Iranian President Mohammed Khatami."

⁴⁸ Sayyid, 9.

⁴⁹ Khatami, "Listening to a New Point of View." See also Khatami, "Remarks by Iranian President Mohammed Khatami."

⁵⁰ Khatami, "Dialogue among Civilizations and Cultures," 72.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁵² Samuel Weber, "Afterword," trans. Brian Massumi, in Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, trans. Wlad Gadzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 103.

⁵³ Connolly, ¶ 5.

⁵⁴ Nietzsche, "Homer's Contest," 36.

⁵⁵ Weber, 107. Italics in original.

⁵⁶ Lyotard and Thébaud, 67.

⁵⁷ Khatami, "Listening to a New Point of View."

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