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Liberating Discernment: Language, Concreteness, and Naming Divine Activity in History

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Abstract: One of the revolutionary insights of early liberation theology was that theological discernment is, above all, a concrete undertaking. Yet this insight is accompanied by a persistent conundrum that arises from the way in which naming God's activity in history is perceived as collapsing God's objective distance into contingent affairs. This paper contends that this conundrum results from a constricting account of theological objectivity which is problematically conceived in opposition to concretization and so obstructs an account of liberating discernment. Locating this concern within the (de)colonial history of competing theological readings of the weather, and, in addition, prompted by Alice Crary's expansion of objectivity in ethical theory, I argue that theological objectivity must not only include but begin with theological languages of the oppressed as its essential point of departure. Recovering the insight of early liberation theologians, this paper contends that theology may speak of God objectively only as it concretely shares in the liberating life and words of the crucified peoples of history. The purpose of this argument is then to envision Christian ethics as language accountable to the apocalyptic activity of the God of the oppressed.

Keywords: liberation theology; ethics; language; the weather; praxis; apocalyptic; discernment; Alice Crary; James Cone; Beatriz Melano Couch

In Latin America, from the immersion in concrete struggle we question the scriptures and doctrine, trying to find direction for both thinking and action. The richer, more objective our knowledge of reality, the more relevant and profound will be our questioning of God's word in our search for faithfulness to God's will.

Beatriz Melano Couch¹

In general, in a deep conflict, the eyes of the downtrodden are more acute about the reality of the present. For it is in their interest to perceive correctly in order to expose the hypocrisies of the rulers.

Immanuel Wallerstein²

What would theology look like if we were to take seriously the claim that Christian theology is poor people's speech about their hopes and dreams that one day "trouble will be no more"?

James H. Cone³

¹ (Melano Couch 1991, p. 443).

² (Wallerstein [1974] 2011, p. 4).

³ (Cone 1985, p. 127).

1. Introduction

One of the revolutionary insights of liberation theology is that theological discernment is, above all, a concrete undertaking. Latin American liberation theologian Beatriz Melano Couch articulated this insight precisely in her insistence that the indispensable condition of theology is “immersion in concrete struggle” (Melano Couch 1991, p. 443). Theological discernment so formulated entails that language about divine activity must be baptized in people’s struggles for freedom from enclosures of sin. Yet this insight is often displaced or covered over by a certain anxiety arising from the way in which naming God’s activity in history seems to risk collapsing God’s objective distance into contingent affairs. This anxiety is here explored as the *conundrum of concretization*. On the one hand, as God is discerned to be concretely involved in contingent creaturely affairs, theological language organically becomes intertwined with human action and praxis.⁴ Theologically, to speak of signs of apocalyptic liberation or to name the Spirit of Christ’s activity in the world presumes a relation to struggle. On the other hand, the same concretization also exposes theology to distortion, since the internal relation of language and action conflicts with prevailing conceptions of objective language with respect to God and the world. According to this anxiety, as divine activity is concretely related to human states of affairs, it risks transgressing objective thinking and speaking about God by conflating divine interests with subjective—or more perniciously—ideological investments.

This paper attends to this conundrum for the purpose of shedding light on the role of discernment in apocalyptic theologies of liberation.⁵ My argument is that, despite the persistence of this conundrum, it is a misconception generated by a governing and constricting view of theological objectivity which is problematically conceived in opposition to concretization, and, precisely so, obstructs the recovery of liberating discernment articulated by Melano Couch and others. The consequences of this misconception include the idea that abstract and generalizable descriptions of divine activity are (most nearly) objective descriptions, in addition to a categorical resistance to concretization. In order to reimagine discernment apart from this view, this essay first attends to the entanglement of theology and readings of the weather in colonial modernity as a fraught yet generative history for considering the promise and perils of concrete, liberating discernment. The resistance to take seriously claims regarding divine activity in irruptive weather and meteorological conditions, which have been crucial to freedom dreams of oppressed people, evinces how prevailing ideas of objectivity restrict theologies of liberation. Second, to recast objectivity, I draw inspiration from Alice Cary’s realignment of objective judgment in ethical theory. Cary’s argument for a wider objectivity for ethics prompts a parallel clarification of concrete objectivity for theology, making possible a recovery and re-articulation of liberating discernment.

If Christian theology is, as James Cone piercingly writes, “language about the crucified and risen Christ . . . language that is accountable to the God encountered in the oppressed community”, then it has to unsettle conceptions of objectivity that resist the radical concretization necessary to make it so accountable (Cone 1985, pp. 122, 127). The purpose of this essay is to re-envision Christian ethics as language accountable to the God of the oppressed by setting forth divine discernment with the “terrifying and liberating concreteness” demanded by the gospel of liberation (Lehmann 1975, p. 37). Theology may speak of God objectively, I contend, only as it concretely shares in the liberating life and words of the crucified peoples of history.⁶

⁴ On the “organic” connection between concrete discernment and praxis, see (Dussel 1979, esp. pp. 57–58).

⁵ By this I mean accounts of liberation theology that begin with revelation (*apocalypsis*). For this formulation, see (Siggelkow 2018, p. 44).

⁶ On the theological concept of the “crucified peoples”, see (Ellacuría [1978] 2013, esp. pp. 208–10).

2. Theological Meteorology and the Conundrum of Concretization

The hybrid history of theology's entanglement with meteorology provides an illuminating (if perhaps unexpected) case for considering the conundrum of concrete discernment. The birth of the modern science of meteorology was, as scholars in environmental and colonial history have argued, induced by the conquest culture and political directives of colonialism.⁷ Like botany, cartography, astronomy, and other natural sciences, the application of scientific measurement and technological instruments (i.e., barometer, thermometer, and telegraphic networks) to collect, analyze, and transmit climate data, and ultimately to forecast the weather, served crucial colonial state building, economic, and administrative imperatives (Schwartz 2015, p. 80). Such imperatives included, for example, expediting transoceanic maritime trade, diminishing the risks posed by hazardous tempests, and coordinating planning and development across "plantation America".⁸ Yet meteorological reflection also held a peculiar, hybrid relation to theology.⁹ Environmental conditions were (and are) inseparable from theological discernments, and vice versa. In the context of modern colonialism, this was unmistakably evident in disaster discourses. These emergent discourses were not by any means limited to empirical observations about natural causation or Aristotelian speculations regarding elemental combinations and combustions.¹⁰ Instead, like the plague narratives of Exodus, disasters were portents that spurred radically concrete claims of divine activity and culpability regarding regimes of human sin. Divided by the fault lines that colonialism created, disasters had the theological potential to reinforce and extend the violent conditions of colonial domination, but they also elicited emancipatory imaginations—those which, representing the dark side of freedom struggles, understood how unstable ecological conditions could catalyze liberation from plantation and racial regimes.¹¹

Consider the following examples of theological discernment in meteorological disaster:

- (1) Puerto Rico, 1868: The Lares rebellion. The anticolonial, people's movement for independence from Spain on the island successfully seizes the town of Lares, but fails to generate a general uprising and is suppressed. In the aftermath, colonial administrators and political leaders declare that discrete weather and seismic events were critical in undermining the political uprising. This, they further claim, is providential evidence of God's preservation of the Spanish regime (Schwartz 2015, pp. 175–78).
- (2) Waco, Texas, 1953: A tornado rips through the downtown city center, devastating the mid-sized Texas city. Circulating among black residents in Waco, Texas, an oral tradition re-describes the tornado event by linking it to 1916 lynching of Jesse Washington, an event W.E.B. Du Bois termed "the Waco Horror". The tornado, according to this tradition, re-traced the very ground on which Washington's body was dragged, and becomes a sign of divine justice and reversal (Carrigan 2004, pp. 189–208).

⁷ My narration of the colonial development of meteorology is informed by Schwartz (2015, pp. 79–80); see also (Williamson 2015). On the environmental and cultural history of meteorology, consult (Golinski 2007; Anderson 2005; Jankovic 2001).

⁸ On the transnational notion of "plantation America", see the classic study by (Beckford [1972] 1999, esp. pp. 17–18).

⁹ I invoke the term hybrid following Bruno Latour's influential distinction between purification and hybridization. Hybrids, according to this distinction, are those things that emerge from surprising and often concealed modern practices of mediation. They describe the unexpected entwinement of knowledges in modernity, despite its claims to separation and purification. See (Latour 1993).

¹⁰ Contemporary disaster studies underscore the multifaceted social construction of disaster environments in contrast to reductive naturalist accounts. For a concise summary of this important emphasis, see (Luft 2009, p. 506). For a masterful example of "disaster before the disaster" analysis of Hurricane Katrina, see Clyde Woods's posthumous writings, (Woods 2017, esp. pp. 216–54), as well as the reflections by theologians, ethicists, and religious studies scholars gathered in (Kirk-Duggan 2006).

¹¹ On these strands of Christianity, see Joseph Winters' illuminative rendering of Vincent Harding's interpretation of Black Power: "If strands of Christianity emphasize the violence of divine judgment over the more idyllic images of lions lying with lambs, then Harding suggests that black power represents the darker side of black freedom struggles, the side that acknowledges how a better future requires some kind of violent interruption into the order of things. This is where things get difficult and interesting". See (Winters 2019, p. 165). On the notion of racial regimes, see (Robinson 2007, pp. xi–xvii).

- (3) Rocksprings, Texas, 1928: A tornado devastates a small town in Edwards County in South Texas. In its aftermath, the tornado is described by local ethnic Mexicans as the retributive justice of God for the widespread anti-Mexican violence and vigilantism in the region, especially in the decade spanning 1910–1920. Furthermore, the tornado is tied to the specific racial terror lynching of Antonio Rodríguez in 1910, representing a discrete moment of divine justice in response to the failure of human justice in the aftermath of terror (Martinez 2018, pp. 67–69).
- (4) Americas, 16th century: Jesuit theologian Bartolomé de Las Casas learns of an indigenous meteorological tradition observing that hurricanes increased in both frequency and severity in the Caribbean following colonial contact and conquest. Las Casas affirms the truthfulness of this tradition, arguing that increased hurricanes are the result of Spain's "new and many sins" (Las Casas 1968, p. 191).¹²

These examples represent moments in colonial modernity in which concrete theological discernments are braided with readings of the weather. It is important to acknowledge that they occur in different colonial contexts in the Americas and span over three centuries. Such differences are not immaterial and invite further investigation. Yet for the purposes of this essay, despite relative differences in history and geography, they display how theological accounts of the weather formed critical and extended modes of contestation within colonial relations of power. In all of them, ecological disaster events are more than mere natural occurrences; they are transformed into theological discourses wherein turbulent weather becomes, borrowing from Cone, "concrete signs of divine presence" (Cone 2013, p. 155). Moving beyond natural "disaster exceptionalism", they reframe the possibilities of creaturely life and arrangements by simultaneously saying something about the weather and something about God (Luft 2009, pp. 506–9). At the same time, they also exhibit significant theological variation in shape and substance. In terms of shape, the first three examples are apocalyptic: they relate irregular, catastrophic ecological events to the revelation of divine activity in the world. The fourth example is theodical: the theological connection between colonialism and hurricanes is not directly mediated by divine activity, but through an account of sin.

Moreover, the examples can be separated along colonial and decolonial or liberationist lines. The first example names divine activity in the weather as the justification of Spanish colonial suppression of a people's movement for freedom. Differentiated from the other three, it represents a form of colonial disaster apocalyptic. This way of reading disaster perniciously names ecological destruction as divine judgment upon victims of colonial violence and its rebels.¹³ Examples two, three, and four contrastively reframe ecological disaster within the disaster of colonialism and so expose its injustice and illegitimacy. They thus take liberating shape, projecting theological discernments in disastrous weather conditions within a world wrecked by colonial violence and its afterlife. Examples two and three similarly discern apocalyptic divine activity in tornado events as the righteous judgment of God visited upon anti-Mexican and anti-black plantation lynching regimes in Central and South Texas. They recall the image found in the prophetic book of Amos, "Does disaster befall a city, unless the Lord has done it?" (Amos 3:6). Accordingly, these examples identify disruptive whirlwinds as apocalyptic signs of imminent divine deliverance. Example four, for its part, takes a similar decolonial shape. We may observe the distinction that where examples two and three recall a certain Amos pattern of apocalyptic discernment, example four approximates a Hosea pattern in that it follows the logic of disaster theodicy. As the prophetic book reads: "For they sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind" (Hosea 8:7). The organizing idea of this mode of discernment is that sin is excessive, bearing a devastating momentum in the world. Hence, sinful colonial relations do not merely define

¹² Cf. (Schwartz 2015, p. 21).

¹³ For more recent example, consult the reflections of Anthea Butler and others on a similarly pernicious mode of colonial disaster apocalyptic in the wake of the 2010 Haiti Earthquake in (Recla 2010). Apocalyptic theologies played a deep structural role in the colonial imagination. See the acute analysis in (Winn and Yong 2014).

the *effects* of climate catastrophe, they are its *causal* forces, the disaster before disaster. The sinful tide of Spanish colonialism generates destructive Caribbean hurricanes, as witnessed to by the indigenous tradition corroborated by Las Casas.

Showcasing theological meteorology's entanglements in modern/colonial fields of struggle, these disaster discourses disclose discernment's concretization. They exhibit claims about how God is actively involved in the world, claims which themselves presume a connection to ethical and political action—for example, action to suppress challenges to colonial terms of order (example one) and actions to overthrow that order (example two, three, and four). In so doing, they express the irreducibly concrete character of divine activity, its embeddedness within material ecologies, and that discernment concerns the languages people speak and the people who speak them. In revealing the concrete character of theological discernment, however, these examples may also evoke certain worries. For instance, can the examples of colonial and decolonial discernment be theologically differentiated? Or does speaking of God's involvement in weather catastrophes risk collapsing divine activity into political programs?

This line of questioning recalls the anxieties over what has sometimes been called political messianism, or the worry that concretely speaking of divine action as it bears on human states of affairs is a recipe for disaster. The specific notion of political messianism originated in the twentieth century with historian and theorist Jacob Talmon (Talmon 1960). In his view, binding theological claims about divine activity to political programs is fundamentally vicious and ideological, since it generates a dangerous desire for final deliverance in history. Michael Walzer influentially re-iterates this critique, arguing that such political messianism "is the great temptation of Western politics. Its source and spur is the apparent endlessness of the Exodus march" (Walzer 1985, p. 135, 138–39). Concrete discernment, according to this line of criticism, is the bad theology and bad politics that results from making differential judgments about divine activity within the confines of human states of affairs, resulting in political judgments that issue in bad faith. Lacking objectivity, it reduces theology to viciously circular and reality-obscuring ideology put in service of justifying political action. Returning to the weather examples, then, it is critical to recognize how, from this vantage, despite the differences between colonial disaster apocalyptic (example one) and the decolonial Amos (examples two and three) and Hosea (example four) discernments, all are reduced to manifestations of the same problem of concretization.¹⁴

This criticism expresses a paradigmatic anxiety regarding concrete discernment, and correctively implies a strategy of abstraction. If concrete discernment places theological language and speech at risk of becoming ideological, and, in equal measure, places politics at risk of becoming absolutist, then one prevailing response has been to moderate theology through abstraction and generalization. Found in various modern theological expressions, one instance of the preference for the moderating effects of abstraction may be found in Augustinian theologies that limit history after Christ of theological meaning through depleting the powers of discernment in the *saeculum*. Other examples can be seen in theological ontologies that normatively maintain that divine presence may only be generally related to the world, and therefore render unavailable gratuitous and differential identifications of divine action in history.¹⁵ Such modes of abstraction, still, ought to be given their due: consider, in contrast to example one, wherein concrete discernment of divine activity functions as the justification of colonial repression through a providential construal of the weather, how the theological avoidance of concreteness has the benefit of undermining the grammar of violent, colonial discernments. That is to say, this mode of theology undermines all such concrete claims because of the nonobjective—which is to say, circular

¹⁴ For a qualified re-iteration of the critique of political messianism in the context of black abolitionism, see (Glaude 2000, pp. 144–59).

¹⁵ Consult (Tran 2018) for an assessment of how other established trends in contemporary theology similarly strand the task of concretization. For an example of such an ontology in the discourse of political theology, see the constructive account of divine presence without identity in (Smith 2014, esp. pp. 121–22).

and self-justifying—theological reasoning at work. Thus, this prevailing mode of abstraction addresses what it takes to be the basic problem and attendant risks of theological concretization.

Yet it is not only colonial discernment that is undermined. All four examples of theological meteorology present identical worries of ideology (lacking objectivity) on the basis of concretization. It follows that substantial distinctions between theological disaster discourses and imaginations (colonial and decolonial, apocalyptic and theodicy, Amos and Hosea) are inconsequential. All variety of material discernments about divine activity in relation to human affairs are problematically concrete and subjective in just the same way, betraying faulty theological reasoning, and, what is more, from the perspective of modern climatology, appear as so much mythology. The distinct content of discernment becomes immaterial to the overriding concern that speaking of God as intimately involved in the goings-on of the world will result in the distortion not the disclosure of reality.

At the most basic level, what philosophically determines the avoidance of concrete theological discernment is a dubious picture of how objectively speaking of God should work. The conundrum of concretization, this is to say, is predicated upon the view that discernment cannot meet the standard conditions of objectivity required by moral and political judgment. As I elaborate below, according to this view, the only permissible sorts of discernments are those that, in alignment with this narrow account of objectivity, exclude the connection between theological objectivity and human praxis. This version of objectivity is not only problematically limiting in regards to moral judgment, but it necessarily excludes concrete discernment altogether, since discernment is a language for speaking about God that is subjective, concrete, and praxis-oriented. If concrete discernment is to be recognized as more than the potential exposure of theology to the risks of political ideology and vicious circularity, it will have to be shown that this conundrum rests upon a misconstrual of the nature of judgment and objectivity. My interest, though, does not concern the nature of judgment in general; rather, I aim to articulate how an alternative picture of objectivity creates the theological conditions for discriminating between and giving preference to liberating discernments, particularly in keeping with the radical modes of naming God's apocalyptic action in history as exemplified by the Waco and Rocksprings traditions. In order to do that, what first needs to be shown is that the standard objection to concrete discernment, and the conundrum of concretization itself, depends upon a deficient view of objectivity. Turning to the work of Alice Crary, I explicate parallel resources from ethical theory for reimagining the nature and task of theological discernment.

3. Objectivity, Action, and Moral Judgment

Working in the intellectual tradition of Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, and Veena Das, Alice Crary's writings consider how ethical attention to language provides a distinct vantage for interrogating established views of knowledge and reimagining human life in the world.¹⁶ Crary's specific challenge to established notions of objectivity brings into focus how theology might think differently about what it means to speak of God concretely. That challenge goes like this: *status quo* conceptions of moral judgment in contemporary ethical theory operate according to a stagnant and rigid metaphysical picture. According to this presumptive framework, no plausible account of ethics can simultaneously incorporate two basic features in our intuitive understanding of judgment. These features are, as Crary labels them, objectivity and internalism. By objectivity, Crary means how moral judgment is seen to be a matter of describing the way the world really is. Objective judgments are those that describe the world accurately and in keeping with a philosophically appropriate idea of disinterest. Adjacently, internalism names the practical connection or the internal relation between moral judgment and action (Crary 2009, p. 11). Internalist moral judgments are those which are closely related to motivation and praxis. According to this standard view that Crary means to challenge, what defines these two features of moral judgment is that they are mutually exclusive of each other. Moral judgments

¹⁶ For a helpful introduction to Crary's work, see the interview by (LeNabat 2016).

cannot both be objective in assessment and oriented toward action. Modern moral philosophy is thus characterized by a certain either/or: proposals elect, in one way or another, for objectivity or internalism. Many contemporary moral realists, for example, opt for the former and abandon the latter altogether. The opposition between objectivity and internalism, Crary argues, is the governing metaphysical assumption in contemporary ethical theory. Crary writes:

this assumption is generally taken to show that any ethical theory that tries straightforwardly to accommodate both of the above two features of our ordinary understanding of moral judgments—that is, any ethical theory that endeavors to be both *objectivist* in that it represents moral judgments as essentially in the business of answering to how things stand and also *internalist* in that it represents such judgments as internally related to action and choice—has to be rejected as untenable. (Crary 2009, p. 12)

Of particular interest is the concept of objectivity, for the idea that objectivity is opposed to praxis-oriented judgments is not limited to ethical theory but logically underwrites the conundrum of concrete discernment in theology described above. The reason that objectivity and internalism are held to be exclusive of one another has to do with how the traditional philosophical notion of objectivity is opposed to subjectivity. In this familiar scheme, a subjective property is a property for which no final or satisfactory conception can be formed beyond the perceptual or affective responses an object evokes. Additionally, what is subjective can, furthermore, be separated into two kinds, namely, the merely subjective and the problematically subjective. The former is straightforward enough: the merely subjective elicits an affective or perceptual response of any kind from a subject concerning an object, but yields nothing more, no relevant data apprehending objective reality. The latter then pertains to the kinds of properties or descriptions that an object evokes under certain circumstances—the kinds which may be situationally conducive to action. Both forms of subjectivity are excluded from objectivity. The idea here is that subjectivity tends to distort rather than disclose or display reality. Thus Crary: “if a given property stood in the sort of internal relation to sensibility or affective propensities that allowed it to be essentially practical, it would not count as properly objective. Conversely, if it had the sort of independence from human subjectivity that would distinguish it as fully objective, it would fail to be essentially practical. So here there can be no properties that are both objective and intrinsically motivational” (Crary 2009, p. 16).

Crary’s contention is that the a priori exclusion of problematic subjectivity from objectivity is unwarranted and misconstrues—indeed *narrows*—the nature of ethical life. Instead, a more adequate, wider conception of objectivity should include problematic subjectivity, since, for Crary, what falls under the heading of problematic subjectivity is in reality the moral sensibilities and forms of life to which moral judgment cohesively belongs. In order to make room for this account of objectivity (and the implied parallel goods it provides for theological discernment), the standard notion of objectivity will need to be dislodged. Central to the standard, narrow notion of objectivity is a certain hostility to the idea that moral judgments themselves belong to moral sensibility. The hostility is due to the fact that this understanding is taken to “encod[e] a form of *circularity*” (Crary 2009, p. 32). By locating moral judgments within the context of moral sensibility, in other words, one becomes caught in a net of circular reasoning. And circularity assumes the problems of problematic subjectivity. According to the traditional philosophical notion of objectivity, then, moral judgment should be ideally construed in a non-circular fashion. Hence, the hostility to circularity, which impinges of the apparently ideal kind of moral judgment.

A significant way that this hostility to circularity gets worked out, according to Crary, is through an “abstraction requirement”. This idea maintains that “the regularities constitutive of a sound conceptual practice must transcend the practice in the sense of being discernible independently of any subjective responses characteristic of us as participants in it” (Crary 2009, p. 21). The idea of an abstraction requirement, for certain ethical theorists, is that by defining objectivity exclusive of the subjective responses to conceptual practices, they embed a critical tool for breaking out of the circularity. Notice that, on this account, the objective meaning of a conceptual practice is peculiarly shifted to,

and consequently defined by, the elements that exceed a practice, but not by the practice itself. This is the logic of abstraction, which it is hoped, provides a way to conceptualize moral judgment that is not reducible to circular reasoning. Hence, Crary:

An ideally non-circular form of discourse would be suitably abstract insofar as, within it, applications of concepts would be beholden to standards that have content apart from the beliefs the pertinent mode of discourse embodies and that can accordingly be conceived as accessible independently of any practical sensitivities that we acquire in arriving at those beliefs. (Crary 2009, p. 33)

Yet the rigidity of the abstract requirement is a demand, Crary argues, that an ordinary account of moral judgment simply cannot resource, and for good reason. Here Crary points to an argument by Wittgenstein, namely, that concepts are not tools for picking out data independent of practice, but that concepts “are resources for thinking about aspects of the world to which our eyes are only open insofar as we develop certain practical sensitivities” (Crary 2009, p. 25). The import integrating concept and practice, for Crary, is that it conditions a reconsideration of objectivity, one in which we discover that, far from an obstructionist or distorting projection of unreality, subjectivity “figures in the best, objectively most accurate account of how things are and, further, that the person who lacks the subjective endowments that would allow her to recognize them is missing something” (Crary 2009, p. 28). The insight is that, instead of guaranteeing the most accurate representation of the world, the abstract requirement runs the risk of unnecessarily excluding essential features of what makes the world livable. In turn, if we reject the idea of an abstract requirement for certifying objectivity, we also reject the idea that non-circular discourse is the ideal or even preferable picture of what counts as philosophical objectivity. The upshot then is the expansion of objectivity inclusive of subjective responses (both mere and problematic subjectivity), an account capable of assessing the full context of moral judgment as belonging to moral sensibilities and forms of life, and one which figures moral judgments as internal to human action.

What does ethics look like if you drop the abstract requirement? As Crary elaborates in more recent work, it looks like a new way of imagining the ethical world, or more precisely, reimagining what counts as the ethical world, what states of affair ethically matter. A wider objectivity, one open to subjective responses, entails jettisoning “a picture of the world as somehow available to thought in an absolutely unmediated manner or, in other words, in a manner not informed by the sorts of subjective responses characteristic of us as participants in particular linguistic practices” (Crary 2016, p. 55). This means that what is objective must include what it has traditionally excluded, for the express reason that “our subjective responses contribute internally to our ability to grasp features of the world”, and thus “bring the world into focus” (Crary 2016, p. 55). When it comes to assessing human action, we then ask different kinds of questions that focus on responses to the contextual circumstances. Crary writes, when “assessing an individual action . . . [i]t is natural to interpret this as a question about appropriate responsiveness to—practical and hence moral—values encoded in relevant circumstance” (Crary 2016, p. 88). It follows, for Crary, that this kind of assessment is not something other than an assessment of objective moral values.

The allure of this picture of moral judgment is that, freed from the strictures of the abstract requirement of traditional philosophical accounts of objectivity, it contains an unanticipated element; or better, it entails that our moral imaginations of the world are defined by a irreducible *openness* that is as available to redefinition as subjective responses to worldly circumstances are diverse. Considering the moral lives of humans and other animals, Crary observes that “there can be no question of limiting the imaginative exercise that we accordingly face by specifying ahead of time which aspects of human beings’ or animals’ lives are of interest. For we cannot exclude the possibility that, once we have refined our conception of what matters in these lives, our understanding of them will shift, revealing that characteristics that once struck us as unimportant are in fact morally salient” (Crary 2016, p. 91). In short, this wider objectivity refashions ethics without the guarantees of abstraction, wherein evaluations of the world are not opposed to but imbricated with languages of praxis and commitment.

4. Concrete Objectivity and the Recovery of Liberating Discernment

Concretizations of divine activity naming God's liberating presence (for example, discernments of tornado disasters as signs of the divine interruption of ongoing racial regimes) threaten a certain notion of theological objectivity and so then risk reducing theology to political ideology. As described above, the critique of political messianism and correspondent move to abstraction charts one way to avoid this risk, since concrete discernment fails to render language regarding divine activity independent of the problematically circular reasoning of discerning subjects. The implicit criterion of this criticism is that the authentication of theological discernment, like moral judgment, involves its capacity to transcend the contextual locale of its genesis. This effectively amounts to the imposition of an analogous abstraction requirement on theological discernment. Ideal discernment, by this requirement, is certified to the extent that it is non-circular and abstracted from concrete situations where life and death and liberation are at stake. Returning to the theological meteorology examples, then, it is important to reiterate that they are similarly problematized as ideological precisely because they fail to meet the abstraction requirement for objectivity. Whether God's apocalyptic activity may be legitimately ascribed to the tempests and whirlwinds that aided in colonial domination or counteractively conjured freedom dreams of other worlds and new creation, or, moreover, whether the sources, languages, and sensibilities that inspired such competing discernments are worth theological attention are questions negated by design, in accordance with the abstraction requirement. Identifying the concrete with the ideological renders questions of source, language, and discernment inconsequential of concretization and ideology.

If, however, objectivity is not opposed to internalism, which is to say, if concretization does not violate but rather enables discerning the otherness of God, then the conundrum of concretization is suspended. The critical importance of Crary's argument lies in how her diagnosis and reframing of objectivity implies a parallel realignment of discernment. This is the insight that Crary foregrounds for theological purposes: far from being a threat to the integrity of God, the concretization of language is the very means of witnessing it. That concepts are not rigid epistemological credentials for purifying thought, but resources for thinking about the world "to which our eyes are only open", as Crary contends, unseats the worry over circularity which maintains objectivity is the exclusion of concretization. Following this insight, formal circularity, we are led to conclude, is not itself at issue in considering better and worse accounts of discernment. The fact that the examples of theological meteorology are circular is not necessarily problematic. No longer is the internal, organic relation of concrete discernment to praxis a reason to believe that discernment, of necessity, is any less objective. We can then say that the problem with the abstraction requirement is that it renders formal (circular versus non-circular) what is, in fact, a material—or better—*pneumatological* question, namely, the question of engaging in God's line of action through the Holy Spirit, who is the power of God in people's struggles for liberation (Melano Couch 1991, p. 448).

A material approach to interpreting the theological disaster discourses with which this essay began would be one that eschews the preoccupation with whether claims about God's revealed activity in the world are sufficiently abstract, as though an objective description of God is one that transcends the context in which God is encountered. Abstract objectivity disciplines a way of speaking of God that refuses to take seriously language that is not immediately generalizable beyond the situation in which God acts. This subverts languages that responsively speak of God as God is encountered within the world. By contrast, Crary's intervention in ethical theory aids in reconceptualizing theological objectivity as, necessarily, concrete objectivity. Concrete objectivity helps to reframe the conundrum of concretization not as a problem for discernment but as a misconception generated by a failed picture of theological reasoning that excuses theological language from commitment, praxis, and engagement in the world—so advancing abstract languages inattentive to the Spirit. We must ask why generalizing theological languages which transcend the life, strivings, and struggles of discerning subjects and communities should be given priority over idiomatic languages. This priority brackets the idea of what counts as theologically objective to the exclusion of language that, for theologies of liberation, centralizes the speech, prayers, *corridos*, blues, poems, and stories of the least and the last as the

condition for truthfully and apocalyptically speaking of God. If God's righteousness is disclosed in the liberation of the poor, the eschatological reversal and undoing of racist and colonial regimes, and the justification of the oppressed, to be apart from the company of the poor and to fail to be accountable to their languages of God amounts to finding oneself "excluded from the possibility of hearing and obeying God's Word of liberation" (Cone 1985, p. 125).

Still, it is important to maintain the distinction between moral judgment and theological discernment at this juncture. We might say that this distinction amounts to different outcomes regarding the meaning of concretization: Crary's project concerning judgment is a constructive account of ethical life grounded in the natural world; discernment is alternately grounded in the apocalyptic disclosures of the Holy Spirit who graciously enlivens and emancipates but is not encoded within the natural world. This means, in part, that where Crary emphasizes that objective moral values are embedded within, and therefore perceptively available to, contingent circumstances, discernment is language accountable to the otherness of God, and may be thought of as speech responding to the objective irruption of values which occurs as God acts to liberate creaturely life within contingent enclosures of sin. To speak of the otherness of God here, however, is nothing other than the affirmation that theological objectivity is unavailable apart from a form of life shared with others similarly struggling for freedom. This shift then does not entail returning to an abstract objectivity or abstract revelation that takes leave of creaturely contingency. Rather, it insists that the distinction between God and world only truly obtains in concrete theological discernment, in recognition of the fact that discernment is an apocalyptic mode of speech defined by God's differential identification with the crucified peoples, those whom Gustavo Gutiérrez calls the "scourged Christs" of the earth (Gutiérrez [1995] 2003, pp. 45–66). Thus, as Melano Couch argues, it is only through joining in Christ's presence with crucified peoples that one can speak of God's salvation, since this is "where God's liberating action takes place" (Melano Couch 1991, p. 449).

This alternative availed by Crary is not a rejection of objectivity but a concrete conception accountable to the languages of discerning communities, in particular the languages of the oppressed. A parallel notion of discernment entails an attunement to subjective, contextual, and circumstantial realities as vitally relevant to objectively naming the revelation of God's action in history. It would include a range of considerations as theologically vital: theological accounts of ecological conditions (like, for example, the weather), invocations of scripture, the sensibilities and storytelling traditions of discerning communities, their structural location(s) in relation to colonial powers, and traditions of resistance.

However, concretization is not, on its own, sufficient for theologies of liberation. The discernment of the first example of theological meteorology in the wake of the Lares uprising relates how colonial and imperial discernment also take radically concrete shape. The concretization of theological discernment, accordingly, is simply the first task over and against theological abstraction. Having disarmed the abstraction requirement, concrete languages need to be differentiated according to the criterion of liberation, between, in this case, the colonial disaster apocalyptic of Spanish administrators according to the first example, and the decolonial Amos and Hosea modes of discernment embodied by the other three examples. It is for this reason that this essay has insisted, in keeping with the writings of liberation theologians like Beatriz Melano Couch and James Cone, that concretization must be essentially related to the struggle of crucified people for freedom. This christological criterion enables the recovery of naming God's activity in history with radical concreteness and additionally provokes visions of new creation for history's crucified and scourged Christs. Liberating discernment then must not merely include concrete language and descriptions regarding divine activity but must be disciplined through immersion in the life and words of the crucified. That liberating discernment prioritizes the emancipation of the least and last discloses its non-neutrality and one-sidedness. Yet this does not discount its objectivity. To the contrary, what Melano Couch called the "hermeneutics of engagement" is the precondition of objectivity, that is, the perspective that begins with reality as it is apprehended through the experience, suffering, and language of the oppressed is the essential

standpoint for objectively bringing God's liberating activity into focus (Melano Couch 1976, pp. 305–6). Language committed to the liberation of the oppressed, accordingly, may not be *a priori* dismissed as problematically subjective or potentially ideological, for the express reason that objective language includes commitment. Moreover, liberating discernment's distinct christological commitment marks the essential position for objectively speaking about divine agency in the world.

One may worry that a consequence of this one-sided construal of discerning divine activity is that it tends toward absolutizing the theological claims, speech, and language expressed by and with crucified peoples. What may be said here, as a provisional response to this concern, is that the christological criterion of concrete discernment does not mean that such discernments of the crucified—like, for example, those apocalyptic articulations regarding catastrophic weather events in Rocksprings and Waco—issue in the final word on God's action in history. This idea would reduce the search for liberating concreteness to yet another search for certainty and finality. Rather, discernment always and everywhere bears the vulnerabilities proper to a "theology of restlessness", to borrow Manas Buthelezi's eloquent expression (Buthelezi 1978, p. 70). Far from conveying the end of discernment, the christological criterion locates the position or standpoint from which objective theological speech must begin. To return to Melano Couch's baptismal language from this essay's introduction, "immersion in concrete struggle" for the life and liberation of the scourged Christs of the earth does not guarantee the totality or finality of discernment; instead, as baptism, concrete struggle signals the indispensable point of departure for engaging in objective theological discernment.

The articulation of conditions that make for a recovery of concrete theological discernment and, in turn, *liberating* discernment has been the primary objectives of this essay. If objectivity with respect to speaking of divine activity in history is not opposed to but depends upon concretization, then theological discernment may be disarticulated from the conundrum of concretization and tied to the life and words of history's crucified people. Naming God's activity in history entails at once carefully discerning concrete signs of divine presence in the world and the correspondent militant action of faith. On the comparison to Crary's theory of moral judgment, theological discernment is both objective and praxis-directed, since it witnesses to divine activity and prompts engagement in it. What is critical about the discernments of God in the weather, as modeled in the decolonial Amos and Hosea patterns above, is the liberating activity of God to which these languages of the oppressed bear witness and the faithful action towards which they point. To speak of God concretely is not to speak of God with certainty or absoluteness. Discernment remains restless and unsettled, without guarantees. Yet it is language that seeks to reverse the present terms of order by first listening to the voices and languages of minoritized and oppressed peoples fighting for freedom for the purpose of naming how God is acting for liberation from enclosures and bonds of sin. It is thus a concrete language responsible to the God encountered in oppressed communities, belonging to what Melano Couch also describes as a "theology on the march", that is, to the ongoing labors of responding to God's liberating activity (Melano Couch 1976, p. 307). Liberating discernment so construed is accountable to the critical question Cone asks regarding all theological speech: "If God is the God of the poor who is liberating from bondage, how else can we speak correctly about this God unless our language arises out of the community where God's presence is found?" (Cone 1985, p. 124).

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