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The Made and the Made-Up

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Abstract
Truth is an ethical relation. Facts, whether descriptions of the physical world or of historical events, are necessarily mediated by our frames of reference. This contingency opens a space for disagreement that cannot be adjudicated by an absolute standard of truth. For those seeking power or profit, the temptation to exploit this state of un-decidability is strong. When many question the institutions that broker meaning – science, the professions, the media – rumors, misinformation, deliberate distortions and false-hoods all proliferate. In the digital age, the 'made' is swiftly supplanted by the made-up. The remedy for this predicament is not technological or factual, but ethical and social. The normative resources for this project lie in our everyday ethic of communication and in the ideal of democracy as shared authority. Whether we can address this predicament effectively is uncertain. But the nature of the problem is clear: It is not that we live in a 'post-truth' age, but rather that we are facing a crisis of democratic society as such. It is not so much that we lost sight of truth, as that we have lost sight of one another.

Keywords
democracy, truth and post-truth, politics, Arendt, discourse ethics

Stranger things

'Truth is stranger than fiction', Mark Twain observed, 'because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; Truth isn't'.[1] Twain's remark – a reworking of Lord Byron's earlier observation[2] – invites us to contrast the unruliness of reality with the constructed nature of fiction. For a story to be judged credible, Twain astutely points out, it must conform to our assessment of its probability. Reality, however, is constrained neither by rules nor by regularities derived from past experience. Reality surprises. Fiction conforms to our expectations and, in so doing, confirms them.

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In the essay *Truth and Politics*, Hannah Arendt presents truth as in conflict with and inherently vulnerable to politics. 'The chances of factual truth surviving the onslaught of power are very slim indeed; it is always in danger of being maneuvered out of the world'.[3] Three factors combine to put truth at a disadvantage. First, the purveyor of falsehood has the upper hand for the reason identified by Twain:

> Since the liar is free to fashion his 'facts' to fit the profit and pleasure, or even the mere expectations, of his audience, the chances are that he will be more persuasive than the truthteller. Indeed, he will usually have plausibility on his side; his exposition will sound more logical, as it were, since the element of unexpectedness—one of the outstanding characteristics of all events—has mercifully disappeared.[4]

Second, truth is disadvantaged because, for Arendt, 'it is unpolitical by nature'.[5] Politics is the domain of opinion, debate and persuasion.[6] Truth, on her view, is tautologically compulsory *as* truth. Thus, she says that 'factual truth, like all other truth, peremptorily claims to be acknowledged and preclude debate'.[7] Once submitted to the political realm, however, a truth-claim becomes the subject of debate and the object of persuasion.[8] This renders truth doubly vulnerable. On one hand, it is 'relatively easy to discredit . . . as just another opinion'.[9] On the other hand, if 'truth should prevail', it would be undone by its own success: 'For truth would then owe its prevalence not to its own compelling quality but to the agreement of the many, who might change their minds tomorrow'.[10] It would become 'mere opinion'.[11]

Third, the stakes change with the emergence of 'Madison Avenue methods' and the 'mass manipulation of fact and opinion' through image-making, in which 'every known or established fact can be denied or neglected'. The greatest danger is not that truth will be supplanted by falsehood, but the destruction of 'the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world'.[12] It is disorientation, rather than falsehood itself, that becomes the object of the political lie. The result 'is a peculiar kind of cynicism—an absolute refusal to believe in the truth of anything, no matter how well this truth is established'.[13]

Arendt traces three of the most familiar pathologies of lying in the political sphere – pathologies that seem even more characteristic of our day than hers. But the analysis is, on her own account, problematic: Arendt recognizes that the 'modern age. . . believes that truth is neither given to nor disclosed to but produced by the human mind' and that 'facts always occur in a context'.[14] She nevertheless situates her analysis within the conventional opposition of fact and fiction.[15] She repeatedly speaks of 'simple factual statements', 'brutally elementary data', and facts that 'assert themselves by being stubborn'.[16] Yet, if facts were really elemental, brutal and stubborn, they should have greater force whatever their other systematic disadvantages. (No, the earth is not flat. Yes, COVID is real and has killed more than six million worldwide. Yet, there are people who disbelieve each of these 'stubborn' truths.)

If, on the other hand, facts are produced by the human mind, then the problem is acute: The historical contingency and social construction of knowledge would seem to put the very category of 'fact' in question. Since most of what we know is not grounded in first-hand observation, the naysayer can always attack the basis for any claim of fact. And that

seems to characterize the political sphere today, where the insight that truth is socially constructed has been cynically weaponized.[17] Any unwelcome report is characterized as 'fake news' and fantastical claims are served up as 'alternative facts'. The consequences are dire. 'Fake news confuses us and makes us doubt whether any source can be trusted'.[18] Cynicism has morphed into full-on paranoia as rumors, misinformation, deliberate distortions and falsehoods proliferate.[19] 'Everything that once seemed definitively and unquestionably real now seems slightly fake; everything that once seemed slightly fake now has the power and presence of the real'.[20] In the digital age, the 'made' is swiftly supplanted by the made-up.

It is conventional to think of truth as a relation between statements and states of affairs in the world. It seems to follow that, if 'truth' is understood as the product of social and historical processes, the dissolution of truth into 'post-truth' or 'anything goes' is inevitable.[21] This is a false and mistaken logic: To humanize or historicize truth is to recognize that truth is, inevitably, a quality of discourse. As such, it is an intersubjective function – a matter of how we relate to one another through communication. There is a critical, normative difference between the constructed – the 'made' – and the made-up. Truth is an *ethical* relation. In that sense, we are never 'post-truth'.

Consider, first, two unconventional variations from within the standard dichotomy of truth-versus-fiction. Each in a different way focusses on the ethics of communication. The first is Lord Byron's original claim that truth is stranger than fiction. The second is the Talmudic concept of *migo*. In both, it is the counterintuitive or eccentric truth that carries the day over more conventional fictions.

Lord Byron's original point was that truth holds a moral insight superior to the conventional stories that define a culture. 'How oft would vice and virtue places change', he asks, if 'some Columbus of the moral seas' would show the novelist a more realistic picture of human nature?[22] For Lord Byron, the constructed world of the standard story with its stereotypical depictions of heroes and villains is a convention in need of disruption. A dose of reality, he suggests, can reverse the established expectations. In revealing the vice of the conventionally virtuous and the decency of those thought villainous, truth can improve fiction and enlarge our moral vision.

Herman Melville's *Billy Budd: An Inside Narrative* is just such a novel. It purports to tell the inside story of a mutinous sailor who struck and killed a superior officer and was summarily executed. (According to the novel's coda, that is the official story as reported in the press of the day.) In the more familiar contours of Melville's tale, Billy is an angelic sailor beloved by Captain and crew who is nevertheless preyed upon by the covetous master-at-arms, Claggart. When Claggart falsely accuses him of mutiny, the tongue-tied Billy lashes out in frustration and kills the master-at-arms with a single blow. Captain Vere, a well-regarded officer and a model of respectability, spontaneously pronounces sentence: 'Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!'[23] Vere quickly convenes a drumhead court composed of his subordinate officers. He bullies them to put aside any mitigating consideration of character or circumstance and to act without pity according to the strict requirements of martial law. Melville casts a jaundiced eye on the proceedings, decrying the peculiar depravity of a man 'of even temper and discrete bearing' who, nevertheless 'in heart . . . would seem to riot in complete exemption from

that law'.[24] The 'true' story told in the novel is yet more poignant when one learns that Vere is modeled on Melville's father-in-law, the celebrated jurist Lemuel Shaw. Melville was sharply, but secretly critical of his father-in-law because of Shaw's views on slavery, his craven enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act, and his role as a hanging-judge in several of his murder cases.[25]

A second kind of inversion appears in the Talmudic concept of *migo*. The Rabbis of the Mishnah discuss the case of a woman and her husband who travel overseas at a time of peace. Upon her return, the woman says that her husband is dead. According to the majority view, she is to be believed and is allowed to remarry. But, if the woman reports her husband's death after traveling together to a war zone, she is not believed and may not remarry.[26] At first blush, this seems counterintuitive. After all, death in a war zone is more likely than death on a pleasure cruise; to paraphrase Twain, it better accords with the possibilities. The Rabbis reasoned, however, that an improbable story should be believed when the party could have told a more credible, false story that would have been entirely effective under the circumstances. Another example would be the case of a debtor who claims that he has already paid back a loan given solely on an oral promise. The Talmud says he is to be believed because, in the absence of documentation, the debtor could have claimed successfully that he had never borrowed the money in the first place.[27]

The psychological logic behind this principle is as follows: 'If I were going lie, I would have opted for the simpler, more credible story. Since I am, instead, telling the less probable truth, you should believe me'. Truth may be stranger than fiction, but only an honest person would be so foolhardy as to rely on it when a better story is at hand. The unscrupulous person, in contrast, would tell the story that people are most likely to find convincing.

Lord Byron sought moral clarity in a truth that disrupts convention. The Rabbis saw sincerity in an unexpected tale told without art or guile. A similar insight is reflected in the familiar idioms 'straight talk', 'plain spoken' and 'the simple truth'. Coming at the dynamic from the opposite direction, George Orwell links affected prose with an intent to obscure. 'A mass of Lain words falls upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outlines and covering up all the details. The great enemy of clear language is insincerity'.[28] In contrast to Arendt's apparent pessimism,[29] these views find hope for truth in clarity and sincerity. These values will become crucial as we move beyond the conventional dichotomy of truth-versus-fiction. They point to a different understanding of truth as an indispensable ethical relation that – like democracy itself – is rooted in an ethic of mutual recognition and respect.

Between fact and fiction

The words 'fact' and 'fiction' are cognates, sharing a common etymology. Fact is from the Latin *facere* which means 'to make' or 'to do'. Fiction comes from the Latin *fictionem* or *fictio*, a 'fashioning' or 'forming' and from the noun form *fictilis* which literally means 'clay'.[30] ('What have you made?' in Latin is *quae fecisti*.) Both fact and fiction are constructed, shaped by expectations borne of prior experience. Even perception – which seems to come unstructured to our senses – is formed in the brain in an interaction

between incoming perceptual signals and previously acquired mappings that mutually adjust until the neural firings match.[31] Twain's famous dictum does not get it quite right. Truth may surprise; but reality, no less than fiction, is constructed. In Hilary Putnam's apt phrase: 'The mind and the world jointly make up the mind and the world'.[32]

To ask (as Twain and Arendt do) about the facts, stories, or characterizations that people are likely to find convincing is to inquire into what will make the most sense to them under the circumstances. It is, in other words, to inquire into the nature of our categories and concepts – for it is our categories and concepts that define our expectations and, in so doing, shape what we perceive, what we judge accurate and what we experience as cogent, compelling and convincing. Reality is always a matter of a world viewed (more precisely, interacted with) under some frame of reference. As Nelson Goodman argues:

> If I ask about the world, you can offer to tell me how it is under one or more frames of reference; but if I insist that you tell me how it is apart from all frames, what can you say? We are confined to ways of describing what is described. Our universe, so to speak, consists of these ways rather than of a world or worlds.[33]

Even 'the allegedly absolute objectivity and precision of the natural sciences', Arendt notes, 'is today a thing of the past' because 'the answers of science will always remain replies to questions asked by men'.[34] Truth is necessarily something framed by human processes.

It is tempting to respond by pointing – like Dr. Johnson kicking the stone – to some simple, irrefutable fact. Arendt mentions Grotius's insistence that 'even God cannot cause two times two not to make four'.[35] But, a three-fingered God would say that $2 + 2 = 11$ (in base 3, where each place to the left represents a multiple of 3) and a digital God would insist that $2 + 2 = 100$ (in base 2). One might reply that $\sqrt\sqrt + \sqrt\sqrt = \sqrt\sqrt\sqrt\sqrt$ is still true regardless of mathematical convention. (If you read that as $2 + 2 = 4$, that just confirms the hold our conceptualizations have on us.) But even this more concrete variation is dependent upon our conventional denotation of 'plus' and 'equals'. True, anyone who tells you that $\sqrt\sqrt\sqrt\sqrt$ and $\sqrt\sqrt\sqrt\sqrt\sqrt$ are the same is gaslighting you. But, $2 + 2 = 4$ is a formal mathematical proposition, not a statement about a mind-independent world.[36] It is true only for some kinds of things-in-the-world – like checkmarks, matchsticks and pennies – and not others. If we are adding two atoms of hydrogen to two atoms of oxygen, two plus two will be one: a molecule of hydrogen peroxide. (Alternatively, it will be two: one molecule of water and one free oxygen atom. Add two more oxygen atoms and you will still have only two, one water molecule and one molecule of ozone). And, if we are adding two cubic feet of air to two cubic feet of air the answer will have to be expressed either in cubic-feet-per-minute (as in ventilation) or in pounds-per-square-inch (if we are adding air to a closed container like a tire).[37]

To recognize that all facts are constructed is not to deny reality. It is, rather, to recognize that the world is for us a field of engagement that is necessarily shaped by our purposes, our categories, our experiences and our conceptions.[38] '[N]ormal functioning', Merleau-Ponty observes, 'must be understood as a process of integration in which the text of the external world is not so much copied, as composed'.[39]

It does not follow that anything goes. That would be to 'pass from absolute objectivity to absolute subjectivity, but this second idea is no better than the first and is upheld only against it, which means by it'.[40] Arendt quotes Nietzsche in *Twilight of Idols*: 'We have abolished the true world. What has remained? The apparent one perhaps? Oh no! With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one'. She explains that Nietzsche is not denying the true world, but rather rejecting the conceptual scheme – 'the whole framework of references' – that orients our thinking.[41] The next step is not nihilism, but an *overcoming* of nihilism.[42] (Arendt, as we shall see, does not take this step.) Truth is made *in*, *of*, and *through* a world that is both plastic to and recalcitrant to our actions. (Consider global warming. Our greenhouse gases are changing the physical and social world. One can deny the phenomenon, but one cannot wish it away.)

It has been said that, for Arendt, 'everything human is contingent' and that 'for better or worse' man is, in a phrase credited to Merleau-Ponty, 'the dwelling place of the contingent'.[43] It is unlikely, however, that Arendt and Merleau-Ponty would have understood this remark in the same way. For Arendt, contingency means just that things 'could always have been otherwise'.[44] What is internal for Arendt is – paradoxically – a solitary or imaginative form of intersubjectivity: The standpoint of truth, she says, 'is one of the various modes of being alone' such as 'the solitude of the philosopher' and 'the isolation of the scientist and the artist'.[45] Within the space of thought, she explains, I make 'present to my mind the standpoint of those who are absent'.

> Hence, even if I shun all company or am completely isolated while forming an opinion, I am not simply together only with myself in the solitude of philosophical thought; I remain in the world of universal interdependence, where I can make myself the representative of everybody else.[46]

Thought, for Arendt, is a solitary endeavor that depends on a community of *imagined* others – that is, interlocutors who are only represented in consciousness.

When Merleau-Ponty says that 'man is the dwelling place of the contingent', he means that the contingent dwells *in us*. 'Society for man is not an accident he suffers but a dimension of his being. He is not in society as an object is in a box; rather, he assumes it by what is innermost in him'.[47] The idea of a solitary thinker is, for him, just a theoretical construct.

> [I]f we could really cut the *solus ipse* off from others and from Nature. . . , there would be fully preserved, in this fragment of the whole which alone was left, the references to the whole it is composed of. In short, we still would not have the *solus ipse*.[48]

Because we are fashioned in our interactions with our physical and social world, we always already contain those experiences and relationships within us as sedimentations or imaginative abstractions of those interactions.[49] We are, in a word, situated. Existing social practices and conditions are neither mere context nor representations in consciousness. Rather, they form both the grounds of intelligibility for and the horizons of our

world.[50] 'The past', as Michelman says, 'is constitutively present in and for every self as language, culture, worldview, and political memory'.[51]

Contingency, for Merleau-Ponty, thus has a double meaning. It still connotes 'the idea of a fundamental element of chance in history'.[52] But, it also bears the additional sense of being dependent or conditional.[53] When Merleau-Ponty says that '[t]oday a humanism . . . begins by becoming aware of contingency',[54] he is calling on us to recognize that language, history and culture make us who we are. 'Since we are all hemmed in by history, it is up to us to understand that whatever truth we may have is to be gotten not in spite of but through our historical inherence'.[55] The contingent is foundational *for us*.[56]

This changes our conception of truth. Once I have recognized that it is only through history that knowledge 'can have a meaning for me, . . . my contact with the social in the finitude of my situation is revealed to me as the point of origin of all truth, including scientific truth'.[57] Science is not only an answer to questions posed by humans, it emerges from and is shaped by various social processes and products: scientific methods and mores; prevailing theoretical frameworks; and emerging technology (the electron microscope, the particle accelerator, CRISPR design tools) that create new pathways for inquiry. Science for the most part has the advantage of being able to 'prove' itself in action.[58] (Rockets have to fly, after all.) But truth historicized in this way is not always subject to direct confirmation. We can appeal only to the conventional criteria of comprehensiveness, elegance or parsimony, and pragmatic usefulness. (Not surprisingly, the kind of criteria already invoked by science.) There is no absolute standard by which truth can be adjudicated: We can imagine a God's-eye point of view, but we cannot step outside our own heads to attain it.[59]

This leaves much in doubt because more than one explanation of events is often possible. Epistemic pluralism of this sort is a consequence of the pragmatic, situated quality of meaning. Scientific method (like any methodology) makes it easier to tackle a problem or organize data because it foregrounds those elements that are most relevant to the job at hand, relegating to the background the welter of other details. But in simplifying a task to make it more manageable, one may also be falsifying it – that is, omitting factors that actually matter. This insight underlies Kuhn's observation that science progresses not by achieving better and better descriptions of reality, but rather by shifts in scientific paradigms that better solve the problems at hand.[60] Because scientific formalizations simplify in just this way, more than one method or theory may actually work (and, in that sense, be 'true').

Arendt makes the point about epistemic pluralism with respect to Marx's theory of history which, she says, mistook a pattern for meaning. Once one recognizes that theories are partial in the way they highlight and interpret data, it follows that more than one pattern or historical theory may account for the past in equally satisfying or persuasive ways.

Arendt, however, totalizes this insight: For her, there is 'almost no pattern into which the events of the past would not have fitted as neatly and consistently as they did his own'.[61] In response to Heisenberg's insight that science is always the answer to a human question, Arendt raises the same nihilistic worry that if there is no question that can lead to 'a consistent set of answers', then the 'very distinction between meaningful and

meaningless questions would disappear together with absolute truth'. If truth is made, then 'we can take almost any hypothesis and *act* upon it, with a sequence of results in reality which not only make sense but *work*'.[62]

This anxiety is an artifact Arendt's all-or-nothing thinking. 'The frightening arbitrariness', she admits, 'is the exact counterpart of consistent logical processes'.[63] To understand contingency as the situated quality of human endeavor, in contrast, is to change the table of possibilities. To be situated – that is, to be mortal – is to face limits.[64] If it were true that anything goes, our situation would not *be* a situation; it would be an irrelevance. Our situation shapes the questions we may pose and constrains the answers we can find.[65] The situated thus comprises (or sublates) the necessary and the contingent.[66] One may, for example, doubt the efficacy of vaccines; one can believe in the superiority of natural immunity or that vaccines cause all sorts of imagined harms. But the microscopic world is not pliant to these beliefs. The measles outbreak in 2019 and the shocking reemergence of paralytic polio in the United States in 2022 show that one cannot make just anything work.[67] Our best guide to action remains the very human enterprise of science with its measures of statistical significance and confirmation through experimentation.

If Arendt's anxiety is overstated, so too is her strong opposition between fact and opinion. 'Facts', she says, 'are beyond agreement and consent'.[68] But with only fallible human processes to establish them, facts stand in need of testing and debate. The paradigm-dependence of scientific and historical data means that: 'Facts all come with points of view'.[69] Facts are neither peremptory nor 'mere opinion'. They require critical inquiry and rigorous discussion.

We live in the space between fact and fiction. For those seeking power or profit, the temptation to exploit this state of undecidability is strong. It is easy to pitch a story to common-sense assumptions, to tell partial truths, or to attack the credibility of scientific or other technical experts. A humanized conception of truth names, rather than resolves, the predicament of truth in the political sphere. The question of truth unavoidably rests with us. It is, as we shall see, a matter of what we owe to one another.

Truth or consequences

If democracy were just a matter of aggregating preferences through voting, the question of truth would be less pressing. A voter who misrepresents her preferences might mislead others, but she would be undermining her own desired outcomes. Candidates might misrepresent their true beliefs to get elected, but as long as they govern in a manner consistent with those stated positions – that is, consistent the preferences of a majority of their constituents – democracy would work smoothly enough. Of course, candidates may say one thing to get elected and act inconsistently once in power. If officials could misrepresent with impunity – that is, if the system lacked transparency and accountability – it would undermine self-governance. But, as long as such behavior is public knowledge, voters could remove that representative at the next election. Democracy would be largely self-correcting. Misinformation *about* other candidates would remain a real, if inevitable problem. But, on this bare-bones view of democracy, the only

critical problem (unfortunately, no longer hypothetical) would be misrepresentations that undermine the integrity and legitimacy of the electoral system itself.

The picture changes if we take a more meaningful view of democracy as self-governance understood as Lincoln's 'government of the people, by the people, for the people'.[70] To be self-governing, citizens need accurate information to respond to the problems they face and decide how best to organize various aspects of their life together. False or misleading information will cause practical, psychological and dignitary harms that directly undermine democracy. Suppose citizens face a concrete problem such as a power grid failure during a winter storm that causes widespread suffering and more than two-hundred deaths. They are told by authorities that the power grid failure was caused by frozen wind turbines; in fact, it was the result of a failure to winterize the natural gas infrastructure.[71] If citizens vote to replace or repair the wind turbines, their attempt at self-rule will have been frustrated. The next bout of extreme winter weather may cause the system to fail again, leading to more death and suffering. In that case – in addition to the needless misery – citizens would also risk demoralization. The danger is that they may come to feel that their well-being is beyond their control. The autonomy that is the very point of democratic self-rule – that is, the people's capacity to exercise authority with respect to their fate – will have been nullified.

Mistake, of course, is always a possibility. The failure of the power grid may have been caused by multiple factors. The citizens might make an informed decision that never-theless fails because the good-faith information they received was mistaken or incomplete. Demoralization would still be a possibility. But it would be a temporary consequence of the adversity to which all human initiative is subject. A resilient polity would learn from its mistakes and, informed by experience, try again. To paraphrase Justice Holmes: Democracy is an experiment, as all life is an experiment.[72] The practical harms would be the same; but, in the absence of systematic misinformation, the danger of demoralization could be overcome. The psychological and dignitary concerns can be met by a subsequent, successful exercise of self-governance.

The picture is different when the problem is not mistake, but misinformation. Misrepresentation by a government official (perhaps influenced by ideological or partisan considerations) abrogates government 'of the people' by severing the link between the represented and their representatives. It compromises government 'by the people' because it precludes the decision the people would have made had they been given accurate information. Beyond feelings of helplessness and frustration, citizens may also feel disillusionment with or a sense of having been betrayed by a government that does not respond to their concerns. (With adequate transparency, of course, citizens can remove the offending official at the next election.) The situation is worse still if the misinformation comes from a self-interested third party such as the fossil-fuel industry. In addition to the practical, psychological and dignitary harms, democracy will have been hijacked for private gain. Government 'for the people' will have been thwarted.

To summarize, misinformation undermines democratic self-governance by perverting the process of democratic decision-making, subverting the relationship between citizens and their agents, and coopting collective action for private benefit or profit. Whatever

accountability might come through the democratic process will depend entirely on the subsequent availability of better, more accurate information.

Democracy and distrust

Mistake, misinformation and misrepresentation all have effects on democracy that can be mitigated to various degrees by transparency and accountability. A lie strikes at the heart of democracy in a different, more profound way.

A lie is something more (and sometimes less) than a falsehood. Asked to *define* a lie, most English speakers say that a lie is a false statement. But, when asked to *identify* a statement as a lie, factual falsity is the least important of the three criteria that people use. Coleman and Kay found that 'falsity of belief is the most important element in the prototype of lie, intended deception the next most important element, and factual falsity the least important'.[73] They found, moreover, that 'subjects fairly easily and reliably assign the word lie to reported speech acts in a more-or-less, rather than an all-or-none fashion' and that they 'agree fairly generally on the relative weights of the elements'.[74]

The social understanding of lie reflects a series of assumptions captured by H.P. Grice's pragmatics of ordinary discourse.[75] His cooperative principle highlights the feature of conversation in which the participants assume they are engaged in the same purposive interaction. Grice identified four correlates: the maxims of (1) *quantity* – make your contribution as informative as is required for current purposes, but not more informative than required; (2) *quality* – do not say something you believe to be false or for which you lack adequate evidence; (2) *relation* – be relevant; and (4) *manner* – be clear, brief and orderly.[76] The concept of lie is understood relative to the default expectation that conversation typically involves an intention to be helpful – that is, by efficiently sharing necessary, relevant information. Since (under ordinary circumstances) only truthful information is helpful, the listener assumes that his or her interlocutor has – according to the maxim of quality – sufficient evidence or reason to believe the accuracy of his or her own statement. A lie, then, is a statement the speaker does not believe to be true. Falsity of belief entails intent to deceive – that is, a breach of the fundamental normative assumption of intention to be helpful (Grice's cooperative principle).

Factual falsity is the least important, but most interesting of the elements of lying. On one hand, factually false statements will be assessed differently depending on the frame of reference or social context: They may be jokes, fiction, tall tales, social lies, white lies, exaggerations, or fantasies.[77] In the first three cases, the speaker and listener are operating within a frame that assumes other purposes for the communication – humor or entertainment, for example. Similarly, the term social lie assumes a frame of communication in which politeness is more helpful than information. White lie assumes a frame in which the informational condition is generally applicable, but where the information being conveyed is of no particular importance. Exaggerations or fantasies assume that, although the conversational norm of helpfulness is relevant, the informational condition is not. The speaker's belief may be deluded or overblown, but the listener is not relying on it for relevant or accurate information.[78]

On the other hand, factual falsity is not necessary to the intersubjective and normative quality of a lie. Suppose that in casual conversation I insist to you that 2 + 2 = 4 is a universal truth, applicable everywhere and always. You know from the earlier section, *Between fact and fiction,* that I do not believe this. Without some qualifier marking an alternative frame of discourse (such as 'assume *arguendo*'), you would be suspicious of my motives and worry whether I was trying to manipulate or deceive you; indeed, you would do so even if *you* believe that 2 + 2 = 4 is a universal. The relation between truth and trust is reciprocal. A lie undermines trust; truthful communication and shared information build trust between interlocutors. But there is, too, a constitutive relation between truth and trust. Because most of what we know is a matter of having adequate reasons for belief rather than first-hand knowledge, trust is necessary to truth. We depend on our interlocutors to share with us only what they believe true. Truth, in short, is an ethical relation.

What distinguishes a lie from misinformation, then, is that a lie expresses disregard or disrespect toward its audience. But democracy requires mutual regard and respect. To understand why, consider what separates democracy from other forms of social ordering.

There are many modes of social ordering that are more-or-less effective. But we judge them not merely on how well they provide various social goods, but also on the degree to which they realize ethical values such as justice and respect for human dignity. If democracy were just about aggregating the preferences of autonomous individuals, the lack of regard for one another might not matter (any more than it does in anonymous markets). But, as Arendt says, 'freedom is possible only among equals'.[79] This is true for two reasons: one positive, the other negative.

The positive reason is that, without a commitment to equal dignity and respect, freedom is impossible. In a social world of complex problems and competing interests – what Arendt calls the condition of plurality – complete individual autonomy is not feasible.[80] We necessarily engage with others in an ongoing scheme of social life. If freedom is understood in positive terms as consisting in the active function of exercising control over one's fate, then it requires political association and collective action. Only a collectivity 'mutually bound by promises' and 'an agreed purpose' have 'the capacity to dispose of the future as though it were the present, that is, the enormous and truly miraculous enlargement of the very dimension in which power can be effective'.[81]

Conversely, without a commitment to equal dignity and respect, freedom understood as self-governance is impossible. Those with the ability to do so have every reason to engage in strategic action to implement their strongly held preferences. In doing so, they would necessarily compromise the self-governance of their fellow citizens. The result would be a form of oligarchy in which some citizens are dominated by others. In other words, democratic collective action would hardly be *self*-government unless everyone had an equal say.[82] Democracy, then, is a mode of coordination between self-governing citizens who share authority over social life under conditions of mutual recognition and respect.

Democracy, like truth, is an ethical relation. A political lie undermines democratic self-government in the same way that lying undermines communication: In the place of

cooperation and respect, it substitutes manipulation and disregard for one's fellow citizens.

The politics of our era has increasingly become a no-holds-barred, us-versus-them struggle. Truth is the first casualty, but not the ultimate one. Deliberate misinformation is a strategic weapon used to dominate others by disorienting or gaslighting them with a blizzard of half-truths, distortions and outright fabrications. The proliferation of social media and the emergence of separate news silos are not the cause of these problems, but rather symptoms of our political dysfunction and vehicles of its reproduction. Social fragmentation and consequent political polarization have destroyed the common ground and sense of common interests that constitute a 'public' as such.[83] When the opposing sides demonize each other, neither communication nor collective governance is possible. One cannot, as Arendt says,[84] 'speak in such a way that the truth of one's opinion reveals itself to oneself and to others' when no one cares and no one is listening. The problem is not that we have lost sight of truth, but that we have lost sight of one another.

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Notes

1. Twain (2009:140).
2. Byron (2004: 496) (Canto XIV ¶101) ("'Tis strange, but true, for truth is always strange,/ Stranger than fiction. If it could be told').
3. Arendt (2006: 227). Arendt twice articulates the suspicion that 'it may be in the nature of the political realm to deny or pervert truth of every kind'. Arendt (2006: 233, 235).
4. Arendt (2006: 247).
5. Arendt (2006: 241).
6. Arendt (2006: 236–37) ('debate constitutes the very essence of political life' and must 'take into account other people's opinions').
7. Arendt (2006: 236–37).

8. Arendt (2006: 239–40); *see also* Arendt (1990: 78) ('As soon as the philosopher submitted his truth, the reflection of the eternal, to the polis, it became immediately an opinion among opinions'.)
9. Arendt (2006: 239).
10. Arendt (2006: 241–42).
11. Arendt (2006: 242).
12. Arendt (2006: 250–53). As Bufacchi (2021: 349) explains, the aim of 'Post-Truth' is 'to undermine the theoretical infrastructure that makes it possible to have a conversation about the truth'.
13. Arendt (2006: 252). This is particularly evident in authoritarian regimes: 'The experience of trembling wobbling motion of everything we rely on for our sense of direction and reality is among the most common and most vivid experiences of men under totalitarian rule'. Arendt (2006: 253). *See also* Arendt (1973: 382) ('one could make people believe the most fantastic statements one day, and trust that if the next day they were given irrefutable proof of their falsehood they would take refuge in cynicism').
14. Arendt (2006: 226, 248). Indeed, one of consistent delights of Arendt's work is the insightful way in which she situates various high-order concepts – such as history, science, or antisemitism – in historical context and shows their dramatic changes in meaning over time.
15. Arendt disregards 'the question of what truth is' and 'is content to take the term in the sense in which men commonly understand it'. Arendt (2006: 227). The Arendt essay was originally published in the New Yorker, Bufacchi (2021), which arguably explains its more conventional stance. For an examination of the issue of truth in politics from within the same analytic framework, see Sari (2018). I read earlier drafts of that paper; this piece is in a sense a reflection on and response to that more conventional framework.
16. Arendt (2006: 233, 234, 254).
17. Winter (2011: 1137–38); Sherwin (2022).
18. McIntyre (2018: 117).
19. On the loss of common sense and its causes, see Luban (2021).
20. Read (2018) (discussing the internet).
21. McIntyre (2018: 123–50) succumbs to this most conventional error in naming postmodernism as a 'cause' of our 'fake news' ecosystem .
22. Byron (2004: 496) (Canto XIV ¶101) ('for truth is always strange,/ Stranger than fiction. If it could be told,/ How much would novels gain by the exchange!/ How differently the world would men behold!/ How oft would vice and virtue places change!/ The new world would be nothing to the old,/ If some Columbus of the moral seas/ Would show mankind their souls' antipodes'.).
23. Melville (1962: 101).
24. Melville (1962: 75–76).
25. Winter (2004: 2491). Melville leaves little doubt of the allusion to Lemuel Shaw when he describes the outward show of respectability and austerity of the depraved character: 'It never allows wine to get within its guard'. Melville (1962: 75). The reference is to *Proverbs* 31: 4–7, which reads: 'It is not for kings, O Lemuel,/ it is not for kings to drink wine;/ . . . Lest they drink, and forget the law,/ and pervert the judgment of any of the afflicted'.

26. Tractate *Yevamos* 114b. Conversely, the Talmud says that if, in a time of war, she says that he died peacefully in his bed she is to be believed.

27. Sinai (2008: 151–53). Similarly, a craftsman in possession who claims that a higher fee was promised is believed when he could have claimed successfully that he obtained the goods via purchase. Tractate *Bava Basra* 45b-46. As Sinai (2008: 116-17) explains, 'the *migo* doctrine encourages litigants to make truthful factual statements'. *But see* Broyde (2007: 75–76 n.10) (characterizing *migo* as a fictitious pleading device).

28. Orwell (1981: 167).

29. I say 'apparent' because Arendt (2006: 257–58) concludes with an account that focuses on social meaning rather than simplistic truth.

30. OED online at https://www-oed-com.proxy.lib.wayne.edu/view/Entry/67478?rskey=ve6NSJ&result1#eid and https://www-oed-com.proxy.lib.wayne.edu/view/Entry/69828?rskey=4hXkQ3&result=1#eid

31. Edelman (1989: 49–54). *Cf.* Merleau-Ponty (1962: 215) ('since sensation is a reconstitution, it presupposes in me sediments left behind by some previous constitution, so that I am, as a sentient subject, a repository stocked with natural powers at which I am the first to be filled with wonder').

32. Putnam (1981: xi).

33. Goodman (1978: 2–3). *See also* Putnam (1981: 54) ('there are [no] inputs *which are not themselves to some extent shaped by our concepts,* by the vocabulary we use to report and describe them, or any inputs *which admit of only one description, independent of all conceptual choices*').

34. Arendt (2006: 48–49) (discussing Heisenberg).

35. Arendt (2006: 236).

36. In the chapter on history, Arendt quotes Vico's observation that: 'Mathematical matter we can prove because we ourselves have made them. . . .' Arendt (2006: 57).

37. Kuhn (1970: 188–89) makes a similar point with respect to Newton's Second Law of Motion: $f = ma$.

38. Lakoff & Johnson (1980: 164) ('In making a true statement, we have to choose categories of description, and that choice involves our perceptions and our purposes in the given situation'.)

39. Merleau-Ponty (1962: 9).

40. Merleau-Ponty (1962: 39). *See* Winter (2001: 11, 56–64) describing this phenomenon as 'antinomial capture'.

41. Arendt (1971: 420–21 n.4), *quoting* Nietzsche (1968: 41).

42. Constable (2005: 34–43).

43. Kohn (2000: 114). In *Signs*, Merleau-Ponty says that man 'is the place of contingency'. Merleau-Ponty (1964a: 240).

44. Arendt (2006: 238, 247).

45. Arendt (2006: 255). For Socrates, thinking is a 'dialogue of solitude in which I am strictly by myself'. Arendt (1990: 88). The philosopher's thought 'is characterized by Plato as a silent dialogue with himself'. Arendt (2006: 240).

46. Arendt (2006: 237). *See also* Arendt (2006: 230), quoting Kant's statement that 'we think, as it were, in community with others to whom we communicate our thoughts as they communicate theirs to us'.

47. Merleau-Ponty (1964b: 128–29).
48. Merleau-Ponty (1964a: 173–74) (discussing Husserl).
49. 'The world, which I distinguished from myself . . . , I rediscover "in me" as the permanent horizon of all my *cogitationes* and as a dimension in relation to which I am constantly situating myself'. Merleau-Ponty (1962: xiii). Following Husserl, Merleau-Ponty refers to these internalizations as sedimentations. Merleau-Ponty (1964a: 91–92); Merleau-Ponty (1962: 129–30). *See* Husserl (1970: 52) (describing sedimentation as the presuppositions of our constructions, concepts, propositions and theories). But, for Merleau-Ponty, many of these sedimentations are preserved in the material world: 'The spirit of a society is realized, transmitted and perceived through the cultural objects which it bestows upon itself and in the midst of which it lives. It is there that the deposit of its practical categories is built up, and these categories in tum suggest a way of being and thinking to men'. Merleau-Ponty (1964a: 245). *See also* Whiteside (1988: 75).
50. Merleau-Ponty (1962: xiii) ('we are through and through compounded of relationships with the world').
51. Michelman (1988: 1513) (describing the persuasive basis of republican constitutional dialogue).
52. Merleau-Ponty (1964a: 218).
53. The OED (definition 8) gives this sense as: 'Dependent for its occurrence or character *on* or *upon* some prior occurrence or condition'. The word derives from the Latin *contingere* whose literal meaning is 'touching' or 'in contact with' and *contingentem* 'touching together or on all sides'. OED online at https://www-oed-com.proxy.lib.wayne.edu/view/Entry/40248?redirectedFrom=contingent#eid
54. Merleau-Ponty, (1964a: 241).
55. Merleau-Ponty, (1964a: 109). *See also* Arendt (2006: 68) ('To think, with Hegel, that truth resides and reveals itself in the time-process itself is characteristic of all modern historical consciousness, however it expresses itself, in specifically Hegelian terms or not'.).
56. Winter (1994: 238–41). To be clear, the claim is not that we are *determined* by history and culture just that we inevitably must think with them. Thus, Merleau observes that 'the human moment *par excellence*' is the one 'in which a life woven out of chance events turns back upon, regrasps, and expresses itself'. Merleau-Ponty (1964a: 240). As Richard Bernstein (1983: 204) puts it: 'To say that these social practices are radically contingent does not mean that they are arbitrary, if by this we mean we can somehow leap out of our historical situation and blithely accept other social practices. There is an effective-history that is always shaping what we are in the process of becoming'.
57. Merleau-Ponty (1964a: 109).
58. *See* Lyotard (1984: 56).
59. *See* Arendt (1990: 84–85) ('Absolute truth, which would be the same for all men and therefore unrelated, independent of each man's existence, cannot exist for mortals'.).
60. Kuhn (1970).
61. Arendt (2006: 81).
62. Arendt (2006: 87) (emphasis in original).
63. Arendt (2006: 87–88). One recognizes in this passage the 'Cartesian Anxiety' described by Richard Bernstein: 'Either there is some support for our being, a fixed foundation for our

knowledge, or we cannot escape the forces of darkness that envelop us with madness, with intellectual and moral chaos'. Bernstein (1983: 16–18). It is, as previously noted n.40 above, an artifact of antinomial capture.

64. Merleau-Ponty (1964a: 239). Merleau refers to this 'passive resistance' as 'adversity'. *See also* Merleau-Ponty (1964a: 218).

65. Kuhn's account of the history of science maintains a robust conception of reality. Otherwise, there could be no anomalies – the puzzles or results that don't fit a given paradigm – that destabilize a paradigm and lead to a scientific revolution. So, too, with respect to his more controversial claim about incommensurability. As he insisted: 'Again, that is not to say that they can see anything they please. Both are looking at the world, and what they look at has not changed. But in some areas they see different things, and they see them in different relations one to the other'. Kuhn (1970: 150).

66. Kruks (1987: 239) describes this as the dialectical quality of situatedness: 'For Merleau-Ponty, however, my situation can both affirm and negate me; it is both the field of my freedom and a limit to my freedom'.

67. CDC (2019); Goldstein & Otterman (2022).

68. Arendt (2006: 236). But compare her statement that one ought 'to see in every *doxa* truth and to speak in such a way that the truth of one's opinion reveals itself to oneself and to others'. Arendt (1990: 84–85).

69. Byrne & Eno (1980).

70. For elaborations of this view of democracy, its normative basis and entailments, see Winter (2021) and Winter (2012).

71. Penny (2021).

72. *Abrams,* 250 U.S. at 630 (Holmes, J. dissenting) ('[T]he best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market, and that truth is the only ground upon which their wishes safely can be carried out. That at any rate is the theory of our Constitution. It is an experiment, as all life is an experiment'.).

73. Coleman & Kay (1981: 43).

74. Coleman & Kay (1981: 43). These findings have been corroborated across different languages with minor cultural variations with respect to which untrue statements are accepted as within the norms of acceptable social lies. Hardin (2010); Cole (1966); Sweetser (1987: 59–62). But this configuration of social values about truth-telling is not universal. *See*, for example, Danzinger (2010).

75. Grice (1975). *See also* Sweetser (1987); Winter (2001: 297–308).

76. Grice (1975: 45–46).

77. Not only do these concepts embody an entire infrastructure of social experience and knowledge, but they represent a highly nuanced set of normative assessments of the ethics of each of these varied speech acts.

78. Within conventional political discourse, exaggerations, evasions, and 'spin' were understood as inevitable aspects of political speech, frustrating but usually tolerated. The consequences change dramatically, however, when spin crosses over into misinformation, lies and conspiracy theories.

79. Arendt (2006: 242). *See also* Patočka (1996: 142–48) (describing freedom as 'something to be *carried out*' that is possible 'only in a *community* of equals').

80. As Arendt (1998: 234) explains, 'the ideal of uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastership, is contradictory to the very condition of plurality'.
81. Arendt (1998: 245).
82. Winter (2021: 660) *quoting* de Tocqueville (1988: 503) ('men will be perfectly free because they are entirely equal, and they will be perfectly equal because they are entirely free'.).
83. Dewey (2016).
84. Arendt (1990: 84–85).

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