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Pseudology: Derrida on Arendt and Lying in Politics

Please note: this is a working paper only.

In 1993, Jacques Derrida was invited to participate in a lecture series at the New School dedicated to the memory of Hannah Arendt, who was closely associated with the school during much of her American exile. As far as I know, the talk that resulted was the only sustained attempt by Derrida to address and draw on Arendt's work. Entitled "History of the Lie: Prolegomena," it was published in several places, most recently in the collection edited by Peggy Kamuf called Without Alibi.¹ The texts he discusses at length are Arendt's essays of 1967 and 1971, "Truth in Politics" and "'Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers."² Derrida masterfully situates Arendt's reflections in a long tradition of philosophical

¹ Jacques Derrida, Without Alibi, ed. and trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, 2002). Earlier versions appeared in Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal, IX,2 and XX, 1 and Futures of Jacques Derrida, ed., Richard Rand (Stanford, 2001).

² Hannah Arendt, "Truth in Politics," in Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought (New York, 1968) [the citation in Without Alibi misdates it in the 1961 collection, before the essay was added to the expanded 1968 edition], and The Portable Hannah Arendt, ed. Peter Baehr (New York, 2000), from which the following quotations are taken, and "Lying in Politics," Crises of the Republic (New York, 1969). For my own assessment of Arendt's thoughts on these issues, see "The Ambivalent Virtues of Mendacity: How Europeans Taught (Some of) Us to Learn the Love the Lies of Politics," The Humanities and the Dynamics of Inclusion Since World War II, ed., David A. Hollinger (Baltimore, 2006).

ruminations on lying, which he calls “pseudology.”³ Plato’s Hippias Minor, Augustine’s De mendacio and Contra mendacium, Montaigne’s “On Liars,” Rousseau’s Reveries of the Solitary Walker, Kant’s “On the Supposed Right to Lie Because of Philanthropic Concerns,” even Alexandre Koyré’s “The Political Function of the Modern Lie” are all brought to bear on the crucial questions raised by Arendt: what is the role of lying in politics and does that role have a history?

As the title suggests, Derrida claims that his remarks were nothing but prolegomena to a more sustained treatment, which, alas, he never attempted to complete. He admits with his characteristic coyness that “I will not say everything, nor even the essential part of what I may think about a history of the lie...I will not say the whole truth of what I think.”⁴ One of the other essays in Without Alibi, “Le Parjure,” *Perhaps: Storytelling and Lying*,” returns, however, to the question of lying and perjury, this time stimulated by Henri Thomas’ novel-play Le Parjure, which contains in it a novel called Hölderlin in America. The latter, Paul de Man confessed to Derrida, was a roman à clef paralleling his own checkered personal past, about which he had publicly lied. In yet another attempt to defend his friend against accusations of disingenuously denying his dubious political past, Derrida draws on J. Hillis Miller’s essay “The Anacoluthonic Lie,” which explores the implications of an internal narrative doubling, a resistance to following a

³ Derrida, Without Alibi, p. 32.

⁴ Ibid., p. 38.

single syntactic track, in Proust (the rhetorical trope of anacoluthon means a sudden change of syntax in a sentence, as often in stream-of-conscious writing). No straightforward confession, Derrida implies, can avoid the ambivalence of the anacoluthonic lie.

The plausibility of this defense of DeMan is not at issue here, although it would be hard to find it entirely satisfactory. What is important to note for our purposes is that the second essay in Without Alibi adds little to the core arguments of "History of the Lie," and touches only fleetingly on politics in a final observation about Bill Clinton's perjury and his own private scandal. It does not work through in a sustained fashion the issues raised in the earlier essay about lying in politics. And although Derrida returned to the related question of secrecy in A Taste for the Secret,⁵ here too not much was added to his earlier tentative ruminations on Arendt's questions.

If underdeveloped, "The History of the Lie" is still a rich text, far more than a mere prolegomenon, and opens up a number of important new lines of inquiry into the issues it treats. I want to ask your indulgence as I rehearse at some length its complicated and often convoluted reasoning. Whether or not it is fully fair to Arendt's own argument is a question I will address at the end of this paper. The essay opens with what Derrida calls

⁵ Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, A Taste for the Secret, ed. Giacomo Donis and David Webb, trans. Giacomo Donis (Malden, Mass., 2001). Here he confesses "I have a taste for the secret, it clearly has to do with not-belonging; I have an impulse of fear or terror in the face of a political space, for example, a public space that makes no room for the secret. For me, the demand that everything be paraded in the public square and that there be no internal forum is a glaring sign of the totalitarianization of democracy." (p. 59). He also developed an argument about Kant's discussion of secrets in The Politics of Friendship.

two confessions or concessions—for some unexplained reason, he can't seem to decide between these terms--which he claims with no apparent irony are "sincere," even if they deal with fable, phantasm and specters. He thus cloaks himself in the mantle of a truth-teller, what the Greeks would call a parrhesiast, to borrow the term Michel Foucault adopted for himself near the end of his life.⁶ The first confession/concession is that his title is a play on Nietzsche's "History of an Error," from Twilight of the Idols. Contrary to Nietzsche, however, Derrida claims he wants to maintain a strict distinction between the concept of error and that of lie. Whereas errors are mistakes about the truth of what actually is, including the ontological claim to know that such a truth exists, lies are deliberate, subjective attempts to mislead. They have therefore what Derrida calls an "irreducibly ethical dimension....where the phenomenon of the lie as such is intrinsically foreign to the problem of knowledge, truth, the true and the false....One can be in error or mistaken without trying to deceive and therefore without lying."⁷ Lying, as Aristotle pointed out in his critique of the overly capacious and vague treatment of the idea of pseudos in Plato's Hippias Minor, is only understandable as an intentional act, not one that merely gets the truth wrong. And it is an act with profound ethical implications, as Augustine had understood. "The lie is not a fact or a state, it is an intentional act, a lying.

⁶ Michel Foucault, Fearless Speech, ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles, 2001). The metaphor of being cloaked in a mantle suggests, of course, the covering over of something beneath, some more basic truth about a person. For a consideration of this issue, see John Vignaux Smyth, The Habit of Lying: Sacrificial Studies in Literature, Philosophy, and Fashion Theory (Durham, 2002).

⁷ Derrida, Without Alibi, p. 29.

There is not the lie, but rather this saying or this meaning-to-say that is called lying.”⁸ Thus Nietzsche’s attempt to look at truth and lying in an entirely “extramoral sense” was doomed to fail.

But having seemingly established a radical distinction between a constative statement, which is true or false, and the performative act of lying with all its ethical implications, Derrida, as might be expected, then proceeds to undo the distinction. “The lie,” he writes, “includes a manifestation of the performative type, since it implies a promise of truth where it betrays it, and since it also aims to create an event, to produce an effect of belief where there is nothing to state or at least where nothing is exhausted in a statement. But, simultaneously, this performativity implies references to values of reality, truth, and falsity that are presumed not to depend on performative decision.”⁹ Thus, unlike purely performative speech acts such as religious prayer, lying has some irreducible link with the truth, with what we may call “what is in fact the case.” Truthfulness and the truth cannot be entirely disassociated, even if they cannot be equated either.

The strongest, most direct version of mendacity, based on the conscious intention of the speaker to deceive the listener about what the former truly believes, is what Derrida calls the “frank concept of the lie,” which “delimits a prevalent concept in our culture...because no ethics, no law

⁸ Ibid., p. 34.

⁹ Ibid., p. 37. He repeats this point in “Le Parjure.” Perhaps,” where he approvingly cites J. Hillis Miller’s essay “The Anacoluthonic Lie:” “contrary to what seems common sense, a lie is a performative, not a constative, form of language. Or, rather, it mixes inextricably constative and performative language.” (p. 169).

or right, no politics could long withstand, precisely in our culture, its pure and simple disappearance."¹⁰ There are, to be sure, more indirect versions, such as silent dissimulation or non-verbal behavior designed to deceive—the example he gives is fake orgasmic ecstasy—but Derrida's focus is on the frank lie, a decision that will influence, as we will see, his critique of the concept of self-deception.

The history of the concept of lying is tied up, Derrida then adds, with the history of the actual practice of lying. Both are themselves dependent in turn on the possibility of our narrating a true history of their development. "How is one to dissociate or alternate these three tasks?" he wonders out loud, but doesn't pause to provide an answer, lamely saying only that "we must not ever overlook this difficulty."¹¹ But plunging on anyway without attempting to resolve it, he then makes his second confession/concession, to which I've already alluded: that he won't, after all, be telling us all he thinks about the question of lying, or certainly not the whole truth of what he thinks. "Does this mean that I have lied to you?" he asks teasingly? "I leave this question suspended, at least until the discussion period and doubtless beyond that." With the uncertainty of his own candor, his own status as a parrhesiast, now hanging tantalizingly in the air, Derrida then provides what he calls two epigraphs to his prolegomenon: one touching on the historicity of lying, the other on the sacredness of truth. The first is from Hannah

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 37.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 38.

Arendt's essay "Truth and Lying," and establishes the intimate, perennial connection between politics and lying, the second is from the philosopher Reiner Schürmann's Heidegger on Being and Anarchy and links the concept of the sacred both to an originary moment, which is historical, and a contrary moment of presencing, which is outside of history. The duty one has to avoid lying, according to Augustine and Kant, is a "sacred imperative" in this dual sense. Precisely what constitutes its sacred quality Derrida does not really elaborate, however, nor does he tell us how much he shares this religious conception of truth (if at all).

Derrida turns instead to Arendt's essays, which help him formulate a rough historical narrative based on what he calls a "mutation" in both the concept and practice of lying. That mutation involves the development in "our modernity" of the lie's attainment of its extreme limit, "a hyperbolic growth of the lie, its hypertrophy, its passage to the extreme, in short the absolute lie: not absolute knowledge as the end of history, but history as conversion to the absolute lie."¹² Derrida expresses, however, some skepticism about how absolute the lie can ever be, insofar as the liar must himself know the truth in order to conceal it. As Socrates had known, there is a link between knowledge, self-consciousness and the capacity to lie. "If it must operate in consciousness and in its concept," he warns, "then the absolute lie of which Arendt speaks risks being once again the other face of

¹² Ibid., p. 40.

absolute knowledge,"¹³ which he clearly disdains as a philosophical fantasy. Still, Derrida remains with Arendt's distinction between premodern and modern lying. Whereas the former is based on the hiding of a truth that is known, the latter involves the very destruction of the reality to which the lie refers. That is, the modern period is based on the substitution of simulacra "all the way down" for a belief in a reality that exists and can then be hidden (an argument perhaps most widely identified with Jean Baudrillard, although Derrida doesn't mention his name). "Because the image-substitute no longer refers to an original, not even to a flattering representation of an original, but replaces it advantageously, thereby trading its status of representative for that of replacement, the process of the modern lie is no longer a dissimulation that comes along to veil the truth; rather it is the destruction of the reality or of the original archive."¹⁴ Derrida then contrasts Arendt's historical account of the lie, as broad as it is, with Kant's very different, totally non-historical critique of it as an unconditional evil that must be opposed at all costs. Here the sacredness of the commandment always to tell the truth is evoked, with no considerations of consequences or allowance for mitigating factors. Derrida is clearly not on Kant's side on this issue, preferring the alternative position of his countryman Benjamin Constant,

¹³ Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 42. In "Truth and Politics," Arendt puts it this way: "the difference between the traditional lie and the modern lie will more often than not amount to the difference between hiding and destroying." (p. 565).

who argued that all social relations would cease if lies were utterly banished as immoral.¹⁵

But rather than dwelling on his reasons, he turns to two examples to hammer home his larger point about the performative dimension of lying. The first concerns the reluctance of several French presidents to apologize officially for the crimes against humanity committed by the collaborationist Vichy regime in World War II. Derrida then claims that the concept of “crimes against humanity” was a performative invention not yet really in play when the acts were committed. But more importantly, he also argues that the very existence of all states are themselves the product of performatives, which create their legitimacy, their boundaries, and their responsibility for acts committed in their name. Successful performatives—he ups the ante by calling them “acts of performative violence”—create the law. “For better or worse, this performative dimension makes the truth, as Augustine says. It therefore imprints its irreducibly historical dimension on both veracity and the lie. This original ‘performative’ dimension is not taken thematically into account, it seems to me, by either Kant or Hannah Arendt.”¹⁶

In so arguing, Derrida may be passing too quickly from the insight that lies have a performative dimension to the conclusion that all performatives—

¹⁵ For a discussion of their debate, see Robert J. Benton, “Political Expediency and Lying: Kant vs. Benjamin Constant,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 43, 1 (January-March, 1982), which has all the relevant citations to the original texts.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

such as creating a state—are like lies. But he does catch himself and acknowledges the dangerous implication that could easily be drawn from the claim that performative speech acts, including lies, actually “make the truth,” for it opens up the possibility of rewriting history by falsifying past facts. Eye-witness testimony, he concedes, may never be sufficient to prove what happened; bearing witness to truth is not enough when it can be just as easily fabricated by lies. But he steps back from the full implications of this logic, whose outcome would be to countenance such abominations as Holocaust “revisionism.” Although he rejects the idea that states can themselves verify facts for all time or legislate the truth—thus providing a defense in advance for Holocaust-deniers like David Irving against being jailed by the Austrians—he struggles to provide an alternative. “Will this perversion be resisted by establishing by law a truth of state? Or rather, on the contrary, by reinstating—interminably if necessary, as I believe it will be—the discussion, the recalling of evidence and witnesses, the work and discipline of memory, the indisputable demonstration of an archive? An infinite task, no doubt, which must begin over and over again; but isn’t that the distinctive feature of a task, whatever it may be?”¹⁷

The second case study Derrida provides also takes off from the scandal over the French presidents’ delay in condemning Vichy complicity, but takes the argument a step further. It involves an article in the June 19, 1995 New

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 52. For a similar argument, albeit from a Habermasian perspective, see my response to Hayden White and Carlo Ginzburg, “Of Plots, Witnesses and Judgments,” in Saul Friedlander, ed., Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution” (Cambridge, Mass. 1992).

York Times by the NYU historian Tony Judt, which lambasted French intellectuals, Derrida included, for failing to condemn the lack of presidential condemnation. Settling scores with Judt, he notes that in fact in 1992, a petition by more than 200 primarily leftist intellectuals, including Derrida himself, did, in fact, call on President Mitterand to acknowledge and apologize for Vichy responsibility for persecuting Jews. Judt, Derrida concedes, did not tell a deliberate lie, but rather committed an error, which he would not have committed had he known the truth. But the reason he didn't pause to find it out, Derrida then charges, is that Judt was in a hurry to confirm his general thesis about the irresponsibility of French intellectuals, developed in his book Past Imperfect,¹⁸ which meant he was anxious to produce an "effect of truth." "What I want to underscore here," Derrida tells us, "is that this counter-truth does not belong to the category of either lie or ignorance or error, doubtless not even to the category of self-deception that Hannah Arendt talks about. It belongs to another order and is not reducible to any of the categories bequeathed to us by traditional thinking about the lie."¹⁹

But precisely what that different order might be Derrida does not pause to spell out, despite having spent so much time venting his spleen against Judt's transgression against the truth (and Derrida's own honor). Is it more than simply a tendentious inclination to believe what one wants to

¹⁸ Tony Judt, Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956 (Berkeley, 1992).

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 57.

believe without regard to contrary evidence? Giving us no help in resolving the problem, he turns instead to the vexed question of self-deception, which as we have noted, he thinks is problematic, at least from the perspective of lying as deliberate trickery. It is not precisely “bad faith” in Sartre’s well-known sense, but like the counter-truth uttered by Judt, it too requires its own unique logic, even another name: “it requires that one take into account both some mediatic, techno-performativity and a logic of the phantasma (which is to say, of the spectral) or of a symptomatology of the unconscious towards which the work of Hannah Arendt signals but which it never deploys, it seems to me, as such.”²⁰ That is, in the first case, it would require an exploration of modern technical media informed by an appreciation of the “hauntology,” the logic of ghostly traces that Derrida himself was developing around this time in Specters of Marx.²¹ In the second, it would necessitate a more extensive application of psychoanalytic theory than Arendt felt comfortable attempting. Whatever it might be, it was not to be confused with frank, intentional lying. Making sense of the question of self-deception is nonetheless important, he avers, because Arendt thought it was intricately tied up with the modern practice of lying in mass democracies, which did so much to prepare the way for the totalitarian absolute lie.

To grasp its importance, Derrida turns in the final section of his essay to the work of another émigré Alexander Koyré, whose 1943 “Reflexions sur

²⁰ Ibid., p. 57.

²¹ Jacques Derrida, Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York, 1994).

la mensonge," translated two years later as "The Political Function of the Modern Lie,"²² anticipated all the major Arendtian themes. Written at a time when the modern version of the lie seemed equivalent to totalitarian total lying, Koyré's essay raises the question of whether a condemnation of lying necessitates a recognition of a categorical distinction between truth and falsehood, which an overly eager deconstruction of binary oppositions threatens. "How can one conduct the deconstructive history of the opposition of veracity and lie," Derrida ponders, "without discrediting this opposition, without threatening the 'frankness' of a concept that must remain decidable, and without opening the door to all the perversions against which Koyré and Arendt will always have been right to warn us?"²³ But having acknowledged the danger, Derrida then backtracks and wonders if Koyré's categorical distinction may itself have a cost, which is to deny the very "possibility of institutive and performative speech (be it only testimony, which is always an act that implies a performative promise or oath and that constitutes the element, the medium of all language, including constative language)."²⁴ Veracity and lying, it must be understood, are "homogeneous with a testimonial problematic, and not at all with an epistemological one of true/false or proof."²⁵ Koyré, however, himself helps us to get beyond this dilemma when he notes that totalitarian leaders do not themselves challenge

²² Alexander Koyré, "The Political Function of the Modern Lie," The Contemporary Jewish Record, 8, 3 (June, 1945).

²³ Derrida, "History of the Lie: Prolegomena," p. 59.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 60.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 61.

the traditional view, based on a stable metaphysics, that lying should be understood in the latter context, that of truth and falsehood (or error). Rather, they maintain it, refusing to acknowledge the performative dimension of truth-telling, and simply reverse the hierarchy, believing in the “primacy of the lie”²⁶ or what is false or an error (not what is intended to be a deliberate act of lying). They accomplish this end in part by the perverse tactic of saying the truth while knowing that no one would take them seriously, what Arendt called a kind of conspiracy “in broad daylight.”

The idea of conspiracy introduces yet another important issue, which Koyré develops in a way Derrida finds questionable. That is, the former argues in a proto-Habermasian manner that secrecy of any kind is anathema to an open, transparent democratic polity, in which the public sphere is an arena for open discussion. “I wonder,” Derrida writes, “if we do not see here signs of the inverse perversion of politicism, of an absolute hegemony of political reason, of a limitless extension of the political. By refusing any right to secrecy, the political agency, most often in the figure of state sovereignty or even of reason of state, summons everyone to behave first of all and in every regard as a responsible citizen before the law of the polis. Is there not here, in the name of a certain kind of phenomenal truth, another germ of totalitarianism with a democratic face?”²⁷ That something might be amiss with this Rousseauist paean to perfect transparency is indicated to Derrida

²⁶ The phrase, cited in ibid., p. 62 is from Koyré’s essay.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 63.

by Koyré's example of a problematic training in lying, that practiced by the Marrano, whom he lists along with the Jesuit and the young Spartan as emblematic dissemblers. For the Marrano, refusing to admit his still Jewish identity to forces of Catholic oppression, shows that secrecy can at times function as a justifiable resistance to power, a kind of clandestine civil disobedience.²⁸

With these ruminations behind him, Derrida moves to his conclusion by returning to Arendt, asking what the positive implications of her work might be for writing a history of the lie. He first notes that, like Nietzsche, she clearly tries to distance any understanding of the role of lying in politics from moral judgments (which is puzzling for him now to account a virtue, for he had contended it was a mistake earlier in the essay). Second, he argues that unlike Koyré, she understood the new simulacral character of the public realm in which the very distinction between knowing the truth and intentionally lying no longer make any sense. The resulting artifactuality of images, which are appearances all the way down, is "at once less and more serious than the lie. Less serious because no one has, in bad faith, sought to deceive anyone else. More serious because the absence of any transcendent referent, or even of any meta-normative norm, makes the effect of the operation not only difficult to measure and to analyze, but fundamentally

²⁸ This function is also explicit in the "Nicodemist" crypto-Protestant resisters to Catholicism and Catholic resisters to Anglican coercion during the Reformation. See the discussion in Perez Zagorin, Ways of Lying: Dissimulation, Persecution, and Conformity in Early Modern Europe (Cambridge, Mass., 1990). Whether or not civil disobedience can ever be fully clandestine is another matter. If it seeks to change laws rather than merely evade them, it has to have a public resonance.

irreparable."²⁹ Third, he acknowledges Arendt's strong intention to delimit the boundaries of the political, a realm of plurality distinguished from the isolation of the solitary philosophical man concerned with the truth. This realm is also different from that of the judiciary and the university, where the responsibility to seek the truth is also paramount (he might have added a free press, at least in its ideal form, here as well). And fourth and finally, Arendt understands, if perhaps with insufficient depth, the performative function of the lie, its links with imaginative action to change the world. "Between lying and acting, acting in politics, manifesting one's own freedom through action, transforming facts, anticipating the future, there is something like an essential affinity....The lie is the future, one might venture to say, beyond the letter of her text but without betraying Arendt's intention in this context. To tell the truth is, on the contrary, to say what is or what will have been and it would instead prefer the past."³⁰ There may as a result be no history in general, and certainly none of the lie, without the freedom and action, the ability to imagine a different future, which is insured by at least the possibility of counter-factual mendacity.

Having established these four positive reasons why Arendt helps us envisage a plausible history of lying, Derrida concludes his essay by pointing to four negative ones preventing her argument from being fully satisfactory. The first problem is her inability to distinguish sufficiently between testimony

²⁹Derrida, "History of the Lie: Prolegomena," p. 65.

³⁰Ibid., p. 66.

and bearing witness, on the one hand, and the proof of textual evidence in an archive, on the other; the distinction she does draw between factual and rational truth, he claims, does not adequately register this importance difference. Because she fails to acknowledge it, Arendt blithely assumes the self-evidence of the concept of lying. Secondly, she employs a confused psychology in invoking the idea of "lying to oneself" in her analysis of the modern totalitarian lie, which as he has argued earlier is "logically incompatible with the rigor of the classical concept of the lie and with the 'frank' problematic of the lie," which will "always mean to deceive the other intentionally and consciously, while knowing what it is that one is deliberately hiding, therefore while not lying to oneself."³¹ For all its problems, the Marxist concept of ideology, informed by a certain application of psychoanalysis, might have served her purposes better than the idea of self-deception. A third problem in her account is the latent optimism Derrida detects underlying her argument, an optimism based on the dubious assumption that ultimately the truth will win out. "By excluding the indefinite survival of mystification," he charges, "Arendt makes of history, as history of the lie, the epidermic and epiphenomenal accident of a parousia of truth."³² Fourth and finally, her "certainty of a final victory and a certain survival of the truth (and not merely of veracity)," even as a regulating idea in politics or history, produces a diminished estimation of the history of the lie as such,

³¹ Ibid., p. 67.

³² Ibid., p. 69.

a kind of comforting banalization that fails to confront the possibility of its infinite survival. Although such a future history cannot, of course be proved or even become the object of secure knowledge, it must be entertained at least as a serious possibility. "One can only say, beyond knowledge, what could or should be the history of the lie—if there is any."³³

With this ambiguous and cryptic final sentence, Derrida ends his prolegomena to a full history of the lie, which he never lived to complete (or abandoned as unworkable). It has been necessary to follow the twists and turns of his complicated argument in some detail, in order to do justice to the dexterity of his mind and the indirectness of his approach, which characteristically involves ambivalently critical encounters with the texts of predecessors. But how close or persuasive a reader of these particular texts was Derrida? And how plausible are the conclusions he drew from his interpretations? In the case of Arendt, I want to argue, he did derive many compelling conclusions from her two essays on lying, but in several instances, he seems to have gone astray. In what follows, I want to highlight what I think are dubious readings of Arendt's texts and raise questions about the uses to which Derrida put them.

Perhaps the first thing to notice about Derrida's ruminations on lying is that although he pays lip-service to the idea of writing its history, and even adopts for a moment Arendt's distinction between premodern and

³³ Ibid., p. 70.

modern lying—the former based on the distinction between truth and falsehood, the latter, premised on a Baudrillard-like claim that it is simulacra all the way down—he ultimately displays little confidence in carrying it out. As he admits in the aside mentioned earlier about the paradox of narrating a true history of lying, a difficulty which “we must not ever overlook,” he has no practical way to resolve it. Insofar as statements about history refer to the past, while lying often points towards a future that may or may not have been or ever be realized, it is hard to reconcile the two. Moreover, in his consideration of the arguments about the total or absolute lie in the modern era, a limit approached by totalitarian states at their most mendacious, Derrida stops short of agreeing that such an endpoint can ever be attained. For the very act of lying, in particular that of the frank, intentional lying he is most concerned to treat, assumes that the liar can know what is true, if not about the state of the world then at least about the state of his intentions. That is, there must always be a gap between internal belief and external statement to make the concept of lying plausible.³⁴ Otherwise we are on the slippery slope towards the idea of self-deception, which we have seen him deny. The absolute lie is as problematic as the ideal of absolute knowledge of the truth. But if it is incoherent to believe in a state of affairs in which the ability to distinguish between truthfulness and deceit is lost—an illusory

³⁴ In places, Arendt agrees with this conclusion, for example in “Lying in Politics,” where she writes “the trouble with lying and deceiving is that their efficiency depends entirely upon a clear notion of the truth that then liar and deceiver wishes to hide. In this sense, truth, even if it does not prevail in public, possesses an ineradicable primacy over all falsehoods.” (p. 31).

world of simulacra all the way down—then the historical distinction between premodern and modern is hard, perhaps even impossible, to maintain. Without it, however, Derrida cannot pretend that he is giving us an even grossly periodized historical account of lying.

If there is a limit to what might be called the subjective side of lying—its dependence on the ability of the liar to distinguish between his real intentions and his public statements to others—Derrida holds on to an objective or external one as well. For in responding to the threat of complete historical revisionism, the making up of facts out of thin air, he appeals to what he surprisingly calls “the indisputable demonstration of an archive,” which supplements that of the sometimes unreliable testimony of witnesses.³⁵ In other words, in texts in historical archives there is hard evidence that resists the ambiguity and undecidability that in other contexts, Derrida seems to have attributed to all texts. Although he argues that veracity and lying are closer to the problematic of testifying than the epistemological one of knowing what is true or false, he nonetheless concedes that the latter can—indeed, must--intersect with the former in the way that the constative dimension of speech acts mingles with the performative one (except in the limit case of prayer).³⁶ Thus, he is able to mobilize the record of his signing the petition urging the French president to

³⁵ This, of course, is not the first time that Derrida considered the questions of archives. See his *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago, 1996), where the question of what is kept in an archive and what is not—secrets, for example—is raised.

³⁶ There are many permutations of the relationship between the performative and the constative in lying. For example, one may intend to tell a lie, but inadvertently reveal the truth.

deal with Vichy as an archival fact that refutes Tony Judt's "counter-truth" about the alleged cowardice of the French intelligentsia. Here the cartoon version of deconstruction as a simple foe of truth and truthfulness breaks down.³⁷

Lying in politics, both Arendt and Derrida emphasize, doesn't always involve making up false evidence about the past, but also points towards a promised future. Politicians who promise something if elected, but do so with their fingers crossed, cannot be contradicted by the "indisputable testimony of the archive," for there is no archive of things to come. It is for this reason that Derrida follows Arendt, indeed even intensifies her claim,³⁸ that lying and action, lying and imagination, and lying and even creating history are all closely related (although not, of course, identical). He follows her in stressing the link between the ability to lie, to say what is not the case, and the freedom to change the world. One can lie also about one's plans for the future and produce action as a result, which changes the status quo.³⁹

³⁷ See, for example, Jeremy Campbell, *The Liar's Tale: A History of Falsehood* (New York, 2001), chapter 18. It also seems to me that this double-barreled quality of the lie as in part dependent on the ability to know what is true undercuts the claim made by Peggy Kamuf in her introduction to *Without Alibi*, that Derrida is focused entirely on truth as made rather than told, as entirely performative, despite Derrida's fondness for Augustine's formula about "making the truth." (p. 11). For it is only if there is some external standard does it make sense to argue for the mixed quality—at once performative and constative—of the frank lie.

³⁸ See, for example, "Truth in Politics," where she asserts that the liar "is an actor by nature; he says what is not so because he wants things to be different from what they are—that is, he wants to change the world." (p. 563)

³⁹ Arendt does, to be sure, admit that under certain circumstances, truth-telling can also lead to change: "where everybody lies about everything of importance, the truth-teller, whether he knows it or not, has begun to act; he, too, has engaged himself in political business, for, in the unlikely event that he survives, he has made a start toward changing the world." (*ibid.*, p. 564).

Derrida seems to go beyond Arendt, however, in calling the founding acts of politics a kind of “performative violence,” for although Arendt did argue that the political arena, the space for political action, was founded according to no principles and by an act of ungrounded assertion, she did not identify it so readily with violence.⁴⁰ She did, to be sure, acknowledge that at least the organized lies of governments “harbor an element of violence: organized lying always tends to destroy whatever it has decided to negate, although only totalitarian governments have consciously adopted lying as the first step to murder.”⁴¹ But elsewhere, she was careful to distinguish political action, which involved acting in concert based on persuasion and judgment, from the isolated exercise of violence to bring about an end.⁴² That is, not all governments take the second step towards outright murder that distinguishes totalitarianism from alternatives modes of governing. Arendt was, of course, an eloquent defender of the glories of political action, and concludes “Truth in Politics” by reminding her readers that despite the prevalence of mendacity in politics, it has a “greatness and dignity” and provides the “joy and gratification that arise out of being in company with our peers, out of acting together and appearing in public, out of inserting ourselves into the world by word and deed, thus acquiring and sustaining our personal identity and beginning something entirely new.”⁴³

⁴⁰ On the issue of violence and founding, see Arendt, On Revolution (New York, 1965).

⁴¹ Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” p. 565.

⁴² Arendt, “On Violence,” in Crises of the Republic.

⁴³ Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” p. 573-574.

This paean could be meaningful only if there were a fundamental distinction between political action and violence, genuine democracy and totalitarianism, no matter how performative both might be in disrupting the status quo. Not all performatives, she seemed to understand, are the same; acting together to change the world can involve sharing common intentions in a truthful way.

In stressing the distinction, Arendt fell back on the possibility of self-deception, which she indeed worried might well engulf those who spin the “big lies” of totalitarian politics. Undeterred by the logical qualm later introduced by Derrida—that “frank” lying necessitated a capacity to tell truth from falsehood absent from lying to oneself—she argued that “self-deception still presupposes a distinction between truth and falsehood, between fact and fantasy, and therefore a conflict between the real world and the self-deceived deceiver that disappears in an entirely de-factualized world.”⁴⁴ But she was also convinced that “our apprehension of reality is dependent on our sharing the world with our fellow-men,” which meant it takes an unusual character to resist what others believe was true, especially because “the more successful the liar is, the more likely it is that he will fall prey to his own fabrications.”⁴⁵ The modern lie, the lie that destroys more than it hides, she agreed with conservative critics of mass democracy, is especially

⁴⁴ Arendt, “Lying in Politics,” p. 36.

⁴⁵ Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” p. 566.

dangerous today because of “the undeniable fact that under fully democratic conditions deception without self-deception is well-nigh impossible.”⁴⁶

The quarrel between Derrida and Arendt on this issue was an old one—curiously, her position was closer than his to that of Nietzsche, who famously said that “the most common sort of lie is the one uttered to one’s self; to lie to others is relatively exceptional”⁴⁷—and continues to exercise students of the problem.⁴⁸ Clearly, the outcome depends on what kind of a self is understood to underlie the act of self-deception, with a split or incoherent self capable of an “internal” lie more easily than an integral and fully aware self. Derrida was certainly no champion of a fully integrated and entirely conscious self, so his falling back on what he calls the “classical rigor” of the frank concept of lying is a bit puzzling. His alternatives to self-deception, however, are only suggested in the lapidary formula cited above—“some mediatic techno-performativity and a logic of the phantasma (which is to say, of the spectral) or of a symptomatology of the unconsciousness” —and he never fully fleshed out what he meant.

Be that as it may, a closer look at Arendt’s argument about self-deception and the loss of the distinction between truth and falsehood shows

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 567. Derrida notes this claim, but wonders what Arendt meant by “fully democratic conditions.” (“History of the Lie,” p. 58).

⁴⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, The Twilight of the Idols, Complete Works, vol. 16, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici (Edinburgh, 1911), p. 212.

⁴⁸ For a recent overview of the debate, see J.A. Barnes, A Pack of Lies: Towards a Sociology of Lying (Cambridge, 1994), chapter 7. For a defense of the evolutionary value of self-deception by a sociobiologist—it serves the function of preventing us from providing somatic clues to what we really think to our enemies—see David Livingstone Smith, Why We Lie: The Evolutionary Roots of Deception and the Unconscious Mind (New York, 2004).

that it is virtually as qualified in practice as Derrida's. For she also introduces limits to its full realization on a polity-wide level. One reason is the existence of a global information network that defeats attempts to create a seamless "big lie" in one country. "Under our present system of world-wide communication, covering a large number of independent nations, no existing power is anywhere near great enough to make its 'image' foolproof. Therefore, images have a relatively short life expectancy."⁴⁹ Another reason is that the political realm itself is surrounded by other institutions—the judiciary, the academy and the press—that have a more principled devotion to truth, even if not always realized in practice. These often intersect with the political realm and prevent a wholesale triumph of even a "big lie" that destroys rather than hides the truth.

But even beyond these checks to the full realization of absolute political mendacity, there is also a stubborn residue of truth within the political realm itself, no matter how much it resists being absorbed into other realms outside it. Because Arendt acknowledged this residue is perhaps the reason for Derrida's final—and I think unsubstantiated--claim about her optimism that truth will ultimately win out, what he calls faith in the "parousia of truth" and "certainty of a final victory and certain survival of

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 568.

the truth (and not merely veracity)."⁵⁰ The issue is the vexed question of how truth intersects with politics.

Arendt clearly opposed the subordination of politics to the one truth of the rational tradition of philosophy derived from Plato. Favoring the Sophists in their confrontation with Socrates, she preferred the plural opinions, the messy unregulated doxa and rhetorical argumentation of public life, to the singular orthodoxy of the monologic philosopher's ivory tower. Or rather she did so in the specific realm of politics to the extent that it can be set apart from other modes of human behavior. "To look upon politics from the perspective of truth," she writes, "means to take one's stand outside the political realm. This standpoint is the standpoint of the truth-teller, who forfeits his position—and, with it, the validity of what he has to say—if he tries to interfere directly in human affairs and to speak the language of persuasion or of violence."⁵¹ From within the political realm, the imposition of a singular truth is an act of domination and coercion, which stills the ongoing struggle among competing opinions and values that is the lifeblood of politics rightly understood. When truth therefore means the singular, monologic, contemplative, rational unity sought by philosophers, there can never be, pace Derrida, a parousia that will signal a triumphant overcoming of agonistic difference. Politics, by definition, is a space of human interaction

⁵⁰ Derrida, "History of the Lie," p. 69.

⁵¹ Arendt, "Truth and Politics," p. 570.

unmastered by the tyranny of universal, univocal, unequivocal truth. For Arendt, in its precincts, there is no “sacred imperative” to tell the truth.⁵²

What about the second kind of truth Arendt postulates in her essays, that of the facts? Does she believe in the “certainty of a final victory and a certain survival of truth” in this acceptance of the term? Here the question grows decidedly murkier. In her consideration of the Pentagon Papers in “Lying in Politics,” it is clear that she faults the policy-makers who got us into the quagmire of Vietnam for their blithe defactualization and lack of political judgment in the name of technocratic calculation. Accordingly, “Truth and Politics” begins with an attempt to incorporate factual truth into the political realm rather than place it outside it like philosophical truth: factual truth, she writes, is “always related to other people: it concerns events and circumstances in which many are involved; it is established by witnesses and depends on testimony; it exists only to the extent that it is spoken about, even if it occurs in the domain of privacy. It is political by nature. Facts and opinions, though they must be kept apart, are not antagonistic to each other: they belong to the same realm.”⁵³ The solidity of facts about the past cannot be denied, as exemplified by Clemenceau’s famous reply to a question about future historians’ judgment about the

⁵² There is, to be sure, no reason that telling the truth about one’s intentions should be taken to imply a belief in a singular ontological truth about the world. Arendt sometimes seems to forget the distinction.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 553.

origins of World War I: "This I don't know. But I know for certain that they will not say Belgium invaded Germany."⁵⁴

But then Arendt expresses second thoughts and backs away from the full consequences of her claim: "when I stated that factual, as opposed to rational truth, is not antagonistic to opinion, I stated a half-truth. All truths—not only the various kinds of rational truth but also factual truth—are opposed to opinion in their mode of asserting validity. Truth carries with it an element of coercion....Seen from the viewpoint of politics, truth has a despotic character....factual truth, like all other truth, peremptorily claims to be acknowledged and precludes debate, and debate constitutes the very essence of political life."⁵⁵ Thus, for all of her respect for the importance of factual truth as it intersects with political action, for all her understanding of the importance of the judiciary, the academy and the free press in introducing uncomfortable facts to resist the imaginative excesses of political fantasizing, for all her faith that power cannot entirely erase the factual record, she never envisaged—and a fortiori never desired—a wholesale invasion of politics by truth-telling, either philosophical or factual in nature. Thus, her peroration to the joys and gratifications of the political life, cited above, concludes by saying that "it is only by respecting its own borders that

⁵⁴ Referring back to this statement later in her essay, Arendt added "A factual statement—Germany invaded Belgium in August 1914—acquires political implications only by being put in an interpretive context. But the opposite proposition, which Clemenceau, still unacquainted with the arts of rewriting history, thought absurd, needs no context to be of political significance. It is clearly an attempt to change the record, and as such, it is a form of action." (p. 562).

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 556. Strictly speaking, "truth" doesn't assert anything; only speakers can do that. Arendt was clearly less sensitive to the linguistic dimensions of speech act theory than Derrida.

this realm, where we are free to act and to change, can remain intact, preserving its integrity and keeping its promises. Conceptually, we may call truth what we cannot change; metaphorically, it is the ground on which we stand and the sky that stretches above us."⁵⁶ There is, in short, no *parousia* of truth for Arendt, factual or philosophical.

What, can we say in conclusion, about Derrida's ambivalent and sometimes tendentious reading of Arendt on lying in politics? Derrida perhaps needs to construct an overly optimistic Arendt, one who believes in the sacred imperative to tell the truth (thus his evocation of the religious concept of *parousia*, which as far as I can tell appears nowhere in her own discourse) to contrast with his own seemingly more skeptical alternative. Thus he asks about seemingly indisputable "facts" of the type Clemenceau cited about the German invasion of Belgium: "how can one still subscribe to them when the 'facts' in question are already phenomena of performative-mediatic discourse, structured by the simulacrum and the virtual, and incorporating their own interpretive moment?"⁵⁷ No contextual explanation, he argues against Arendt, will suffice to fix factual truth, which is always already a function of linguistic performance.

Derrida, moreover, clearly wants to place more weight than Arendt did on the image as opposed to linguistic discourse in describing modern politics. For all his stress on the importance of speech act theory, which Arendt never

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 574.

⁵⁷ Derrida, "History of the Lie," p. 293.

explicitly used in understanding lies, he went so far as to claim that “in the ‘modern’ simulacrum (‘live television’ for example) the substitute takes place of what it replaces and destroys even reference to the alterity of what it replaces, by means of its selective and interpretive performativity, and by means of the absolute and indubitable ‘truth effect’ that it produces. Here, then, is doubtless the space of an absolute lie that can always survive indefinitely without anyone ever knowing anything about it or without anyone being there any longer to know it or remember it.”⁵⁸ The destruction of the modern lie, as opposed to the hiding of its premodern predecessor, can be complete. The result is more than mere self-deception; it is a new ontological condition.

But then, catching himself in a contradiction—as we have seen, he stresses the logical necessity of being able to tell the truth in the frank concept of lying, absolute or not—he backtracks by returning essentially to Arendt’s position: “It can always do so, perhaps, but we must maintain this regime of the perhaps and this clause of possibility if we want to avoid effacing once again the history of the lie into a history of the truth, into a theoretical knowledge that comes under the authority of determinant judgments.”⁵⁹ Like Arendt in her ruminations on the importance of Kant’s Critique of Judgment for politics, he mobilizes the inherently aesthetic idea of reflective judgments to resist the subsumptive, algorithmic logic of

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 293.

⁵⁹Ibid.

theoretical reason.⁶⁰ Both lying and politics cannot be understood by subordinating them to determinant judgments, and one might add normative as well as epistemological. Neither can be judged from the point of view of abstract, universal rules or categorical imperatives (which is why the Kant of the first two critiques is not helpful in dealing with them).

If this is so, than the general claim that we live in a world entirely dominated by simulacral images and absolute lies can itself be challenged as an inappropriately determinant judgment that has no place in politics, an attempt to tell a universal truth that should not be allowed to dominate the messier realm of counter-factual political action. If we take seriously the “perhaps” that Derrida himself wants to emphasize, then we are no longer fully dominated by the ideological image machine that he sees as more prevalent than self-deception. Instead, we are in a more Arendtian world of agonistic political discourse in which opinions, rhetoric and, yes, the ability to lie, are signs of a freedom that is—perhaps—inextinguishable so long as politics resists the domination of sacred imperatives of whatever kind.

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⁶⁰ Hannah Arendt, Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy, trans. Ronald Beiner (Chicago, 1992).

