Are Lies a Threat to Democracy?

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Outline

“Truth and Politics” (1967)

“Lying in Politics” (1971)

*The Human Condition* (1958)

*Men in Dark Times* (1970)

1. Introduce Hannah Arendt

2. What is politics?

3. Truth and lies in politics

4. What kinds of problems arise from both truth and lies in politics?
Hannah Arendt (1906-1975)

- German-Jewish political thinker
- Jewish refugee (1933)
- Lost German citizenship (1937)
- Detained in Gurs, France (1940-1941)
- Fled to the US (1941)
- Gained US citizenship (1950)
- Most notable works:
  - *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951)
  - *The Human Condition* (1958)
Politics

• Core pillars of democracy
  • Freedom, plurality, debate, political action, and informed opinion-formation

• Public space where persons appear before and speak with one another

• Political activities:
  • Speech
  • Action

• The world arises *between* persons when they engage in these political activities (DT, 16-17)

• Then, we act ‘for the sake of public interest’ or out of ‘common concern’ for our shared world (HC, p.28; p.57-58)
Speech

• Aristotle: “Man is by nature a political animal” (1253a3)

• We need to live in community with others in order to become “self-sufficient”
  • Flourishing or eudaimonia

• Aristotle believes what makes us political animals is the fact that we have the “gift of speech” (1253a10)

• Speech is political because:
  1. It enables us to distinguish between right and wrong
  2. It takes place between people
Speech

In the *polis*, Arendt explains, “speech is the way of life,” and its “central concern is citizens talking to each other” (HC, p.27); and acting together, which creates a world they share in common.
Action

- Gives rise to something new
- Takes place between people
- Natality = capacity to strike a new beginning (HC, p.9)
- Freedom “makes action possible” and makes politics possible in turn (LP, p.5-6)
- The world is fragile because freedom and action are:
  - Unexpected
  - Unpredictable
  - Unreliable
  - Vulnerable
Plurality

• “the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world” (HC, p.7)

• Plurality = actualization of a person’s distinctness/who (through speech)

• Diversity = “counting noses and joining a majority” (T&P, p.302)
  • Reduces distinctness/who to a what

• Debate
  • Allows opinions to be checked, revised, and verified by a plurality of views
  • Ensures that opinions are informed or truthful
Truth & Lies in Politics

• Truth is anti-political, coercive, despotic, and vulnerable
  “truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other, and no one, as far as I know, has ever counted truthfulness among the political virtues. Lies have always been regarded as necessary and justifiable tools not only of the politician’s or the demagogue’s but also of the statesman’s trade” (T&P, p.296)

• Truth is powerless in the political sphere is because it is contingent
  Factual truths are “the invariable outcome of men living and acting together ... [and] constitute the very texture of the political realm” (T&P, p.296)
  • Factual truths “could have been otherwise” (T&P, p.303)
  • This is “the price of freedom” (T&P, p.303)
Factual Truth

• Factual truths are essential to establishing our reality
• Factual truths = ‘what is the case’
• Factual truth “is established by witnesses and depends on testimony; it exists only to the extent that it is spoken about” (T&P, p.300)

“[e]ven if we admit that every generation has the right to write its own history, we admit no more than that it has the right to rearrange the facts in accordance with its own perspective; we don’t admit the right to touch the factual matter itself” (T&P, p.300)

• Factual truths “are beyond agreement, dispute, opinion, or consent” (T&P, p.301)
Factual Truth

- Factual truths run counter to the “very essence of political life” (T&P, p.301) – debate
- They run counter to “governments that rest on consent and abhor coercion” (T&P, p.302)
- “factual truths must inform opinion” (T&P, p.302)
  - Aids in the establishment of informed or truthful opinions
- Perhaps we can employ them as a means to articulating our opinion
- Opinions that contain a factual truth within them can be contested, questioned, and debated
Lies

• Lies = “neither error nor illusion nor opinion ... but ... deliberate falsehood” (T&P, p.305)

• Traditional political lies
  • Used to cover up state secrets
  • Not known to the public

• “the traditional political lie ... was directed at the enemy and was mean to deceive only him” (T&P, p.307)

• Modern political lies “deal efficiently with things that are not secrets at all but are known to practically everybody” (T&P, p.306)
  • Deceive the masses
  • Construct a false narrative
Lies

“And, finally, and perhaps most disturbingly, if the modern political lies are so big that they require a complete rearrangement of the whole factual texture – the making of another reality, as it were, into which they will fit without seam, crack, or fissure, exactly as the facts fitted into their own original context – what prevents these new stories, images, and non-facts from becoming an adequate substitute for reality and factuality?” (T&P, p.307)
“What is at stake is survival, the perseverance in existence ... and no human world destined to outlast the short life span on mortals within it will ever be able to survive without men willing to do what Herodotus was the first to undertake seriously – namely ... to say what is. No permanence, no perseverance in existence, can even be conceived of without men willing to testify to what is and appears to them because it is” (T&P, p.296)
Truth, Lies, and Opinion

“when the liar, lacking the power to make his falsehood stick, does not insist on the gospel truth of his statement but pretends this is his ‘opinion,’ to which he claims his constitutional right” (T&P, p.306)

• Equating lie with opinion ‘blurs the line between factual truth and opinion’ (T&P, p.306)
• Collapses the distinction between truth and lie

“[t]he result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lies will now be accepted as truth, and the truth be defamed as lies, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world – and the category of truth vs. falsehood is among the mental means to this end – is being destroyed” (T&P, p.308)

• The proliferation of lies in politics prevents us from thinking for ourselves
• When we stop thinking, we become “swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in” (T&MC, p.188)
Courage

• “[T]hinking calls not only for intelligence and profundity but above all for courage” (HDT, p.8)

• The truth, “if it happens to oppose a given group’s profit or pleasure, is greeted today with greater hostility than ever before” (T&P, p.299)

• Our shared world is at stake

• To ‘say what is,’ so that we can make informed political opinions and decisions
Next Up

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• Should Philosophers Rule the World?
• Tuesday, 6 April @ 19.30-21.00