



## Aporias of Truth and Politics: Arendt, Foucault, and the Practice of Truth-Telling

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In the recent debates on so-called 'post-truth politics,' Hannah Arendt's essay "Truth and Politics" is a constant reference point. Indeed, it is one of the few texts within political philosophy and political theory in which the ongoing conflict between truth and politics takes center stage. While it is usually assumed that, according to Arendt, truth and facts provide the indispensable basis for opinion formation and political action, a detailed rereading of her essay shows that the relation between truth and politics is much more complex and, in many ways, aporetic. Arendt herself and most of her interpreters attempt to solve these aporias by excluding truth from the political realm or tolerating it only at its margins. The article, by contrast, juxtaposes Arendt's figure of the *truth-teller* with Michel Foucault's notion of *parrhēsia* to argue that these aporias are key not only to an adequate understanding of the intricate truth–politics relationship but also to the critical assessment of our supposed post-truth condition.

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Throughout these exercises the problem of truth is kept in abeyance; the concern is solely with how to move in this gap – the only region perhaps where truth eventually will appear. (Arendt 1969, 14)

## 1. Introduction: Truth and Politics in Conflict

Hannah Arendt's essay "Truth and Politics," first published in *The New Yorker* in 1967, figures prominently in current debates about 'post-truth politics' and the dangers of a supposedly 'post-factual age.' There are good reasons for this. For a start, Arendt's essay seems to anticipate many of today's developments, apart, of course, from the technological upheavals that she could hardly have foreseen in her own day (see Gordon 2018). What is more, Arendt's essay remains one of the few texts in political philosophy and political theory that explicitly deals with the complex relationship between truth and politics, thus addressing a topical research desideratum. However, although there are now numerous studies on post-truth politics, its historical precursors, and related phenomena, such as lying, propaganda, disinformation, 'bullshit,' or conspiracy theories, surprisingly little attention is paid to the complex relationship between truth and politics itself as well as its historical shifts and changes. Moreover, the various approaches are often characterized by simplistic explanations or hasty accusations, for example against postmodernism, constructivism, or relativism.<sup>1</sup>

For heuristic purposes, we can roughly distinguish between three lines of argument, which also allow for combinations and overlaps (see Posselt and Seitz 2024, 571–73): The *conservative* view considers the emergence of a post-truth age as a process of erosion or decay in which truth, science, and facts are increasingly devalued and lose their authority. The *progressive* view interprets the current situation as a transitional phenomenon, leading, with the digitalization of our lifeworld, from the outdated paradigm of facts to the new paradigm of data (see Lynch 2016; Lepore 2016). From now on, so the argument goes, data assume the epistemic function previously fulfilled by facts, guaranteeing the scientific ideals of objectivity, neutrality, and universality. The *continuity* view rejects the simple diagnosis of a 'post-truth age,' arguing that deception and lies are not new phenomena but as old as politics itself (see Bufacchi 2021). Think of Nietzsche's dictum that truth is just "the obligation to lie according to an established convention" (1989, 250) or Arendt's oft-cited statement that "[n]o one has ever doubted that truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other" (TP 227). Still, proponents of this view do not deny that the significance of truth and lying in politics has changed and that we are dealing with new phenomena (see Hyvönen

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the debate, see for example D'Ancona (2017), Baggini (2018), McIntyre (2018), Fuller (2018), Harsin (2018), Block (2019), MacMullen (2020), Ferrari et al. (2023), Farkas and Schou (2024), and Newman and Conrad (2024). Vogelmann (2019), Prozorov (2019), Flatscher and Seitz (2020), and Newman (2022) reject the usual accusations.

2018). While some emphasize the changed *status* of lying as something that no longer discredits politicians but functions as a sign of strength and political power, others highlight the unprecedented *quantity* and *speed* with which lies and fake news spread on social media, thwarting all attempts at fact-checking.<sup>2</sup>

Although all these accounts address important issues, they often fail to take a closer look at the relationship between truth and politics itself. While the conservative position implicitly assumes "a nostalgia for an age of facts" and a power-free notion of truth (van Dyk 2022, 39), without being able to date a time when truth and facts still could claim trust and authority (see Vogelmann 2018), dataism risks becoming a new myth by obscuring the biased processes through which data are collected, processed, and translated into usable knowledge (see Reichert 2014; Kitchin 2014; Rieder and Simon 2016). Even those approaches that assume that lying and manipulation have always been part of politics tend to lose sight of the complex entanglement of truth and politics by reducing the role of truth in politics either to matters of power or ideology, with truth acting as a plaything or weapon in political struggles (see Newman 2022), to moral issues such as truthfulness or epistemic virtues and vices (see Williams 2002; Nida-Rümelin 2019), or to epistemic and epistemological questions. The last trend is reflected in political philosophy's "epistemic turn" (Landmore 2017; critically Jörke 2010; Urbinati 2014) and analytic political epistemology. Although the latter locates itself at the intersection of political philosophy and epistemology, it primarily examines political phenomena from an epistemological perspective, arguing that "epistemological considerations can (and should) be incorporated into contemporary discussions about politics" (Hannon and Ridder 2021, 1).

Rather than engaging in these debates, I propose taking a step back and looking more closely at the truth–politics relationship itself by rereading Arendt's "Truth and Politics." My primary interest lies in Arendt's ambivalent and "multifaceted" concept of truth (Heuer and Rosenmüller 2022, 95) and her aporetic intensification of the conflict between truth and politics. While some scholars consider Arendt's account inconsistent and in need of revision, others attempt to remedy the ambivalences and tensions – if they are perceived at all – by placing them in the larger context of her work.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, I argue that the seeming or actual contradictions should not be

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Hendricks and Hansen (2016), Jaster and Lanius (2019), Cosentino (2020), Zimdars and McLeod (2020), and Köhler (2020).

<sup>3</sup> Even though no clear classifications can be made here, Habermas (2006), Derrida (2002), Beiner (2008), Brunkhorst (2004), and Harcourt (2020) are presumably closer to the first position, while Nelson (1978), Honig (2023), Villa (1996), Phillips (2013), Zerilli (2012), Sari (2021), and Fusillo (2024) seem to hold the second. Beiner, for example, sees Arendt's "misleading and obfuscating account of truth" as the "evil twin" of her "interesting account of judgement" (2008, 123). For a general overview, see Thaa (2022, 137).

hastily explained away but should be taken as the starting point for a thorough analysis of the complex intertwining of truth and politics.<sup>4</sup> This approach is supported by the fact that Arendt presented "Truth and Politics" on various occasions between 1963 and 1966 and published it six times between 1964 and 1969 (four times in English, two times in German).<sup>5</sup> It is therefore rather unlikely that the ambivalences and contradictions escaped her notice, which in turn raises the question of why she kept reiterating and staging them. It is also noteworthy that Arendt describes the essays collected in *Between Past and Future* as "exercises in political thought," which contain both critical and experimental elements, with the last chapters, including "Truth and Politics," being "more experimental than critical" (1969, 15). Moreover, she emphasizes that "fundamental and flagrant contradictions [...] [i]n the work of great authors," such as Marx or Nietzsche, "are the most important clue to a true understanding of their problems and new insights," particularly when one has "to deal with new phenomena in terms of an old tradition of thought outside of whose conceptual framework no thinking seemed possible at all" (1969, 25; see 1989, 104–05).<sup>6</sup>

Against this backdrop, I argue that we should view the ambiguities and contradictions in "Truth and Politics" less as shortcomings that need to be remedied than as symptoms and effects of the aporias inherent in the relationship between truth and politics itself. If Arendt herself does not draw this conclusion (although she paves the ground for it), it is perhaps because she subscribes to a set of rigid dichotomies that do not allow for ambiguities or overlaps. And yet, overall, her thinking is indeed sensitive to aporias, as becomes clear when, for example she speaks of the "aporias of the rights of man [*Aporien der Menschenrechte*]" (2013, 601) or the "aporias of action [*Aporien des Handelns*]" (2013, 241, 279) in the revised German editions of her work.<sup>7</sup> Just as these aporias reveal a great deal about the phenomena in question, we can assume

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<sup>4</sup> According to Vogelmann (2018, 26), "Arendt's position is especially interesting, [...] because she neither defines away its coercive potential (as Habermas does) nor rejects truth altogether because of its coercive potential (as Rorty [sometimes] does). Instead, she realises that it is precisely the ambiguous nature of truth's compelling force that makes it irreplaceable for us."

<sup>5</sup> See the editorial note by Ludz in Arendt (2012, 428–29). Kohn also points out that "Truth and Politics" is "among the most difficult of her essays to grasp as a whole", since in "it she compresses in less than 40 pages what would take a 'professional thinker' [...] 400 pages to expound" (Young-Bruehl and Kohn 2007, 1063).

<sup>6</sup> According to Nelson, Arendt puts us in a situation that is "at best a paradox, at least a terrible tension, and at worst a flat contradiction" (1978, 280). In her defense, however, it can be argued that she "was trying 'desperately to think against the tradition while using its own conceptual tools' [Arendt 1969, 25]" (Nelson 1978, 298).

<sup>7</sup> In the English edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt speaks of the "perplexities of the rights of man" (1979, 290) and in *The Human Condition* of the "threefold frustration of action" (1989, 220). See also Arendt's remark that "Plato's Socratic dialogues [...] are all aporetic. [...] None of the *logoi*, the arguments, ever stays put; they move about, because Socrates [...] sets them in motion" (Arendt 1971, 428–29). See Zerilli (2012, 60–61).

that the productive unfolding of the aporias of truth and politics enables a more precise understanding not only of their interconnection but also of the post-truth discourse as a symptom of a more general crisis and transformation of the contemporary truth regime.

To support my thesis, I subject Arendt's influential essay "Truth and Politics" (TP) to a thorough rereading, also drawing on the final German version "Wahrheit und Politik" (WP) from 1969, rewritten by Arendt based on a rough translation, and "Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers" (LP) from 1971.<sup>8</sup> I will first focus on the ambivalent role of *factual truths* in the political realm. While they form the solid ground on which political action becomes possible in the first place, nothing is more endangered and vulnerable in the political sphere than truth and facts (2). A similar situation applies to the relationship between truth and lying. Lying, as the ability to imagine and begin something new, is an essential element of political action, but as soon as it is done in an organized way, it destroys the common world as a whole (3). The relationship between truth and politics, as well as between truth and lying, thus proves to be inherently aporetic, insofar as truth and lying are both the *condition of possibility* and the *condition of impossibility* of politics (4). While Arendt seeks to bypass these aporias by excluding truth from the political realm and tolerating it only at its margins, I contrast her figure of the *truth-teller* with Michel Foucault's notion of *parrhesia* to show how they can be put to productive use (5).

## 2. The Fragility and Stubbornness of Facts

Right at the beginning of "Truth and Politics," Arendt addresses the antagonistic, almost warlike, relationship between truth and politics.<sup>9</sup> There seems to be no doubt that the reputation of truth in politics is in a poor state. Truth has no dignity or value in the political sphere; nor has truthfulness ever been counted "among the political virtues" (TP 227). When it comes to lying, however, things look pretty different. Lies seem to be an essential and almost indispensable part of politics, "regarded as necessary and justifiable tools not only of the politician's or the demagogue's but also of the statesman's trade" (TP 227). This is a "remarkable and disturbing fact" (WP 44) because it implies that truth and power are mutually exclusive: while truth is powerless, political power is deceitful and mendacious (see TP 228). This should not, however, lead us to

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<sup>8</sup> See the editorial note by Ludz in Arendt (2012, 429). "Truth and Politics" (TP), the German edition "Wahrheit und Politik" (WP), and "Lying in Politics" (LP) are cited hereafter with abbreviations. All translations from the German are my own.

<sup>9</sup> Arendt draws here on ideas that Alexandre Koyré developed as early as 1943 in "The Political Function of the Modern Lie" (2017). While she does not mention Koyré in "Truth and Politics," she quotes him in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1979, 376). See also La Caze (2017).

conclude that truth and truthfulness are irrelevant to the political realm – quite the contrary. As Arendt argues, "one can sacrifice every principle and every virtue to reasons of state rather than precisely truth and truthfulness" (WP 46). While we can ask ourselves "whether life would still be worth living in a world deprived of such notions as justice and freedom, the same, curiously, is not possible with respect to the seemingly so much less political idea of truth" (TP 229). Truth thus proves to be a genuinely political concept that is indispensable for a comprehensive understanding of the political. This also means that the relationship between truth and politics, however controversial, cannot be reduced to a simple opposition or a purely external relationship. On the contrary, since the beginnings of philosophy, truth and politics have been in a constant conflict that "has a long and multiply intertwined history, which becomes neither simpler nor more comprehensible by moralizing or simplifying" (WP 46; see TP 229).

To better grasp this conflict, Arendt adopts Leibniz's distinction between *factual* and *rational truths*. While rational truths were initially at the center of this dispute, factual truths took their place with the rejection of religious and philosophical claims to absoluteness in the modern era and the Enlightenment. According to Arendt, rational truths refer to truths that can be discovered by reason alone, such as mathematical (" $2 \times 2 = 4$ "), scientific ("The earth revolves around the sun"), and philosophical truths ("It is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong"). Factual truths, by contrast, refer to contingent events or facts that could always have been otherwise, such as the fact that Germany invaded Belgium in August 1914 or, to choose a more recent example, that the sun did not shine during Donald Trump's first inauguration ceremony in 2017. Unlike rational truths, "*contingent facts* [...] carry no inherent truth within themselves, no necessity to be as they are," which makes them particularly vulnerable to lies and deliberate falsehoods (LP 6). The difference between rational and factual truths can therefore also be illustrated by comparing their respective counterparts: While "[t]he opposite of a rationally true statement is either *error* and *ignorance*, as in the sciences, or *illusion* and *opinion*, as in philosophy" (TP 232; emphasis added), the "hallmark of factual truth is that its opposite is neither error nor illusion nor opinion, no one of which reflects upon personal truthfulness, but the *deliberate falsehood*, or *lie*" (TP 249; emphasis added). This does not imply that errors cannot occur in the realm of the factual world: "Error, of course, is possible, and even common, with respect to factual truth" (TP 249). But its actual antagonist is not the accidental error but the deliberate lie.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Zerilli points out that "[w]hereas Habermas would say that lying is a 'strategic form of communication' [...] that is parasitic on and a deviation from speech oriented to genuine understanding, Arendt would argue that the possibility of lying inheres in the very character of factual truth itself, namely its irreducible contingency" (2012, 70).



It is important to note that Arendt is interested neither in the "intrinsic legitimacy" of the distinction between rational and factual truths nor in the ontological or epistemological "question of what truth is"; instead, she is concerned with the genuinely political question of "what injury political power is capable of inflicting upon truth" (TP 231). With this formulation, Arendt highlights the fragility, precariousness, and vulnerability of truth, to which factual truths are particularly exposed. Indeed, because of their contingency, factual truths are "much more vulnerable" and are exposed to a much greater danger "than all the kinds of rational truth taken together" (TP 231). While logical axioms, scientific discoveries, and philosophical theories – such as Euclidean mathematics, Einstein's theory of relativity, or even Plato's philosophy – can, at least in principle, be thought up again and reappear in a similar form (TP 231–32), facts and events, once forgotten or lied away, are irretrievably lost and cannot be brought back by any rational effort. The reason for this is that facts and events – in contrast to rational truths – are always "the invariable outcome of men living and acting together" and as such "constitute the very texture of the political realm" (TP 231). Consequently, factual truths are not located outside the political sphere but within it. They are "political by nature" (TP 238), as Arendt emphasizes, which is why "any attack on factual truths takes place within the political realm itself" (WP 49).<sup>11</sup>

The genuinely political character of factual truths is also shown by the fact that they rely on the *testimony* of others for their existence and validity.<sup>12</sup> Factual truth, Arendt tells us, "concerns events and circumstances in which many are involved; it is established by witnesses and depends upon testimony; it exists only to the extent that it is spoken about" (TP 238). A shared world is therefore only possible under the condition of human plurality. Or as Arendt puts it in *The Human Condition*, "The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves" (1989, 50). This also means that data and facts are not simply given or speak for themselves, even if this is repeatedly claimed by, for example, defenders of a positivist concept of truth or big data apologists. Instead, they require the affirmation of others to attain permanence and "find a secure dwelling place in the domain of human affairs" (LP 6). The testimonial character of facts is at the same time responsible for their inherent instability and unreliability. Because facts must be witnessed and asserted by others to exist, "the establishment of facts is so extraordinarily uncertain" (WP 65; see TP 243). This is why lying poses such a significant threat to factual truths. This

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<sup>11</sup> See also Foucault's claim that "[t]ruth is a thing of this world" (2000, 131).

<sup>12</sup> In his only detailed discussion of Arendt, Derrida criticizes her for the "absence of a veritable problematic of testimony, witnessing, or bearing witness" and for her "concept of 'lying to oneself' or 'internal self-deception'" (Derrida 2002, 67). See Jay (2009), Barbour (2011), and La Caze (2017) for more differentiated accounts.

applies not only to specific facts but to our entire factual reality: "The historian knows how vulnerable is the whole texture of facts in which we spend our daily life; it is always in danger of being perforated by single lies or torn to shreds by the organized lying of groups, nations, or classes, [...] or simply allowed to fall into oblivion." (LP 6) This danger exists not only where inconvenient or "unwelcome factual truths" – such as the fact that a majority of the German people supported Hitler's rule or, to take up our current example, that the sun did not shine at Trump's first inauguration – are denied or lied away but also where facts are treated as if they "were not a matter of historical record but a matter of opinion" (TP 236).

This tacit transformation of factual truth into mere *opinion* is possible because factual truth and opinion do not belong to different spheres; rather, "both belong to the political realm and are most closely connected" (WP 59). Arendt even goes a step further: "factual truth is no more self-evident than opinion," which makes it "relatively easy to discredit factual truth as just another opinion" (TP 243). This ontological and epistemic affinity between facts and opinions becomes a serious danger once we no longer deal with a conflict of different views "within the framework of a common and commonly recognized reality" (TP 236–37) but with the questioning of the common world as such. What is at stake here is not just individual facts but the "common and factual reality itself," and this is not only an ontological or epistemological but "indeed a political problem of the first order" (TP 237).

The lesson Arendt draws from this is that facts and opinions must be kept apart precisely because both belong to the realm of human affairs. Facts must be witnessed and made known to exist, and in this respect, they belong in the political sphere just like opinions. But while "opinions, inspired by different interests and passions, can differ widely and still be legitimate as long as they respect factual truth" (TP 238) and "the integrity of the facts to which they refer" (WP 57–58), conflicting facts cannot be legitimate and coexist in the same way as opinions. Arendt thus seems to imply a base and superstructure model between facts and opinions: "Facts inform opinions" and are the subject matter of opinions (TP 238), which is why they serve as the basis for any opinion-forming process.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, "all freedom of opinion becomes a cruel hoax" if there is no "right to unmanipulated factual information" (LP 45), and "[f]reedom of opinion is a farce unless factual information is guaranteed and the facts themselves are not in dispute" (TP 238). Facts are therefore both the condition and the limit of opinion formation: "factual truth provides the subject matter for the formation of opinions and keeps it in check" (WP 63; see TP 242). This leads Arendt to the surprising

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<sup>13</sup> Regarding the relationship between factual and rational truths, this implies that "factual truth informs political thought just as rational truth informs philosophical speculation" (TP 238).



conclusion that facts exist independently and beyond deliberative processes: "Facts are beyond agreement and consent, and all talk about them [...] will contribute nothing to their establishment. Unwelcome opinion can be argued with, rejected, or compromised upon, but unwelcome facts possess an infuriating *stubbornness* that nothing can move except plain lies." (TP 241; emphasis added)

This contradicts Arendt's earlier claim that facts and factual truths are inherently political and must be witnessed and spoken about in order to exist (see TP 238). Moreover, the question arises as to how the stubbornness of facts can be reconciled with their inherent frailty, uncertainty, and vulnerability. Arendt is pursuing a two-pronged strategy here. On the one hand, she assumes a fundamental level of "pure facts" (*reine Tatsachen*) and "brutally elementary data," which are "independent of opinion and interpretation" and whose irrefutability and "indestructibility has been taken for granted even by the most extreme and most sophisticated believers in historicism" (TP 238–39). On the other hand, she explains the stubbornness and "great resiliency" of facts, despite their precarious and fragile nature, by attributing to them the "same irreversibility that is the hallmark of all human action" (TP 258–59). Facts, "like all results of human action, in difference to the products of work, cannot be undone" (WP 85; see TP 259).<sup>14</sup> This irreversibility also marks the limits of human power, since no power in the world can undo facts and events once they have occurred: "In their stubbornness, facts are superior to power" and "less transitory than power formations, which arise when men get together for a purpose but disappear as soon as the purpose is either achieved or lost" (TP 259; see also 1989, 200). The consequence is that power – understood as "the human ability [...] to act in concert" (1970, 44) – can neither guarantee nor replace factual truth and reality: "power, by its very nature, can never produce a substitute for the secure stability of factual reality, which, because it is past, has grown into a dimension beyond our reach" (TP 258).

But just as the past is beyond our control, the stubbornness of facts cannot simply be demonstrated either. Indeed, it only becomes apparent in retrospect, when it turns out that "where facts have been consistently replaced by lies and total fiction [...] there is no substitute for truth" (WP 83), just as there is no "adequate substitute for reality and factuality" (TP 257).<sup>15</sup> In a certain way, the existence of truth and facts can therefore only be established negatively and retrospectively: On the one hand, they are the solid

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<sup>14</sup> In *The Human Condition*, Arendt speaks of the "threefold frustration of action – the unpredictability of its outcome, the irreversibility of the process, and the anonymity of its authors" (1989, 220).

<sup>15</sup> This irreplaceability gives truth is the specific force, which differs from that of rhetorical persuasion and physical violence: "Truth, though powerless and always defeated in a head-on clash with the powers that be, possesses a strength [*Kraft*] of its own: whatever those in power may contrive, they are unable to discover or invent a viable substitute for it. Persuasion and violence can destroy truth, but they cannot replace it." (TP 259; WP 86)

ground without which no common action is possible and whose absence we only notice when the shared reality has already become fiction. On the other hand, they cannot be replaced by anything else, which might explain why truth and facts, even where they seem to have lost their relevance for politics, as in totalitarian regimes or our 'post-truth age,' do not disappear from political discourse.

### 3. The Political Function of Lying

If we consider the stubbornness of facts from the viewpoint of lying, the difficulties do not diminish. For the "stubborn thereness," which according to Arendt is the "surest sign of the factuality of facts and events," is paradoxically their greatest weakness, since it gives lies and propaganda "their momentary advantage over factual truth" (TP 258). This is because lies often appear more coherent than bare facts when it comes to processes of political opinion formation. While the "inherent contingency [of facts and events] ultimately defies all attempts at conclusive explanation" (TP 257), the characteristic feature of systematic lies, propaganda, or conspiracy narratives is "that in them all particular data are plausibly ordered" and "every fact is fully explained" (WP 84).

Nevertheless, Arendt does not banish lying from the political sphere – quite the contrary. While the "stubborn thereness" of facts highlights the irreversibility and irrefutability of human reality, lying stands for the possibility of change and a new beginning. Because to start something new, and "to make room for one's own action, something that was there before must be removed or destroyed." This is precisely what lying does, since "the deliberate denial of factual truth – the ability to lie – and the capacity to change facts – the ability to act – are interconnected" (LP 5). Lying is thus not just a common political device that is part of every politician's daily business. Understood as the possibility "of inserting ourselves into the world by word and deed, thus acquiring and sustaining our personal identity and beginning something entirely new" (TP 263), lying is also a constitutive element of human action. As the ability to imagine another world, lying makes action possible in the first place, "and action is of course the very stuff politics are made of" (LP 6).

Surprisingly, this means that freedom is not associated with the idea of truth – as one might assume according to the maxim "The truth will set you free" (John 8:32) – but with that of lying. Because only "our ability to lie – but not necessarily our ability to tell the truth – belongs among the few obvious, demonstrable data that confirm human freedom" (TP 250). Consequently, lying is not only an element of political action but also a sign of freedom, paradoxically both enabling and destroying it: "That we can change the circumstances under which we live at all is because we are relatively free from them, and it is this freedom that is abused and perverted through

mendacity" (TP 250) but also made possible, as Arendt specifies in the German edition.<sup>16</sup> This does not pose a significant problem as long as lying is done selectively and locally, with the intention of deceiving the opponent and concealing the truth. Lying, however, becomes a serious danger to the community once it is done systematically and in an organized form, as in totalitarian regimes, where reality is threatened and negated by systematic manipulation.

It follows that Arendt distinguishes between two forms of lying. While the *traditional lie* refers only to isolated sections of reality, the *modern lie* uses organized manipulation to target reality as a whole. The traditional lie is *partial* and *asymmetrical*: It is partial because it only affects individual aspects of reality within a larger context; it is asymmetrical because it does not deceive everyone without distinction but is directed at particular persons, groups, or hostile states, so that the liar does not have to fear the danger of self-deception. To expose the lie, it is sufficient to point out "incongruities, holes, or the junctures of patched-up places"; for as long as only isolated aspects are affected and the fabric of reality as a whole remains intact, "the lie will eventually show up as if of its own accord" (TP 253). In short, the "injury done to reality" by the liar is not complete; nor is "the injury done to the liar himself [...] complete or final. He lied, but he is not yet a liar [*er hat gelogen, aber er ist nicht verlogen*]" (TP 254–55; see WP 80).

By contrast, the modern lie – such as the systematic fabrication of history in totalitarian regimes – is *universal* and *symmetrical*: It is universal in that it not only concerns isolated aspects of reality but aims at a "complete rearrangement of the whole factual texture" so that it becomes an "adequate substitute for reality and factuality," fitting even better – "without seam, crack, or fissure" – than the original facts (TP 253–54); it is symmetrical in that those who fabricate it deceive not only others but also themselves. In other words, while the traditional lie aims to conceal and hide the truth from individual persons or groups, the modern lie obliterates and destroys the common world as a whole, so that "the difference between the traditional lie and the modern lie will more often than not amount to the difference between *hiding* and *destroying*" (TP 253; emphasis added). The crucial problem here is not so much that lies take the place of truth, so that "the lies will now be accepted as truth, and the truth be defamed as lies," but that the very distinction between truth and falsehood, which provides meaning and orientation in the world, is abolished (TP 257).

This violent and reality-destroying force of the modern lie is not limited to totalitarian regimes but also affects, albeit in a less murderous way (see PT 252), modern democracies, in which reality is systematically "defactualized" through public

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<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, Arendt does not speak of 'mendacity' (*Verlogenheit*) in the German edition but of 'lying' (*Lügen*): "es ist diese Freiheit, die das Lügen ermöglicht und die gleichzeitig von ihm mißbraucht und pervertiert wird" (WP 74).

relations, marketing techniques, and "image-making" (LP 44). What is at stake here is not so much the deliberate distortion of reality as the tendency to blur the distinction between *opinions* and *facts* by turning facts into opinions and masquerading opinions as facts (see TP 237). Because of the "present system of world-wide communication," propaganda fictions are sooner or later recognized and exposed (TP 256).<sup>17</sup> For this reason, instead of outright denying the facts, modern liars present them as mere opinions. This "blurring of the dividing line between factual truth and opinion" is just another, more subtle instance of "the many forms that lying can assume, all of which are forms of action" (TP 250). Consequently, in modern democracies, factual truths are threatened not so much "by lies and deliberate falsehood but by opinion[s]" (TP 237), which are subjected to the logic of the market and are advertised and sold by lobbyists and public relations experts "no differently from soap powder and perfumes" (WP 80; see TP 255).

The deliberate transformation of factual truths into mere views and opinions also seems to characterize our current post-truth condition, in which any subject matter, even simple facts, can be recast as just another point of view or even as 'alternative facts,' with which one may agree or disagree (see Hendricks and Vestergaard 2019, 49–52; 104). Again, truth is less threatened by lies than by the deliberate reinterpretation of historical facts and scientific findings as mere opinions.<sup>18</sup> Can we therefore conclude that political decisions should be based solely on scientifically sound findings and confirmed facts? Not exactly. The reverse tendency to present facts as necessary and without alternative – in line with the notorious TINA principle ("There Is No Alternative") – and to reduce politics to purely factual issues, expert knowledge, and mere administration is just as troubling. As Linda Zerilli puts it, "The problem of factual truth, then, is not only that it is vulnerable to mendacity, but also that we tend to see such truth in the mode of necessity" (2012, 71).

The reason for this, as Arendt argues, is that "[t]ruth carries within itself an element of coercion" (TP 239). Even worse, "from the viewpoint of politics, truth has a despotic character" (TP 241) and consequently a "non-political and, potentially, even anti-political nature" (TP 260). For "every claim in the sphere of human affairs to an absolute truth" that purports to be independent of people's opinions is imperious and

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<sup>17</sup> Arendt goes so far as to claim that, due to the de-hierarchization of communication in modern mass democracies, "under fully democratic conditions deception without self-deception is well-nigh impossible" (TP 256). On Arendt's problematic attitude toward modern mass democracy, see Derrida (2002, 57–58) and Brunkhorst (2004).

<sup>18</sup> Think of those who claim that Darwin's theory of evolution is no more provable than creationism, or of those who relativize scientific findings concerning climate change and reinterpret them as matters of opinion.

"strikes at the very roots of all politics and all governments" (TP 233).<sup>19</sup> This applies not only to rational truths but to truths of all kinds. Of course, mathematical, scientific, philosophical, and factual truths "are produced and proven in completely different ways" (WP 60), as Arendt concedes; "but, once perceived as true and pronounced to be so, they have in common that they are beyond agreement, dispute, opinion, or consent" (TP 240). Consequently, the ambivalences in Arendt's account of truth cannot be resolved by attributing the coercive character solely to absolute or rational truths. Factual truths are just as despotic and anti-political as rational truths are: "The trouble is that factual truth, like all other truth, peremptorily claims to be acknowledged and precludes debate, and debate constitutes the very essence of political life" (TP 241).

As far as opinions are concerned, the situation is quite different. Here, the coercive and compelling factor is absent, as opinions always require explanation and justification: "Opinions do not possess axiomatic certainty. They are not self-evident but require justification; they do not impose themselves but are the result of deliberation" (WP 62). Arendt concludes from this, ignoring again the testimonial character of factual truths, that "our thinking is truly discursive" only in "matters of opinion, but not in matters of truth": for only in matters of opinion does our thinking run, "as it were, from place to place, from one part of the world to another, through all kinds of conflicting views, until it finally ascends from these particularities to some impartial generality" (TP 242).<sup>20</sup>

#### 4. The Aporias of Truth and Politics

To summarize, politics is under threat in two respects: first, by the "compelling force of truth" (LP 236) and the "factuality of facts and events" (TP 257), whose irrefutability excludes any debate, discussion, and exchange of opinions; second, by organized lying, which in modern democracies transforms facts into mere opinions and destroys not only the distinction between truth and falsehood but also our orientation in the world. To make matters worse, truth and facts not only undermine the possibility of political action but also provide its foundation. Similarly, lying not only destroys the possibility of action but also enables it by creating a new beginning.

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<sup>19</sup> The consequence is that truth is valued neither by totalitarian nor democratic regimes, albeit for different reasons: "It is [...] hated by tyrants, who rightly fear the competition of a coercive force they cannot monopolize, and it enjoys a rather precarious status in the eyes of governments that rest on consent and abhor coercion" (TP 241). On Arendt's identification of truth and tyranny, see Beiner (2008, 128).

<sup>20</sup> On Arendt's reevaluation of the role of opinion-formation or judgment vis-à-vis the philosophical quest for truth, see Arendt (1990), Enaudeau (2007), Zerilli (2012), and Zerilli (2025).

Arendt seeks to dispel these contradictions by locating truth – contrary to her initial claim that "truth is political by nature" – "outside the political realm" (TP 263), at its margins, defining it as that which keeps the "inherent boundlessness of action" within limits (1989, 191). While political institutions, such as constitutions, civil rights, or the separation of powers, "arise out of and belong to the political realm" and are therefore only partially capable of limiting political rule, truth can assume this function because it "has its source outside the political realm, and is as independent of the wishes and desires of the citizens as is the will of the worst tyrant" (TP 240). For politics, it follows that it "can preserve its own integrity and fulfil its inherent promise that people can change the world only if it respects the limits placed on this capacity" (WP 92; see TP 264). This also means accepting that past actions and events cannot be undone. If, on the other hand, the past itself is called into question, then "the political realm is deprived not only of its main stabilizing force but of the starting point from which to change, to begin something new" (TP 258). The concluding sentence of Arendt's essay reads accordingly: "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" (TP 264).

In other words, what makes political speech and action possible in the first place, according to Arendt, is the shared ground of factual truths and the stubbornness of facts; that what drives them forward is the sky of philosophical truths, such as the proposition that it is better to suffer a wrong than do wrong, or such 'self-evident truths' as that all men are created equal.<sup>21</sup> However, since truth is only metaphorically the ground beneath our feet, it should not be too surprising that it is far from solid. As we have seen, this applies especially to factual truths. Although Arendt asserts the "stubborn thereness" of facts that guarantees the common reality, she also emphasizes their fragility. The reason for this 'groundless ground' of factual reality, which is also a sign of lying,<sup>22</sup> lies – apart from the testimonial character of facts, not to mention the notorious unreliability of eyewitnesses and the possibility of falsifying historical documents (see TP 243) – in the intrinsically narrative structure of reality: "For what we understand as reality is never identical with the sum of all facts and events accessible to us, and would not be so even if we ever succeeded in getting hold of all objective data" (WP 89; see TP 261). Instead, reality becomes comprehensible only when it is

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<sup>21</sup> For a critical examination of Arendt's claim that Thomas Jefferson confused truth with opinion when he wrote "We hold these truths as self-evident" in the Declaration of Independence (TP 246), see Honig (1991), and Posselt and Seitz (2024, 579).

<sup>22</sup> See TP 258: "consistent lying, metaphorically speaking, pulls the ground from under our feet." The German version reads: "Konsequentes Lügen ist im wahrsten Sinne des Wortes bodenlos [*bottomless, groundless*] und stürzt Menschen ins Bodenlose." Note that Arendt translates "metaphorically speaking" as "im wahrsten Sinne des Wortes" ("in the truest sense of the word").



told in the form of a story: "Who says what is – *legein to eonta* – always tells a story, and in this story the particular facts lose their contingency and acquire some humanly comprehensible meaning" (TP 261–62). This again explains why "the whole texture of facts in which we spend our daily life" is so easily distorted and can be torn apart by lies and organized manipulation (LP 6). It contains, as Nietzsche puts it in "Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense," "not a single point that would be 'true in itself,' real, and universally valid, apart from man" (1989, 251).

Truth is thus, as it were, both inside and outside the political: it is within the political sphere because it is "political by nature"; it is external to it because its coercive character puts an end to politics itself. Accordingly, truth can also be understood as the 'constitutive outside' of politics: it is constitutive of politics insofar as it grounds and limits political action; it must be excluded from the political realm and banished to its outer limits insofar as its despotic character makes any political action impossible. For politics, this means that reducing political action to purely fact-based decision-making undermines the political sphere just as much as the reverse attempt to deny facts or turn them into mere opinions. Or as Arendt puts it, "Political thinking and judging moves between the danger of taking facts to be necessary and therefore unchangeable, and the other one of denying them and trying to lie them out of the world" (WP 85; see TP 259). If this diagnosis is correct, the challenge would be to navigate the fragile ship of democracy between the Scylla of a purely fact-based technocracy and the Charybdis of post-factual politics. From this perspective, *post-factual politics*, as we experience it today, is the flipside of a *factual* or *technocratic post-politics* (see Vogelmann 2018; Marchart 2017), in which political questions are reduced to factual questions, prompting actors not to judge but to calculate (see LP 37).

This approach has the advantage of viewing truth and politics not as simple opposites but as antagonists in a 'war of position,' to use a Gramscian term. However, it remains inadequate if we want to gain a more precise understanding of their mutual interdependence. Suppose it is true that politics oscillates between the two extremes of either considering facts as necessary and unchangeable or denying them altogether. In this case, it would be once again a matter of distinguishing truth from politics, instead of problematizing their entanglement. Such an approach can neither explain the particular interplay between truth and politics in a society, its "politics of truth," to borrow Foucault's phrase (2000, 131), nor why and how a society's politics or regime of truth changes or becomes fragile in a particular historical constellation.

Yet Arendt's "Truth and Politics" also allows for another reading. If we take Arendt's reflections to their logical conclusion, it turns out that the relationship between truth and politics is not so much contradictory as *aporetic*. In system-theoretical terms, a

paradox or aporia occurs when the conditions of possibility of a concept, phenomenon, or operation are also the conditions of its impossibility (see Baraldi et al. 1997, 131). Our analysis has shown that this applies to the relationship between truth and politics: Truth is the *condition of possibility* of politics since it makes politics possible in the first place; it is the *condition of impossibility* of politics since its compelling force undermines all political debate. This aporetic structure is also mirrored in the relation between lying and politics: Lying is the condition of possibility of politics since it opens up the possibility of action; it is the condition of impossibility of politics since in its organized form it undermines reality as the common ground of political life and thus destroys the human sense of orientation in the world.

The discussion revolving around Arendt's "Truth and Politics" usually ignores these aporias or attempts to downplay or resolve them. This applies to approaches that reject Arendt's account as inconsistent as well as to those that defend it, by, for example, distinguishing between different types of truth's "despotism,"<sup>23</sup> revising the dichotomy between factual and rational truth (Nelson 1978; Brunkhorst 2004; Chambers 2020; Sari 2021; Fusillo 2024), considering Arendt's reflections on political judgment (Zerilli 2012), or stressing the "division of labor between uncovering facts much up to journalists, legal bodies, and scientists, and the democratic deliberation and debate carried out between politicians and citizens fully equipped with values and visions for the good life and the just society" (Hendricks and Vestergaard 2019, 107). My argument, on the other hand, is that the seeming or actual contradictions are less attributable to Arendt's ambivalent notion of truth or her multi-layered argumentation than to the aporetic structure of truth and politics itself, as it is characteristic of the Western tradition. If this thesis holds, then what initially appeared to be a shortcoming would turn out to be a strength of her essay, making explicit the inherent aporias of truth and politics (even if Arendt herself would probably not have agreed with this thesis). Consequently, any analysis of the truth–politics relationship remains inadequate if it fails to account for its aporetic structure. Neither can the conflict between truth and politics be resolved by clear demarcations, nor do they belong to separate spheres that could control each other according to the principle of checks and balances. Instead, we are dealing with a reciprocal conditionality whose aporetic structure is crucial to a thorough understanding of the current crisis of the liberal truth regime, of which the post-truth discourse is arguably only a symptom.

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<sup>23</sup> See Villa (1996, 96): "While, from a doxastic perspective, it is possible to speak of the 'despotism' of factual truth, this despotism is of a different order from that exercised by truths of reason or religion. The former provide nonpolitical boundaries to be realms of opinion and persuasion, while the latter invariably quash the plurality of perspectives that generates the 'incessant discourse' Arendt cherishes."

This requires that aporias are not dismissed as mere contradictions or impasses that lead to suspension of judgment, as in skepticism, but are seen as critical passage points that provide valuable insights into the phenomena in question. In "Force of Law" (1992), Jacques Derrida emphasizes that every decision or judgment that is not reducible to mere calculation or the mechanical application of rules contains an element of undecidability. Consequently, there is no epistemic, ethical, or political judgment without a moment of aporia; we are only dealing with a responsible judgment or decision where it cannot be reached by logical or algorithmic operations alone.<sup>24</sup> The above characterization of truth as the 'constitutive outside' of politics can perhaps be seen in a similar vein. According to Judith Butler, the emergence of a constitutive outside can be understood in two ways: first, as "the constitution of a political field that produces *and naturalizes* that constitutive outside"; second, as the constitution of "a political field that produces and *renders contingent* the specific parameters of that constitutive outside" (1995, 55). The latter seems to apply to Arendt, as her repeated attempts to determine a fixed point or stable ground from which to address the conflict between truth and politics reveal precisely the contingency of such foundations.

## 5. Telling the Truth and 'Speaking True': Arendt and Foucault

### *Arendt's Truth-Teller*

Although Arendt repeatedly touches on the aporetic relationship between truth and politics, she does not draw the full consequences from it. One way to go beyond Arendt's conceptual framework, without losing sight of the aporias of truth and politics, is to contrast her figure of the *truth-teller* with Foucault's concept of *parrhesia*, which he develops in his last lecture series at the Collège de France.<sup>25</sup> At first glance, Arendt's *truth-teller* (*Wahrheitssager*) and Foucault's *parrhesiastes* (*Wahrsager*), the one who 'speaks true' (*dire-vrai*), do not seem to differ too much. In both cases, we are dealing with a person who tells the truth and takes a particular risk. Examples of *parrhesia* are the royal advisor and the citizen before the people's assembly, who courageously confront their counterparts with the unwelcome truth. Arendt's recurring example is the "conflict between truth-teller and citizens" (TP 229) in Plato's *Cave Allegory*. As long as those who throw off their chains only strive for truth to dwell under the "sky of everlasting ideas" (TP 237), they have nothing to fear. However, they risk their lives once

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<sup>24</sup> On an instructive juxtaposition of Arendt's and Derrida's concept of judgment, see Flatscher and Pistol (2024).

<sup>25</sup> See especially Foucault (2010), Foucault (2011), and Foucault (2019). Since I am only concerned here with comparing Arendt's truth-teller and Foucault's parrhesiast, I will not go into the extensive discussion on parrhesia. For parallels and differences between Arendt's and Foucault's notion of truth-telling, see Tamboukou (2012), Holme (2018), Hyvönen (2018), Newman (2019), Posselt (2021), and Zerilli (2025).

they try to convince their fellow citizens of the truth and "to set them free from falsehood and illusion" (TP 229). But there are also significant differences. While Arendt's truth-teller is simply stating or reporting an obvious fact, *parrhesia* denotes a "verbal activity" through which the individual constitutes themselves as a speaking subject by openly telling the truth to the face of the other. Or as Foucault puts it, "In *parrêsia*, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses truth instead of lies, death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and duty instead of interest and selfishness" (2019, 46).

A benevolent reader might recognize this mode of truth-telling in Arendt's discussion of Socrates, who fearlessly accepts the death sentence imposed on him by his fellow citizens. As Socrates's tragic case shows, a philosophical truth, such as "It is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong," cannot be demonstrated by argument, but can only be taught by example and proven by practice (TP 247). At best, this applies to philosophical truths but not factual ones, because factual truths are neither necessarily true nor do they contain any political principles for human action. In this respect, the teller of a factual truth finds themselves in a situation even more hopeless than that of Socrates, since factual truth – unlike Socrates's philosophical truth – "has no transcendent origin and possesses not even the relatively transcendent qualities of such political principles as freedom, justice, honor, and courage, all of which may inspire, and then become manifest in, human action" (TP 243). While Socrates, by invoking these principles, sets an example and puts it to the test – "indeed, the only form of 'persuasion' [*Beweisführung*] that philosophical truth is capable of" (TP 247; see WP 70) – factual truths can at best be the basis but not the guiding principle of action:

Not only do factual statements contain no principles upon which men might act and which thus could become manifest in the world; their very content defies this kind of verification. A teller of factual truth, in the unlikely event that he wished to stake his life on a particular fact, would achieve a kind of *miscarriage*. What would become manifest in his act would be his courage or, perhaps, his stubbornness but neither the truth of what he had to say nor even his own truthfulness. (TP 249; emphasis added)

In other words, the one who risks their life and accepts death to prove a factual truth or to verify a fact is simply misguided. They are not even a martyr bearing witness to a religious truth, but merely a fool. Their speech act would be, in Austin's words, a "misfire," "misexecution," or "miscarriage" (1975, 18). As courageous or stubborn as they may be (Arendt's *stubbornness* of facts comes to mind), this proves neither the truth of their statements nor their truthfulness. Even the liar may be quite willing to risk his life if it seems opportune to him, "especially in politics, where he might be

motivated by patriotism or some other kind of legitimate group partiality" (TP 249). Accordingly, neither speaking the truth nor truthfulness counts as a political virtue: "the mere telling of facts, leads to no action whatever; it even tends, under normal circumstances, toward the acceptance of things as they are" (TP 251). This also explains why the mere expression of facts and "a commitment even to factual truth is felt to be an anti-political attitude" (TP 239). To be sure, under certain circumstances "the disclosure of facts may be legitimately used by political organizations" as a weapon in a political struggle, or "encourage and strengthen the claims of ethnic and social groups" (TP 251) – think, for example, of the publication of the Pentagon Papers by Daniel Ellsberg, Chelsea Manning's leaking of classified documents to *Wikileaks*, or the #MeToo movement. However, according to Arendt, such disclosures are not political per se; they become so only where they are used to pursue political goals.

However, Arendt's argument that the mere assertion of facts has no political relevance is difficult to reconcile with the testimonial character of facts. Right at the beginning of her essay, Arendt declares that even the mere saying of *what is* constitutes an act without which no human world could exist:

[N]o human world [...] will ever be able to survive without men willing to do what Herodotus was the first to undertake consciously – namely, *legein to eonta*, 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. (TP 229)

This is because facts "possess by themselves no trace of self-evidence or plausibility for the human mind"; instead, they are characterized by an "irritating contingency" (*irritierende Kontingenz*), since things "could always have been otherwise" (TP 251; see WP 75). As we have already seen, this gives the liar a significant advantage over the truth-teller: "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" (TP 251).<sup>26</sup> Moreover, while we can never be sure whether the truth-teller is sincere or simply naïve, selfish, self-interested, or desperate for attention, the liar has always already started to act, thus proving their freedom. Truth and truthfulness, by contrast, become political virtues only in a community where lies are ubiquitous, such as in totalitarian regimes.

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<sup>26</sup> Zerilli points out that "the liar, though engaged in action, is also engaged in the denial of action's central feature: contingency" (2020, 18).

Only where a community has embarked upon organized lying on principle, and not only with respect to particulars, can truthfulness as such, unsupported by the distorting forces of power and interest, become a political factor of the first order. Where everybody lies about everything of importance, the truth-teller, whether he knows it or not, has begun to act. (TP 251)

The reason for this is that "[i]n a world where facts are dealt with at will, the simplest statement of fact is already a threat to those in power" (WP 75). So, telling the truth can be a political act after all, but only in the extreme case of a world in which everything has already become a lie. However, this also allows for a reverse conclusion. One could argue that reality turns into fiction once political actors succeed in establishing themselves as the sole truth-tellers. If, for example, Trump repeatedly promises his supporters that he will always tell them the truth, gains their trust, and thus succeeds in constituting himself as the sole subject of truth, he, by implication, also proves to them that the so-called 'real' world is nothing but a web of lies, fictions, and fake news fabricated by the ruling elites, the mainstream media, etc.

Arendt's figure of the truth-teller does not seem to get us any further here. On the one hand, she seems to ignore that even a simple statement is a complex speech act that not only describes or reports existing facts but also performs actions, establishes facts, and constitutes subjectivities. On the other hand, she conceives of truth-telling as an isolated activity of a single subject and not as a practice shared with others. Or to quote her own words, "Outstanding among the existential modes of truth-telling are the solitude of the philosopher, the isolation of the scientist and the artist, the impartiality of the historian and the judge, and the independence of the fact-finder, the witness, and the reporter" (TP 259–60). Leaving aside the question of whether philosophy, science, and art can be understood as isolated practices and in what specific sense judges, historians, witnesses, and reporters are impartial and independent,<sup>27</sup> one wonders where Arendt locates her own truth-telling. She is surprisingly unambiguous here:

To look upon politics from the perspective of truth, *as I have done here*, 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.<sup>28</sup> (TP 259; emphasis added)

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<sup>27</sup> On the complex discussion on testimony and bearing witness, see for example Krämer and Weigel (2017).

<sup>28</sup> The phrase "and to speak the language of persuasion or of violence" was omitted by Arendt in the German edition (WP 86), probably because it implies that the language of politics and human affairs is, by default, a language of persuasion and violence.



The only question arising here, as Arendt continues in the German edition, is "whether this standpoint itself," which is also her own, "has any political significance" (WP 86). This passage is remarkable: not only because Arendt, as Bernard Harcourt critically notes, "places herself, as a truth-teller, outside of politics" and "seeks refuge in the attitude of the philosopher" (2020, 125–26), but also because this position is difficult to reconcile with the practical and experimental nature of the essay as an "exercise[] in political thought, as it arises out of the actuality of political incidents" (1969, 14). Even if such an exercise cannot occur in the political sphere itself, it cannot be detached from it either. Indeed, the "proper habitat" for such an exercise in political thought, as Arendt tells us about the genesis of "Truth and Politics," is the "gap between past and future" in which it must learn to move (TP 227; 1969, 14).<sup>29</sup>

### ***Foucault's Parrhesiast***

In contrast to Arendt's ambivalent claim to an external standpoint, Foucault's genealogical approach, following Nietzsche, emphasizes that there is neither a neutral and independent standpoint nor an impartial and objective meta-language for the historian. "Nietzsche's version of historical sense is explicit in its perspective and acknowledges its system of injustice" (Foucault 1998, 382). Importantly, this 'perspective injustice' is not a methodological dilemma; rather, it enables critical activity to become reflexive by tracing the genealogy of its own epistemic movement (see Posselt 2005, 78–81). This is also how Foucault understands his "genealogy of truth-telling" (2010, 255). While Arendt views truth-telling as an existential mode of solitude, Foucault accentuates parrhesia's dialogic-performative and subject-constitutive character. According to Foucault, parrhesia is a form of address in which an individual speaks the truth openly and courageously to the face of the other and thus "constitutes himself and is constituted by others as a subject of a discourse of truth" (2011, 3). In this sense, parrhesia is a critique in which the speaker, who knows the truth but has no power, addresses from a position of inferiority those who have power but do not possess the truth. This is done not out of coercion but at free will, because the parrhesiast sees it as their duty to tell the truth to help others (see 2019, 46). Consequently, parrhesia cannot

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<sup>29</sup> In a footnote to the English edition, Arendt addresses the political background of "Truth and Politics": "This essay was caused by the so-called controversy after the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Its aim is to clarify two different, though interconnected, issues of which I had not been aware before and whose importance seemed to transcend the occasion. The first concerns the question of whether it is always legitimate to tell the truth – did I believe without qualification in '*Fiat veritas, et pereat mundus*'? The second arose through the amazing amount of lies used in the 'controversy' – lies about what I had written, on one hand, and about the facts I had reported, on the other. The following reflections try to come to grips with both issues. They may also serve as an example of what happens to a highly topical subject when it is drawn into that gap between past and future which is perhaps the proper habitat of all reflections." (TP 227) Note that "the question of whether it is always legitimate to tell the truth" also touches on parrhesia.

be reduced to merely speaking the truth; rather, it is a verbal activity directed at others that receives its efficacy from them (see Posselt 2021).

It is important to note that Foucault does not speak of *truth-telling* or the *truth-teller* (*Wahrheitssager*), as Arendt does, but uses the French phrase *dire-vrai* (literally, 'true-telling') in reference to Nietzsche's term *Wahrsager* (literally, 'true-teller,' 'the one who speaks true') (Foucault 2019, 63).<sup>30</sup> What is at stake in parrhesia, then, is not *truth* as such, in any idealistic or universalistic sense, but the dialogical and performative activity of 'speaking true.' Whereas, according to Arendt, "the *truth-seeker* and *truth-teller* can exist only as an individual with individuals" (WP 54) – a "mode[] of being alone" that excludes "political commitment" and "adherence to a cause" (TP 259–60) – Foucault's parrhesiast already speaks and acts with others, not only confronting their fellow human beings with the painful truth, but revealing themselves in their vulnerability. In other words: While Arendt's truth-teller commits an error of judgment and runs into their doom when they try to free their "fellow-citizens [...] from falsehood and illusion" (TP 229), the parrhesiast recognizes not only their vulnerability but also that their relation to themselves and to truth is already mediated by their relation to others.<sup>31</sup>

These two modes of the subject's relation to truth roughly corresponds to Foucault's distinction between two ways of problematizing truth (see Posselt 2021, 9): The first, analytical tradition "is concerned with the question of how to make sure that a statement is true, that its reasoning is correct, and that we are able to get access to truth" (Foucault 2019, 224); the second, critical tradition is concerned with the meaning of truth for the individual and the community and addresses the role of power "in the interplay between the subject and truth" (2011, 8). Here, the question is, "what is the importance of telling the truth, who is able to tell the truth, and why should we tell the truth, know the truth, and recognize who is able to tell the truth?" (2019, 224). If we understand parrhesia along these lines, it becomes clear that it can neither be reduced to an "analytics of truth" (2019, 224) nor to the act of telling the truth. Rather, it is – to borrow Arendt's phrase – a "truly discursive" practice that was initially rooted in politics and democracy and later transferred to ethics and the realm of personal relations. As a discursive practice addressed at others, parrhesia produces effects and events that

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<sup>30</sup> On Foucault's use of the term *dire-vrai* and the reasons for translating it into English as "truth-telling," see the editors' preface in Foucault (2014, 1).

<sup>31</sup> For a different reading, based on Arendt's account of opinion (*doxa*), see Zerilli (2025). According to Zerilli, "Foucault's primary interest in the subject's 'manifestation of truth' (GL, 10), though it rightly reminds us of our part in the 'force of truth,' risks losing sight of 'men in the plural' and the common world, without which, Arendt argued, the truths relevant to politics could never survive" (2025, 92).

challenge and transform the speaking subject's relationship to truth, to itself, and to others.<sup>32</sup>

However, parrhesia also has another, negative side, which is why it is vital to know who is actually able and qualified to tell the truth. Because if parrhesia means saying everything without hiding or concealing anything, really everything that comes to one's mind, without any restriction or distinction, then parrhesia not only becomes mere talk and gossip, but a real danger for the polis and democracy (see Foucault 2019, 124). Foucault speaks therefore of "two great paradoxes at the center of the relations between democracy and true discourse, at the center of the relations between *parrēsia* and *politeia*": "No true discourse without democracy, but true discourse introduces differences into democracy. No democracy without true discourse, but democracy threatens the very existence of true discourse" (2010, 184). In other words, democracy is both the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of parrhesia: Democracy is the condition of possibility of parrhesia because parrhesia requires equality in speech (*isegoria*) and before the law (*isonomia*); it is its condition of impossibility because if everybody has the right to say what comes to mind, without thinking and differentiation, then parrhesia itself becomes impossible. Conversely, parrhesia is also the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of democracy: It is the condition of possibility of democracy because without the possibility of openly telling the truth and voicing critique there can be no democracy; it is its condition of impossibility because by requiring the speaker to distinguishing themselves from their fellow citizens through their moral qualities, parrhesia undermines the equality principle of democracy.<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, parrhesia contains a violent and injurious element. On the one hand, the parrhesiast openly speaks the painful truth to the other's face, be it the tyrant or the people's assembly. On the other hand, there is always the risk that the addressees do not answer with words but with violence, like Plato's cave dwellers or Dionysius of Syracuse, whose revenge Plato only escapes by fleeing the island (see Foucault 2010, 49).

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<sup>32</sup> In his discussion of Descartes' *Meditations*, Foucault already emphasizes the significance of discursive practices for telling the truth (see Posselt 2019). Whereas the *Meditations* as analysis and logical demonstration presuppose a subject that is itself unaffected by the quest for truth – "it remains, in relation to it, fixed, invariant and as though neutralised" (Foucault 2006a, 562–63) – the *Meditations* as practical exercise and critique require a speaking subject that "ceaselessly moves, changes, modifies his convictions, and advances in his certainties, taking risks and constantly trying new things" (2006b, 579). This recalls Arendt's distinction between thinking as an active experience "through practice, through exercises" and "such mental processes as deducing, inducing, and drawing conclusions whose logical rules of non-contradiction and inner consistency can be learned once and for all and then need only to be applied" (Arendt 1969, 14).

<sup>33</sup> It is important to note, as Zerilli emphasizes, that according to Foucault, these paradoxes or aporias are "a problem to be confronted, not avoided by eliminating one or the other" (2025, 82).

The violent and injurious force of parrhesia reveals an interesting parallel to Arendt's account of lying. Lies not only "harbor an element of violence" (TP 252) but are also potentially destructive. At the same time, as we have seen, this violence is the precondition for human action, for "[i]n order to make room for one's own action, something that was there before must be removed or destroyed" (LP 5). This is not without consequences for another of Arendt's key distinctions, namely that between power and violence. According to Arendt, *power* is a phenomenon of togetherness that exists only where people speak and act in concert; *violence*, on the other hand, though it can extinguish and destroy power, "is utterly incapable of creating" or even of preserving it (1970, 57). In this sense, violence is as impotent as it is powerless, which also explains why violence increasingly occurs "where power is being lost" (1970, 53). However, if it is true that lying is a necessary precondition for human action and a sign of human freedom, then a violent element is inevitably inscribed in all speech and action. This also applies to power, as Oliver Marchart points out: "There is no power, not even an emancipatory power, that is not inherently marked by an element of violence" (2008, 198).

While Arendt seems to be caught in these aporias, Foucault's notion of parrhesia provides us with the conceptual vocabulary to make them productive: on the one hand, by reintroducing truth – which Arendt, because of its coercive character, tolerates only at the borders of the political – into politics; on the other hand, by linking truth to freedom, which, according to Arendt, is above all a sign of lying. This becomes possible because Foucault – unlike Arendt – does not think of truth exclusively in the mode of solitude but conceives of it as a precarious practice with others that is interwoven with an ensemble of self-technologies, modes of subjectivation, governmental techniques, and power relations that constitute a society's politics of truth or truth regime (see Posselt 2024).

## 6. Concluding Remarks

My starting point was the widespread debate about post-truth politics and the emergence of a seemingly post-truth age. While there is no lack of attempts to explain our post-truth predicament, these tend to de-problematize the entanglement of truth and politics rather than subject it to closer scrutiny. To make progress here, I have thoroughly revisited Arendt's essay "Truth and Politics," which, due to its complexity and level of reflection, continues to set the standard against which any analysis of the truth–politics relationship is to be measured. It emerged that the relationship between truth and politics in the history of Western philosophy is not only characterized by constant conflict but is also inherently aporetic. In other words, truth is both the con-

dition of possibility and impossibility of politics, which also applies to the relationship between lying and politics. Although Arendt was probably aware of this, she ultimately failed to draw the full consequences from it. To point out the productive potential of the aporias of truth and politics, I have contrasted Arendt's truth-teller with Foucault's parrhesia, understood as a mode of speaking in which truth, politics, and subjectivity are constitutively intertwined from the outset.

This is not to deny that Arendt's thought might also offer resources for productively developing these aporias. Think, for example, of her revaluation of the Greek notion of opinion (1990) or her reflections on the "disclosure of the agent in speech and action" (1989, §§24–25). Indeed, not only does Arendt herself show an affinity for thinking in aporias; it should also be recalled that, in her view, fundamental contradictions can provide essential clues for gaining new insights, especially where we are dealing with new phenomena for which we do not yet have adequate concepts (see 1969, 25). Therefore, accusing Arendt of propositional or performative contradictions would be misguided. In Derrida's words, that would be, "doubtless the most sterile repetition or confirmation of the said contradiction" (1989, 260). Instead, I aimed to show that Arendt, insofar as she already subverts and deconstructs those rules, forms, and concepts that she must lay claim to, paves the way to an approach that focuses not only on the conflict between truth and politics but also on the conflicting politics of truth in society.

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