



LYING AND HYPOCRISY IN MORALITY AND POLITICS

MENTIRA E HIPOCRISIA NA MORALIDADE E NA POLÍTICA

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Abstract. *Hypocrisy is necessary in politics, especially in democracies, but while hypocrisy can facilitate democratic cooperation, lying tends to undermine it. There are two basic alternative possibilities for how to think about political ethics. The first begins with universal moral principles that are then applied to politics as well as to other areas of life. In the second approach, instead, each activity or type of relationship has its own moral requirements. What is it about politics that makes hypocrisy and lying either morally legitimate or morally illegitimate? For the first approach, lying and hypocrisy are vices, whereas for the second, they may be considered as virtuous under certain circumstances. Hypocrisy is necessary because political relationships are relationships of dependence among people whose interests do not exactly coincide. To secure supporters and coalition partners requires a certain amount of pretense. The case of lying, however, is quite different due to three additional characteristics of political relationships: cooperation over time requires trust; accountability requires transparency; and consensus requires a shared sense of reality. Lying undermines all three. Thus, truthfulness is among the political virtues even if exceptions sometimes must be made. Today, “post-truth” politics (“New Lying”), threatens to create a dangerous indifference to the truth and a cynical, wholesale acceptance of political lying.*

Keywords: *Lying, Hypocrisy, Politics, Ethics, “Dirty Hands”, “Post-Truth”.*

Sumário. *A hipocrisia é necessária na política, especialmente nas democracias; mas enquanto a hipocrisia pode facilitar a cooperação democrática, a mentira tende a miná-la. Há duas alternativas básicas possíveis sobre como pensar acerca da ética política. A primeira parte de princípios morais universais que são depois aplicados à política assim como a outros domínios da vida. Ao invés, de acordo com a segunda abordagem, cada tipo de atividade ou relação apresenta requisitos morais próprios. Quais as características da política que fazem com que a hipocrisia e a mentira sejam, respetivamente, moralmente legítimas ou ilegítimas? De acordo com a primeira abordagem, a mentira e a hipocrisia são vícios, enquanto que para a segunda podem ser consideradas virtuosas em certas circunstâncias. A hipocrisia é necessária porque as relações políticas baseiam-se na dependência entre pessoas cujos interesses não coincidem exatamente. Para garantir apoiantes e parceiros de coligação é necessária uma certa dose de dissimulação. O caso da mentira, contudo, é bastante diferente devido a três*

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características adicionais das relações políticas: a cooperação ao longo do tempo exige confiança; a prestação de contas requer transparência; finalmente, o consenso exige um sentido partilhado da realidade. A mentira mina todas. Por conseguinte, a veracidade pertence às virtudes políticas mesmo que, por vezes, seja preciso abrir exceções. Hoje em dia, a política da “Pós-Verdade” (a “Nova Mentira”), ameaça criar uma indiferença perigosa em relação à verdade e uma aceitação da mentira política a qualquer custo.

Palavras-chave: *Mentira, Hipocrisia, Política, Ética, “Mãos Sujas”, “Pós-Verdade”.*

In 1987, I published a book called *Hypocrisy and Integrity: Machiavelli, Rousseau and the Ethics of Politics*. That was over twenty years ago. So, when I was invited to revisit this subject, I began by asking myself whether or not I would revise my opinions today, considering that the times have certainly changed. At that time, it seemed to me important to recognize the value of a certain kind of hypocrisy, because the political dangers, in my view, emanated primarily from moralistic, absolutist and self-righteous anti-hypocrites. Hypocrisy seemed in need of defense. Then, I argued that hypocrisy is necessary in politics, especially in democracies, and that it often has positive effects. I still think that is true and that it is likely to remain true, and I will try to make the case for these claims shortly.

But today, we face a very different set of political dangers, the dangers that arise from cynicism and indifference to the truth. There is, not only an awful lot of lying going on, but also an attack on the value of truthfulness itself, along with an emphasis on manipulating appearances regardless of the realities. These developments are corrosive of politics, particularly democratic politics. As Hannah Arendt put it:

The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist (Arendt, 1973, p. 474).

While I argue that hypocrisy can facilitate democratic cooperation, lying tends to undermine it. And so, though it may seem somewhat paradoxical, hypocrisy, on the one hand, and lying on the other, do not have the same relationship to political morality.

But before turning to hypocrisy and lying in particular, let us consider how we might think about the relation between morality and politics generally. There

are two basic alternative possibilities for how to think about political ethics. The first begins with general, universal moral principles that define what makes a good human being, and these principles are then applied to different areas of life. For example, if a good person is compassionate, a good soldier should be also. And, if a good person is honest, a good politician should be also. If it turns out that a soldier must be ruthless to be an effective soldier or a politician must lie in order to be an effective politician, then the person who cares about leading a moral life must avoid war and politics. This approach is familiar in Christian pacifism, for example, or in Socrates' claim in the *Apology* that the just man must avoid politics since politics requires injustice. Generally speaking, taking this first approach leads to classifying hypocrisy and lying among the vices.

The second approach is represented by Machiavelli. He is not asking how one can be a Christian prince. Rather, he makes a famous remark in chapter 15 of *The Prince* that a prince has to learn “how not to be good” (Machiavelli, 1979, p. 127). If there are general rules of morality, they do not apply to princes. What is good for a prince is what is necessary in politics. According to this second approach, each activity or type of relationship has its own moral requirements given by the character of the activity. Doctors should be compassionate in order to be good doctors, though soldiers may need to be ruthless. Family members should be loyal in order to be good parents, children and siblings. Instead of a single set of ethical principles applied to our different roles and relationships, each distinct domain has varying moral requirements. We have medical ethics, political ethics, legal ethics, business ethics, and so on, and not just ethics *per se*.

This doesn't mean that there are no commonalities. Activities can be grouped in various ways. Competitive endeavors share certain characteristics - for example, sports, politics, business, and law. And cooperative endeavors share certain characteristics that require different sorts of virtues as well - for example, families, teams, education and politics. Note that politics is included in both categories, as a competitive and a cooperative endeavor. The complex character of political relationships is part of what makes the subject of morality in politics so difficult.

If we take the second approach to the question of the relation of politics and morality, our question now becomes: “What is it about *politics* that makes

hypocrisy and lying either morally legitimate or morally illegitimate?” This question has been asked before. Max Weber, in *Politics as a Vocation*, attributes the complexities of political morality to the fact that violence is the characteristic means of political power (2004, p. 33). Michael Walzer, in “The Problem of Dirty Hands” (1973), takes a similar view. Political relationships are relationships of power backed up by violence.

A very different perspective emerges by viewing political relationships, not so much as relationships of power, but as relationships of dependence. All politicians need supporters and coalition partners. Moreover, they must win their voluntary cooperation. It cannot be forced. While political actors are competitors who do not share the same interests and aims, they depend nonetheless on one another’s cooperation. Political relations are unlike friendships: friends need one another and want to benefit each other. And political relationships are unlike enemies: enemies do not need one another and wish each other harm. Politics is something in between: friendly relations among people who are not friends – people who need one another, but seek their own benefit. It is this dependency among people with conflicting interests that is the unique characteristic of politics.

This characteristic dependence explains where hypocrisy comes from in political life. With friends, you can be honest. With enemies, you can be honest. But with supporters and allies, you might need to be hypocritical. Politicians need to flatter supporters. To secure the cooperation of allies, we use diplomacy. And to act diplomatically means not being entirely frank. Democratic politicians are especially dependent on supporters and coalition partners. They can do very little alone. One should expect, therefore, to find quite a lot of hypocrisy in democracies.

The link between dependence and hypocrisy is one lesson of Machiavelli’s discussion of political morality in *The Prince*. Machiavelli begins the section of the book about lying, hypocrisy and other aspects of political morality (beginning with chapter 15) by telling the reader that he is now turning from discussing war (enemies) to discussing relationships with “subjects and allies,” that is to say, political relationships. Rousseau teaches the same lesson in the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*. People become hypocritical when society has developed to

the point where we are all dependent on one another: "... [Men] must therefore incessantly seek to interest [others] in their fate, and to make them find their own profit, in fact or in appearance, in working for his (Rousseau, 1992, p. 52). We need one another, but our interests do not coincide. Hypocrisy is what allows us to cooperate in these circumstances.

A simple example will illustrate the point. Imagine a meeting of a local school board where redistricting plans are under consideration. The room is full of parents advocating one plan over another. In fact, all of the parents are there because they do not want their own child moved. But not one of them says that. If everyone made claims on the basis of their own personal interest, the meeting would get nowhere. Instead, they argue that one plan will make more efficient use of the school buses or another plan will help meet diversity goals, and so on. These claims are not lies, and they are all acceptable public justifications. But the parents articulating these positions adopt a pretense of concern for the public good. They are hypocrites. This is a kind of hypocrisy that is necessary for democratic cooperation and, indeed, for any kind of political cooperation.

This was one of the basic arguments of the book published 20 years ago. Hypocrisy is necessary due to the character of political relationships as relationships of dependence. For this reason, it makes no sense to condemn all hypocrisy in the name of some kind of moral absolute. Sometimes, as in the case of the school board deliberation, hypocrisy is perfectly legitimate and sometimes not. The question is how to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate kinds of hypocrisy.

The case with respect to lying is quite different as is the contemporary political context. The news confronts us daily with the political dangers associated with cynicism and indifference to the truth. The case for truthfulness in politics begins with the same approach that we took when considering hypocrisy. Beginning with the nature of political relationships, the question is: what does the character of *politics* tell us about the legitimacy or illegitimacy of lying? There are three additional characteristics of politics that are important here. Politics requires *trust* so that people can cooperate over time. Politics requires *accountability* in order to check abuses of power. And politics requires a *shared sense of reality* in order for some kind of consensus to be achieved and for

deliberation to be possible. Without common ground, there can be no deliberation. It should be clear that all three of these requirements depend upon truthfulness. Trust cannot be maintained unless promises are truthfully entered into. Accountability depends upon transparency. And there can be no deliberation without some agreement that standards of truth will govern the discussion. Lying corrodes the conditions that make politics, and especially democratic politics, possible.

It could be objected that we see lying in politics all of the time. Far from rendering politics impossible, lying is endemic to politics. Here is Hannah Arendt again:

No one has ever doubted that truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other, and no one, as far as I know, has ever counted truthfulness as 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 (Arendt, 2006, p.223).

Her metaphor of lying as a “tool” of the politician’s “trade” suggests that lying is a morally neutral technique. The ethical question is whether lying is used to good or bad ends; by a statesman or a demagogue.

I take issue with this view. Lying in politics may sometimes be necessary, useful, or justifiable, but it always comes at a cost for the reasons I just gave – it undermines the conditions for politics. Truthfulness is among the political virtues even if exceptions must sometimes be made.

This may seem somewhat paradoxical. Lying can be the right choice, but it is wrong nonetheless. Politicians need to get their hands dirty sometimes. When they do, they need to recognize that they have done something *morally* wrong, even if it is *politically* justifiable. Michael Walzer calls this the “problem of dirty hands.” As Machiavelli says, the Prince must learn how “not to be good” – but the standard for goodness remains. In other words, when politicians lie, they must recognize that they have breached a fundamental value. It is important to *care* about the truth in politics.

This is what we are losing in the United States today. There has been a dramatic change in the quantity and quality of lying in politics. Formerly, politicians would lie to serve particular purposes and try to conceal their lies. Their lying was instrumental, and if they could achieve the same goal truthfully,

they would. Now, lying is brazen, fortuitous, and it seems directed at undermining the very distinction between fact and fiction, truth and lies. One of its key characteristics is that, when the truth is exposed and the facts are publicized, nothing changes. This is what I will call the “new lying.” And its political consequences could be very serious. Remember Arendt’s warning quoted at the beginning of this article: the ideal subject of a totalitarian regime is the person “for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.”

One indication of this shift is that the Oxford English Dictionary chose “post-truth” as the word of the year for 2017. They define “post-truth” as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” The Dictionary found two spikes in searches for this word; one during the Brexit campaign and the other when Donald Trump was nominated for the Presidency. It is important to recognize that this is not just an American phenomenon. Nonetheless, Trump is clearly the prime example of the “new lying.” There are hundreds of examples of his falsehoods, with new ones added almost daily. The constant barrage of claims and counterclaims normalizes the lying and confuses the public. Moreover, Trump’s advisors defend his lying, not by claiming that he is telling the truth, but precisely by claiming that his lying doesn’t matter. They say publicly without shame, “Don’t take him literally,” “Many people make statements without facts to back them up,” “There are no facts anymore, what counts is what people will believe.” Politics becomes about making images, not confronting reality. Politics comes to resemble televised professional wrestling (one of Trump’s involvements) or the tabloid press. The audience knows the show is fake and the readers know the stories are largely false, but they don’t care.

Why has there been this dramatic change in the character of lying? One plausible explanation would be that it is an effect of the increasing polarization in American politics that began to intensify about ten years ago. Polarization means that parties have less and less common ground; less and less sense of a shared reality. And because the media has also become partisan and polarized, there is no shared authoritative source of facts and news trusted as reliable by all parties.

Moreover, political parties thoroughly distrust each other and see their political opponents as enemies. Under these circumstances, lying to discredit the opposition or to win at all costs seems justified. Politics has become warfare where everything seems to be at stake in every conflict over every issue.

However, the problem with attributing the “new lying” to political polarization is that it would lead one to expect that both parties would be equally prone to “post-truth” politics. Why, then, do we find the phenomenon more pronounced on the right than on the left? This is a question for which I do not have an adequate response. But whatever the explanation, undermining truth as a common public standard is particularly threatening in democracies, because democracies require a *common language* for deliberation; *truth-telling* for accountability; and *trust* for bipartisan action.

What I have called the “new lying” seems to have come out of nowhere. But it is not unprecedented in history. The government of the Soviet Union was well known for rewriting history to serve its own political purposes, for example. George Orwell makes clear in his fictional account of an authoritarian regime, *1984*, that controlling the “truth” is an essential aspect of modern tyranny (Orwell, 1971). Going further back, Thucydides told how the breakdown of a common language was tied to polarization in times of civil war. He described, not lying exactly, but the re-description of reality.

So the condition of the cities was civil war ... men inverted the usual evaluation of actions ... Irrational recklessness was now considered courageous commitment ... Moderation was a cover for lack of manhood ... while senseless anger now helped to define a true man ... the man of violent temper was always credible, anyone opposing him was suspect (Thucydides, 1982).

These precedents are not encouraging – authoritarianism and civil war. It would be well worth examining the link between lying and the breakdown of democratic politics. Lying always comes at a cost because healthy politics depends on politicians – and citizens – who value the truth and recognize that there is an objective reality, a world of facts we can appeal to in order to settle our differences.

I have argued that we should judge political ethics by considering the distinctive characteristics of political relationships. One of these is that political relations are relations of dependence. Dependence fosters a kind of hypocrisy

which can contribute to cooperation. Lying, on the other hand, threatens political cooperation by undermining the conditions for it: viz. trust, deliberation and accountability. And so, all forms of deception in politics are not alike. We live in a world where the quality and quantity of political deception is changing and growing. At this particular moment, there couldn't be a better subject for a journal volume than: "Lying and Hypocrisy in Politics and Morality."

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