



## THE ROLE OF LYING IN POLITICS

### O PAPEL DA MENTIRA NA POLÍTICA

Kathrin Bouvot\*  
k.bouvot@gmail.com

**Abstract.** *The aim of my paper is to discuss the question of whether in the political climate lying is to be seen as a skill, something that an effective politician must do, or whether it is an absolute “no go” realm. Are lying and deception necessary “skills” for achieving success in politics? Is truthfulness in politics a contradiction in itself? Is the political business as such not dirty by nature? When we think about the remarkable number of lies which have been concocted and distributed by politicians in the recent past, the impression that politics and lies indeed go hand-in-hand emerges, and that the ideal image of politics as a rational instrument for the formulation of generally binding objectives is fraudulent. Should a distinction be made between lies that pursue harmful goals and lies that aim to achieve a good aim? Should politicians be morally justified to lie in order to realise well-meant political objectives?*

**Keywords:** *lying, deception, success in politics, truthfulness, the problem of dirty hands, moral justification.*

**Sumário.** *O objectivo do meu artigo é discutir a questão de saber se no mundo político a mentira é vista como uma competência, como algo que um político eficaz deve fazer, ou antes se é absolutamente interdita. Será que a mentira e o engano são competências necessárias para que haja sucesso em política? Será que a veracidade em política é uma contradição? Será a actividade política enquanto tal suja por natureza ou não? Quando pensamos no número considerável de mentiras geradas e disseminadas por políticos no passado recente, surge a impressão de que a política e a mentira são, de facto, uma dupla inseparável e que a imagem ideal da política como um instrumento racional para a formulação de objectivos gerais vinculativos é fraudulenta. Devemos fazer uma distinção entre mentiras que visam fins nefastos e mentiras que visam fins bons? Devem os políticos ter uma justificação moral para mentir de forma a realizar objectivos políticos bem-intencionados?<sup>1</sup>.*

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\* Department of Philosophy, University of Vienna.

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**Palavras-chave:** *mentir, engano, sucesso em política, veracidade, o problema das mãos sujas, justificação moral.*

## **o. Introduction**

The paper provides a profound overview of the positions of several philosophers, theologians and politicians about the question of lying in political and moral terms. In the first section, I will analyse the question of how the true nature of politics can be defined. In the second section, I will discuss the requirement of politicians to get their hands dirty. In the third section, I will examine the claim that lying is not generally reprehensible in a moral sense. In doing so, I will try to defend the thesis that lying is, in certain exceptional situations, not only a morally good thing but also a skill that is morally required. The fourth section will focus on a discussion of absolutely prohibiting lying. The fifth section will show the wide range of skills the successful liar has to master. In this section I will discuss positions that claim lying is a skill. In the sixth and last section of the paper, I will defend my position that lying is a morally neutral skill that can be used to realise something good as well as to create horrible evil as such. I will demonstrate that the moral direction of lying is absolutely dependent on the responsibility of the agent.

Jean-François Revel claims that the very first of all powers that rule the world is the lie (cf. Revel, 1990, p. 11). This automatically begs the question of what a lie is. A lie is generally defined as a false statement made with deliberate intent to deceive or as an intentional untruth or falsehood. However, what is frequently disregarded is the fact that the lie is only one single facet of the contrary of truthfulness, but it is the most obvious and most relevant kind of untruth. This is supposedly also the reason why within the field of moral philosophy the lie has since time immemorial played an almost exclusive role when the opposite of truth should be analysed. Nonetheless, the range of untruth should not completely fade into obscurity. A few other examples of mendacity are dissimulation, guile, flattery, breach of promise, obfuscation, diversionary tactic, perjury, forgery, secrecy, deception, whitewashing, boastfulness, hypocrisy,

allegation, manipulation, trickery, fakery, subterfuge, stratagem<sup>2</sup>, collusion or withholding the truth. Michel de Montaigne realises early on in his *Essais* that the flipside of the truth has one hundred thousand forms of appearance and that it has at one's command an indefinite latitude (cf. Montaigne, 1998, p. 23).

The aim of my paper is to discuss the question of whether in politics lying is to be seen as a required skill – that is, something that an effective politician *must* do for achieving success – or whether it is something that should be absolutely prohibited as claimed, for instance, by Augustine of Hippo or by Immanuel Kant. A further goal of this paper is to clarify whether truthfulness in politics is or is not a contradiction in itself.

### **1. The true nature of politics**

In *The Prince*, Niccolò Machiavelli outlines quite a dirty image of the politician since he claims that it is neither possible nor necessary for the prince to have all the virtues,<sup>3</sup> but that it is, in practice, even absolutely destructive to have them and to use them all at the same time. According to Machiavelli, for the prince it is sufficient to pretend to have the virtues: “Therefore it is unnecessary for a prince to have all the good qualities I have enumerated, but it is very necessary to appear to have them” (Machiavelli, 1993, p. 139). This principle formulated by Machiavelli claims that seeming is extremely important. It can be seen as the very antithesis of what Cicero asserts in *De officiis*. Namely, that one should genuinely be something instead of merely seeming to be (cf. Cicero, 1992, p. 181).

Hannah Arendt also claims in her essay *Wahrheit und Politik* that there never was a doubt that truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other, and that no one has ever counted truthfulness to be among the political virtues. According to Arendt, it would seem that lying has always been regarded as a necessary tool not only of the politician's or the demagogue's but also of the

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<sup>2</sup> As an example of such a stratagem can be cited the Normandy invasion from England, planned by the allies not only with absolute secrecy but also with strategical chicanery, making the Germans think that the invasion would happen at another time and in another place. Further information about the stratagem can be found in Geismann & Oberer (1986, pp. 8-9).

<sup>3</sup> In the 15<sup>th</sup> Chapter of *The Prince* Machiavelli registers eleven virtues and pairs them with eleven vices. The eleven virtues listed by Machiavelli are liberalness, generousness, compassionateness, faithfulness, boldness, affableness, chasteness, sincereness, indulgence, graveness and trustfulness (Machiavelli, 1993, p. 118).

statesman's trade (cf. Arendt, 2013, p. 44). Friedrich Schlegel also argues that the political business as such is by its very nature dirty or something that spoils the character of anybody who comes into contact with it when he says that where "politics or economy is involved, there is no morality" [Translated from the German] (Schlegel, 1800, p. 22).<sup>4</sup> And, to cite a more recent example, Erich Straßner states in his essay *Dementis, Lügen, Ehrenwörter. Zur Rhetorik politischer Skandale* that the more a politician masters the entire disposable apparatus of manipulative tactics and strategies, the more his reputation increases because solely the virtuosity with its application guarantees the political success (Straßner, 1992, p. 2). Even Plato in his work *Republic III* says rulers have the exclusive right to lie in order to protect and guarantee the ideal state, whereas subjects are to be punished for lying (389 b6 – 389 d4) (Plato, 1997a, p. 1026). This passage in Plato exhibits a quite dangerous image of political power. However, the greatest potential for causing a stir is the passage in Plato's *Republic V* where it reads that for the purpose of the optimal production of children the rulers may deceive and engage in control and selection pertaining to the reproduction among the subjects:

the best men must have sex with the best women as frequently as possible, while the opposite is true of the most inferior men and women, and, second, that if our herd is to be of the highest possible quality, the former's offspring must be reared but not the latter's. And this must all be brought about without being noticed by anyone except the rulers, so that our herd of guardians remains as free from dissension as possible (459 d4 – 459 e2) (Plato, 1997a, p. 1087).

These lines are, without a doubt, a prime example of the dangers that can emanate from political power. At the same time, they raise the question of whether it is the power or the foray into the political business that spoils the politician's character or whether the reverse is true: a spoiled character spoils politics. On this note, the Austrian politician, Julius Raab, has claimed that it is not politics that spoils the character but a spoiled character spoils politics. Gustav Radbruch, on the other hand, sees politics as a chance to prove one's character: "Politics spoils character. No, politics tests character. People who work in the political arena where so much is considered allowed which would be impermissible in private life, and who know no other liberal moral other than the one in private life, have a character that has proven itself in politics" [Translated

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<sup>4</sup> For the German original see: Schlegel (1800, p. 22).

from the German] (Radbruch, 2002, p. 216). However, Jacob Burckhardt has quite a negative perspective on power in his work *Reflections on History* and considers power as something evil: “Now power is of its nature evil, whoever wields it. It is not stability but a lust, and *ipso facto* insatiable, therefore unhappy in itself and doomed to make others unhappy” (Burckhardt, 1950, p. 86, see also p. 38 and 120).

Since power is to be seen as *the* essential factor in politics, it might be concluded, according to Burckhardt's remarks, that politics is by its nature dirty and evil. In terms of the role of power in politics or, to be more precise, the inextricable amalgamation between power and politics, Straßner asserts in his essay that the acting of our politicians is primarily geared to the acquisition, the enhancement and the maintenance of power (Straßner, 1992, p. 1).

However, as far as power is concerned, the Wounded Knee Massacre (cf. Brown, 1981) 5 is an example of an abuse of power. When we think about the remarkable number of lies which have been concocted and distributed by politicians in the past, the impression emerges that politics and lies are, indeed, an inseparable couple and that the ideal image of politics as a rational instrument for formulating and implementing generally binding objectives is fraudulent or nothing more than a pure illusion. Some examples for the endless range of political lies and scandals, include the Watergate Affair (cf. Bernstein, & Woodward, 1974; see also Woodward, 2005; Woodward, & Bernstein, 1976; Zuelzer, 1975, Ch. 3), the CIA Coup in Chile, the Tyrolean Rebellion in 1809, the Iraq Crisis, the Suez Crisis, the Spiegel Affair (cf. Doerry, & Janssen, 2013), the Chernobyl disaster where important information was concealed, something which we can also see regarding the Pentagon Papers, and, last but not least, the Irangate Scandal. These cases reveal that power and lies are inherently dirty and accompany the pursuit of harmful goals.

Contrary to this thesis, which maintains the dirtiness of power, we may offer a statement from Romano Guardini who considers power to be something inherently neutral whose moral value is inevitably linked with the agent or the agent's responsibility: “In itself, power is neither good nor evil; its quality is

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5 For further information see: Green (1996).

determined by him who wields it. In fact, of itself it is only potentially constructive or destructive, since it is essentially governed by freedom” (Guardini, 1961, p. 6). In the end, according to Guardini, it will always depend on the agent and his moral norms as to whether power is something good or not. On closer consideration, in my view this thesis can ultimately be applied one-to-one to the lie. The lie is itself a neutral competence. Originally, it is neither something good nor something evil. It is the agent who gives the lie its moral value or its moral orientation.

## **2. The problem of dirty hands**

On the requirement of politicians to get their hands dirty, Michael Walzer claims in *Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands* that no “... one succeeds in politics without getting his hands dirty” (Walzer, 1973, p. 164). In this context, the term “dirty hands” has its origin in Sartre's play *Dirty Hands* in which Hoederer, for whom purity is nothing more than “... a phantasm of monks and fakirs ...” and who interprets politics as a dirty business, declares the following: “I have dirty hands. Right up to the elbows. I have plunged them in filth and blood. But what do you hope? Do you think you can rule innocently?” [Translated from the German] (Sartre, 2005, p. 114). Walzer's answer to Hoederer's or, that is to say, Sartre's question is the following:

My own answer is no, I don't think I could govern innocently; nor do most of us believe that those who govern us are innocent ... even the best of them. But this does not mean that it isn't possible to do the right thing while governing. It means that a particular act of government ... may be exactly the right thing to do in utilitarian terms and yet leave the man who does it guilty of a moral wrong (Walzer, 1973, p. 161).

For Walzer, there are situations when politicians are compelled to lie to defend public interest. Walzer supposes that certain actions can be morally wrong and good at the same time. In other words, the ethics of dirty hands supposes that one and the same action can be morally false and right at the same time. For example, a person who kills somebody to save another person's life is acting morally wrong and right at the same time. Walzer puts forth the following example of a dilemma which a politician can find himself in:

... he [the new leader, KB] is asked to authorize the torture of a captured rebel leader who knows or probably knows the location of a number of bombs hidden in apartment buildings around the city, set to go off within the next twenty- four hours. He orders the man tortured, convinced that he must do so for the sake of the people



who might otherwise die in the explosions – even though he believes that torture is wrong, indeed abominable, not just sometimes, but always (Walzer, 1973, p. 167).

In Walzer's example, the action taken by the politician is morally wrong, but the consequences of the action are morally good. The politician decides to do a bad thing in order to do good.

In discussing the problem of dirty hands, I would like to mention Hans-Georg Soeffner who sketches the theory of a kind of ritually supported substitution agreement that is characterised by the practice that the electors give their ambassadors a kind of collective permission to commit moral violations inasmuch as such a violation is needed for the general interest. In this way, the representatives are able to wash their hands of moral guilt (cf. Soeffner, 1998, p. 224). According to Soeffner's theory, the problem of dirty hands ceases to be a problem. Something similar would happen if Niklas Luhmann's position was applied to the problem of dirty hands, since Luhmann releases or uncouples the political system from any form of control on the basis of moral criteria. Luhmann's idea is that the political system regulates for itself the manner and form which is morally relevant. According to Luhmann, political ethics should reflect, in particular, the self-regulating character of political systems (cf. Luhmann, 1993, p. 40). By applying Luhmann's notion of self-regulation of political systems, the problem of dirty hands would resolve itself. Niccolò Machiavelli has also addressed the problem of dirty hands, albeit indirectly, and provides a general justification of the political lie. In the chapter 15 of *The Prince*, he suggests that the man who enters political life is required "... to know how to do wrong, and to make use of it or not according to necessity" (Machiavelli, 1993, p. 117). This line of argument can also be found in chapter 18 of *The Prince*, where Machiavelli states that the prince has to be a master of hypocrisy and dissimulation, a "great pretender and dissembler" (Machiavelli, 1993, p. 138) and that there are situations in which the prince is justified in breaking his word if the compliance of his promises is disadvantageous for his political targets and interests (Machiavelli, 1993, p. 137). The problem posed by Machiavelli is that the emerging politician will, at least sometimes, find himself in a dilemma where the skill to act immorally to reach certain goals will be required. There are circumstances that require one to commit immoral things in order to reach a good

goal. This principle is expressed even clearer in chapter 9 of the first book of *The Discourses*, where Machiavelli points out:

It is a sound maxim that reprehensible actions may be justified by their effects, and that when the effect is good, as it was in the case of Romulus, it always justifies the action. For it is the man who uses violence to spoil things, not the man who uses it to mend them, that is blameworthy (Machiavelli, 1976, p. 132).

This principle can be applied to a moral dilemma where a person has to choose between two courses of action both of which would be wrong for him to undertake. Such a dilemma happens whenever someone is forced to choose between sticking to certain important moral principles and sidestepping some catastrophe. Dilemmas of this nature show that, at least sometimes, crossing moral principles is unavoidable and, indeed, that it is possibly even more moral to cross them than to adhere to them. In other words, there are goals that are reached by crossing moral borders that could be of a higher moral value than the moral value of the strict compliance with the moral principles.

### **3. Lying is not generally reprehensible in a moral sense: the white lie and other good lies**

I defend the thesis that lying is, in certain exceptional situations, not only a morally good thing but also a skill that is morally required. I am convinced that there are circumstances when not telling the truth is not only a good thing but also a moral obligation, in particular if the act of telling the truth would have the inevitable consequence that one life or even several lives would be lost. There are several philosophers and surprisingly even theologians who have formulated numerous exemptive rules which concede a partial permissiveness to lying, if, for instance, the lie is used in a situation of extreme hardship as a kind of saving medicine (Müller, 1962, p. 325),<sup>6</sup> the lie is utilised in a situation of conflict of obligations (Müller, 1962, pp. 274-275),<sup>7</sup> the lie is used for reasons of charity (Müller, 1962, p. 275), the lie is uttered with the purpose of self-defence (Müller, 1962, pp. 275-277), the lie in the sense of a *falsiloquium compensativum* (a good purpose justifies an immoral method) (Müller, 1962, pp. 272-273) or if it is a

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<sup>6</sup> Müller quotes the following authors as examples for such a position: Clemens of Alexandria, Origenes, Johannes Cassianus and Germanos of Constantinople.

<sup>7</sup> Examples for this position are: Giovanni Vincenzo Bolgeni (Müller, 1962, p. 327), Hans Christian Oersted or Helmut Thielicke (Müller, 1962, p. 334).



white lie<sup>8</sup> that saves life and limb. Matthias Laros in his book *Seid klug wie die Schlangen und einfältig wie die Tauben* discusses the exemplary case of the friend who is arrested and incriminated by the Gestapo for listening to foreign stations. Laros goes on to discuss the justifiability of the white lie to protect the accused from years of prison (Laros, 1951, pp. 37 ff.). On the topic of white lies, Eberhard Schockenhoff mentions that in early modern times in the course of the confessionalisation of the political regimes everywhere in Europe religious dissidents were forced either to choose martyrdom or to escape into a feigned assimilation and to acquiesce the demanded confessional practice of faith. The feigned participation in public ceremonies of the state's religion, forced change of religion and mock-baptism were for English Catholics, French Protestants and Spanish Jews the only way of saving their goods and chattels and often even the only way to protect their life (cf. Schockenhoff, 2000, p. 89).<sup>9</sup> Schockenhoff's example of circumstances where the state and churches infringed on the right to the freedom of religion with their methods of oppression, is a situation where lying is more than just legitimate. The justifiability of the white lie is also discussed by Sissela Bok. She considers nearly every kind of lie as unjustifiable but regards the white lie that saves a person's life as justifiable. However, she notes that it is only justified if the other person's life can, without a doubt, be protected by the lie (cf. Bok, 1980, pp. 65–66, 136–139).

In my opinion, a white lie that protects one's own life or that of another person should always be legitimate. The immorality of lying is without exception abolished by the act of preventing someone's death. To my mind, the perfect example for the legitimacy of white lies are those told to save the lives of persecuted ethnic or religious groups. One specific historical example involves the lies told during the Second World War to protect Jews from persecution. This shows once again that the protection of a life should invariably carry a higher moral weight than any imperative moral obligation to tell the truth.

#### **4. The absolute prohibition of lying**

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<sup>8</sup> Augustine of Hippo and Immanuel Kant principally refuse all forms of white lie, even the one that protects the life of an innocent.

<sup>9</sup> For further details about the discussion of the justifiability of the white lie see also: Schockenhoff (2000, pp. 106–108).

Analysing the role of the lie in politics and society requires a discussion of the position of the absolute prohibition of lying. In doing so, there is no way around Aurelius Augustine who defines and approaches the lie methodically in *De Mendacio* (cf. Augustinus, 1953) by distinguishing eight different levels of the lie. Basing his thesis mainly on the Holy Bible, Augustine considers every form of the lie as a sin and as something that is morally reprehensible, even if the lie injures nobody or if it is the only way to defend people.<sup>10</sup> According to Augustine, in matters of faith lying is not permitted under any circumstances. In the chapter XVIII of the book XIII of his *Confessions*, Augustine also leaves no doubt about the important role truth should play in the life of a faithful Christian (Saint Augustine, 1984, p. 116). I consider it noteworthy that Augustine refers in his *Confessions*, in chapter XXV of the book XII, implicitly to John 8:44 (Saint Augustine, 1984, p. 107), where it is written that the devil is the father of the lie:

You are from your father, the devil, and you want to work the lusts of your father. He was a man-killer from the beginning and hasn't stood in the truth, because no truth is in him. When he speaks the lie, he speaks from his own, because he is a liar and its father (*The Gospel According to John*, p. 89).

In the Augustinian direction but arguing in a different way, namely on the basis of pure rationality, the philosopher and theologian, Johann David Michaelis, pleads in his work *Moral* in favour of an absolute prohibition of lying that he defends with the argument that every form of wilful untruth destroys the social confidence, any credibility and, as a direct result, any ability to convince other fellows of the truth. The result of Michaelis' intellectual efforts can be seen in the knowledge that the lie makes social cohabitation of people impossible. To demonstrate the direct consequences of deliberate lies, which Michaelis sees in the loss of any convincibility, he cites the example that, given the general permissibility to lie, a chased person cannot be saved anymore from the danger of being killed by a persecutor, who has the intention of killing, by telling a lie since the murderer will probably believe that he has received incorrect information about the abode of his victim and, for that reason, any attempt to deceive him is condemned to failure from the beginning:

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<sup>10</sup> In this context, it should be mentioned Johann Georg Walch who formulates a polemic against the rigorous Augustinian prohibition of lying by creating an example in which is demonstrated that an intentional lie can be legitimate, indeed required (cf. Walch, 1775, p. 2318).

... what is to be done if someone asks me in a rage where the man whom he wants to kill has run? Answer: To tell the truth. The truth will be considered a lie by the murderer. If the murderer is at least not stupid, he will choose the other path and not that one I have showed him. Therefore, with a lie I endanger the life of the chased man just as by telling the truth [Translated from the German] (Michaelis, 1792, pp. 160–161).

Johann Adam Bergk also claims that a general permissiveness of lie would displace any truth since everybody would tell the untruth as soon as anything can be gained, such as when breaking out of a dangerous situation: “Where should the truth be searched in such a case? Is the truth not changed into a fairy tale if everybody who considers oneself to be in distress is permitted to say the untruth?” [Translated from the German] (Bergk, 1798, p. 143). In those days, the positions of Bergk or Michaelis provoked predominantly reactions of disconcertment and refusal since the enlightened zeitgeist supports the position of the lie being permissible inasmuch as a disadvantage can be prevented or an advantage can be achieved by lying. So Michaelis’ absolute prohibition of lying is an attempt to attack the moral theories of the Enlightenment. Michaelis tries to defeat the position of the permission of the lie of the Enlightenment with its own argumentative instruments since he argues not theologically but rationally, exactly like the philosophers of the Enlightenment argue. Immanuel Kant, who read Michaelis’ *Moral* and whose positions are very similar to those of Michaelis, expresses in *The Metaphysics of Morals* an absolute ethical and juridical prohibition of lying in an equally rigorous manner: “The greatest violation of a human being’s duty to himself regarded merely as a moral being (the humanity in his own person) is the contrary of truthfulness, *lying*, (*aliud lingua promptum, aliud pectore inclusum gerere*)” (Kant, 1996, p. 182). Kant condemns categorically every kind of lies because in his estimation lying and reason are two things that are by all means incompatible. The reason, in turn, is considered by Kant as a condition for the status as a person. Therefore, the liar steals his status as a person, he destroys his human dignity, as Kant concludes in *The Metaphysics of Morals*:

By a lie a human being throws away and, as it were, annihilates his dignity as a human being. A human being who does not himself believe what he tells another (even if the other is a merely ideal person) has even less worth than if he were a mere thing (Kant, 1996, p. 182).

According to Kant, lying is for a man

... directly contrary to his character as a moral being (in terms of its very form), that is, to inner freedom, the innate dignity of a human being, which is tantamount to saying that they make it one's basic principle to have no basic principle and hence no character ... (Kant, 1996, p. 175).

In 1796, Benjamin Constant addresses stiff criticism to the rigorous conception of an absolute prohibition of lying of a “German philosopher”, by publishing a pamphlet entitled *Des réactions politiques* (cf. Constant, 1988, pp. 95–157) in which he refers above all to the example of the murderer who wants to know whether his victim is at home. In this pamphlet, Constant formulates a rejection of the absolute prohibition of lying in a situation outlined in the prominent example of a murderer. Constant argues that moral principles cannot impetuously be adapted to practice, especially to the political and juridical practice but they need conciliatory principles.

In Constant's estimation, an absolute prohibition of lying that is independent of the validity of the situation can be interpreted as a kind of ruin of any faculty of social cohabitation of people. According to Constant, society is politically inviable if the same is not permitted to lie at least in certain situations. Karl Friedrich Cramer<sup>11</sup>, the translator and editor of the German version of Constant's pamphlet, remarked in a footnote that Constant told him that the “German philosopher” he is referring to is Kant. In truth, the position of an absolute prohibition of lying as described in the example of the murderer was defended by Michaelis before Kant, namely in 1792, and Kant's work, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, in which Kant develops his casuistry of the lie, contains word-for-word neither the aforementioned example nor the complete argument that Constant uses as a reference point for his pamphlet. On top of this, Kant's ethical prohibition of lying as formulated in *The Metaphysics of Morals* cannot be Constant's reference point because *The Metaphysics of Morals* was published *after* Constant's pamphlet came out, namely in 1797, and also probably after the publication of Cramer's German translation of Constant's pamphlet, in autumn 1797. Apart from this fact, a spicy detail to note is that Kant himself confesses in *On a supposed right to lie because of philanthropic concerns* (his reply to Constant's pamphlet published in 1797) that he cannot at all recall where precisely it was that he discussed the example of the murderer in his writings, but

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<sup>11</sup> For further details about the oral annotations of Constant towards Cramer see: Geismann, & Oberer (1986, p. 11).

he admits shortly afterwards with suspicious emphasis that the example was discussed indeed by himself “in some passage” of his writings just like Constant had recited it.<sup>12</sup> Kant assumes, in the aforementioned reply, the complete responsibility and the onus of proof of a provoking example or position that he mentioned not at all up until then. In *On a supposed right to lie because of philanthropic concerns* Kant picks up on the example, raised by Constant, of the potential murderer who wants to be informed whether his intended victim is at home and uses it for justifying his position of an absolute ethical and juridical prohibition of the lie that remains valid even when an assailant with the declared intention to kill and with the weapon in his hands asks for the abode of the innocent whom he is bent on assassinating. Kant takes an explanatory approach to an example that he himself has never mentioned before. A rather obvious reason for Kant’s eagerness to assume responsibility for an example that is not his own could be, in my estimation, that Constant’s example enables Kant to strengthen and enlarge his position in terms of rigorousness for an essential element, i.e. for the principle that there are no exceptional cases in which a man is exempted from his obligation to tell the truth. In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant defends the position that the obligation to truthfulness has to apply irrespectively of all consequences: “That I ought not to lie, no matter how great the benefits to myself and my friend might be. Lying is *mean* and makes a human being *unworthy* of happiness” (Kant, 1996, p. 224).

Kant criticises, unlike everybody else, the lie as a communication form that is under no circumstances allowed for a moral subject, distinguishing between an external lie that is directed to another person and an internal lie that is directed against the subject itself. The external lie is considered by Kant as a usage of language against the intention of linguisticity:

But communication of one's thoughts to someone through words that yet (intentionally) contain the contrary of what the speaker thinks on the subject is an end that is directly opposed to the natural purposiveness of the speaker's capacity to communicate his thoughts, and is thus a renunciation by the speaker of his personality, and such a speaker is a mere deceptive appearance of a human being, not a human being himself (Kant, 1996, p. 182).

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<sup>12</sup> Original title: Über ein vermeintes Recht aus Menschenliebe zu lügen.

Kant holds the position that it is absolutely not allowed that thought things and said things differ. On closer consideration, in this argument a parallel can be drawn to Augustine who claims in *De Mendacio* that not every untruth is a lie: a person who believes in the truth of his statement even if it is not true is not lying: “For which purpose we must see what a lie is. For not everyone who says a false thing lies, if he believes or opines that to be true which he says” [Translated from the German] (Augustinus, 1953, p. 2.). In Augustine’s view not the untruth is the requirement for the lie but the relation that a subject has to the things he is saying. If the subject is convinced that the said things are true, he is, according to this conception, not lying. Augustine claims that the opposite of the lie is not the truth but the reliable statement on which reliability depends, on the one hand, on the accordance between the expressed things, and, on the other hand, on the inner conviction of the speaker that the expressed things are true. This conviction between what is meant and what is said could be described as truthfulness in the conception of Augustine. Augustine’s approach could be seen as a way to untie the lie from the problem of the truth. In this interpretation of Augustine, it is the difference between what is said and what is known which defines the lie. Arthur Schopenhauer, in turn, considers all forms of lying that are manipulating or negating another person’s will, or which bring another person to accept a truth as *his own* when it is not *his* truth (cf. Schopenhauer, 1969, p. 337) as reprehensible and unjust and, therefore, as something that is to be rejected. In this context, it must be remarked that in Schopenhauer’s conception all forms of moral wrong are generally reduced to the following constellation: “The other cases of wrong can all be reduced to the fact that I, as the wrongdoer, compel the other individual to serve my will instead of his own, or to act according to my will instead of to his” (Schopenhauer, 1969, p. 337). Schopenhauer considers the origin of all forms of unjust actions the “motivation”, under which he understands any attempt of subjugating or manipulating another individual’s will. For this very reason, the refusal to tell the truth is for Schopenhauer no form of injustice because it doesn’t manipulate another person’s will. In contrast to this, in Schopenhauer’s view, telling something false is always wrong because it is a kind of force to accept a truth as my truth that is not my truth. In that sense, lying is a kind of behavioural control. It is a form of “motivation” and, therefore, morally reprehensible: “... every imposition of a lie is a wrong. The person who refuses to show the right path



to the wanderer who has lost his way, does not do him any wrong; but whoever directs him on to a false path certainly does” (Schopenhauer, 1969, p. 338).

In Schopenhauer’s view, the protection of the own will takes on such an important role that all actions which serve to protect the will are allowed, inclusively killing another person if this person threatens my own will and this menace cannot be averted in another way:

If an individual goes so far in the affirmation of his own will that he encroaches on the sphere of the will-affirmation essential to my person as such, and denies this, then my warding off of that encroachment is only the denial of that denial, and to this extent is nothing more on my part than the affirmation of the will appearing essentially and originally in my body, and implicitly expressed by the mere phenomenon of this body; consequently it is not wrong and is therefore right. This means, then, that I have a *right* to deny that other person's denial with what force is necessary to suppress it; and it is easy to see that this may extend even to the killing of the other person whose encroachment as pressing external violence can be warded off with a counteraction somewhat stronger than this, without any wrong, consequently with right (Schopenhauer, 1969, pp. 339-340).

Montaigne, in turn, argues quite distinctly compared to Schopenhauer, and considers lying as a remarkably cursed vice because in his estimation exclusively by telling the truth we are humans and capable of community. By lying, according to Montaigne, we are destroying the premise for the personhood and for the capability to live together in a community (cf. Montaigne, 1998, p. 23). The Czech politician and human rights activist, Václav Havel, provides a completely different approach in formulating a plea for being truthful. In his book *Versuch, in der Wahrheit zu leben* he condemns the mendaciousness of the post-totalitarian communist system and vehemently stands up for the way of truthfulness, regardless of the risk of unjustified imprisonment, work-related discrimination and social marginalisation. What really counts in Havel’s view is the daily fight for the possibility of a life in truthfulness, dignity and freedom. Havel considers the purity of this fight as the best weapon against the post-totalitarian structures (Havel, 2000, p. 82). In the 1990 New Year speech, Havel deems the worst thing to be that he and his fellow citizens are living in a spoiled moral milieu. Havel speaks about a moral illness because of the habit of saying something which goes against what is thought (Havel, 1991, p. 9). In this context, Augustine and Immanuel Kant can once more be recalled in their demand that thought things and said things must never differ. During his New Year speech, Havel brought back to his fellow citizens their accompliceship that has its origin, according to him, in getting accustomed to the totalitarian system, in tolerating

it as an irrevocable fact because this was how the totalitarian system was actually kept alive. Such a tolerating attitude can be interpreted as the breeding ground that enabled a totalitarian system to survive for so long. Havel considers himself and all his fellow citizens, even though to a different extent, as responsible for the lengthy existence of the totalitarian system. According to Havel, nobody is solely its victim but everybody is at the same time its co-creator (Havel, 1991, p. 10). In pursuing his systematic campaign for a life in truthfulness, Havel urges his fellow citizens in his pre-election speech to vote exclusively for those candidates who are used to telling the truth instead of those who construct a new “truth”, namely “their truth” on a weekly basis (Havel, 1991, p. 83). Havel mentions George Orwell or, to be more precise, the atrocious Orwellian world where an absolute manipulation and oppression of truthfulness predominates (Havel, 2000, p. 81). However, Havel’s critique of the mendacity of the totalitarian system reminds me of a specific passage in Orwell’s novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in which even history is something invented by the “Ministry of Truth”. I would like to quote the aforementioned passage because it shows the metamorphosis of the lie into an incontestable truth: “It might very well be that literally every word in the history books, even the things that one accepted without question, was pure fantasy ... Everything faded into mist. The past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became truth” (Orwell, 1996, p. 78).

Another appeal that is strongly related to political and social practice against nearly every form of mendacity comes from Sissela Bok who claims in her book *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* that confidence and integrity are valuable resources that are easy to lose but hard to win back. According to Bok, liars should think about the consequences of lying which she considers as harmful in particular for society, namely for the social confidence on which our social coexistence is based. In other words, Bok regards practically every form of lie, even its well-intentioned variants, as detrimental for the society and for the individual (Bok, 1980, pp. 36 ff.). Here, the demerit of the lie is situated in its derivation of the truth. According to Bok, truth is a positive value and every form of falsified transmission diminishes this positive value and, in addition to it, it gradually undercuts the basic function of language that consists in transporting the truth. In my view, this constitutes an unambiguous borrowing from Immanuel Kant who holds a similar position concerning the true purpose of

language. Bok explains the harmful effect of lying for society or rather the uncontrollable nature of lies through the slippery slope argument according to which every lie is inevitably and unstoppably comparable with a chain reaction of more lies with the result being that a general climate of reciprocal deception emerges (Bok, 1980, pp. 132 ff.). Michel de Montaigne had discerned the uncontrollable nature of the mendacity which is close to what we nowadays call a slippery slope. Montaigne considers mendacity as the vice whose origin and development should be disputed relentlessly because otherwise mendacity continues to increase with the liars or the lies brought into orbit. Once the lie is allowed, in Montaigne's estimation, it soon becomes apparent how absolutely impossible it is to undo the lie (cf. Montaigne, 1998, p. 23).

Bok evaluates the lie in politics in an extraordinary morally stringent way since she claims that wherever there is a special risk of lies becoming routine towards the general public, as is undeniably the case in politics, special protective measures should be insisted on against any form of lying (Bok, 1980, p. 219).

A further approach along these lines is taken by Eberhard Schockenhoff in his book *Zur Lüge verdammt?: Politik, Medien, Medizin, Justiz, Wissenschaft und die Ethik der Wahrheit*. Against the "compulsion to the lie" as claimed, for instance, by evolutionary biology or behavioural science, Schockenhoff cherishes the claim to absoluteness of the ethical norm of the truth. According to Schockenhoff, the thesis of the omnipresence of the lie, or any documented violation of an ethical norm, should not on any account be an argument for its relativisation or even its abolishment. Schockenhoff argues that it is impossible to equate the thesis of the ubiquitous lie in the animal world with the phenomenon which is described as a lie in humans in a moral sense (Schockenhoff, 2000, pp. 32 ff.). A further example for a position that asserts the exceedingly important role of truthfulness for every man in general with simultaneous application of this issue to politics, namely in concrete terms to kings and princes, can be found in Aegidius Romanus' *De Regimine Principum*. Truthfulness is, in the view of Aegidius Romanus, the avoidance of understatements and overstatements in regard to their own person whereby he views it as more important to avoid the latter since, in his estimation, all humans tend by nature to overstate things for reasons of self-protection and to overvalue

themselves. Aegidius Romanus demands that the merciful and gracious king must not be either boastful or its opposite, but that he has to be truthful and sincere. The most important virtue for a good king nevertheless is, in Aegidius Romanus' judgement, that he never promises something he is not able to realise afterwards (Romanus, 1968, pp. 80–82).

## 5. Lying as a skill

I defend the thesis that lying demands several extremely sophisticated skills of the liar who needs a gapless memory, a vivid faculty of imagination, empathy and, beyond that, the right balance in the use of these skills. The successful liar is a brilliant performer because, by plying his art under the guise of truthfulness, he needs to have his utterance accepted as the truth in the end. While lying, the liar has to manage the contradiction between his conviction and fiction. Balancing this is quite a demanding skill that not everybody has. The sovereign liar has to control the risk that he may come to believe in the end in his own lies since in that case the freedom, gained initially with the lie, would be lost. In such a case, the original witting lie changes gradually and unnoticeably into unwitting self-deception. Michel de Montaigne claims that in his view it is said with good reason that whoever cannot trust his memory completely should be vigilant against lying (Montaigne, 1998, p. 23). In Pierre Corneille's comedy *The Liar*, there is another allusion to the urgent need for an excellent memory when lying, namely in the 5<sup>th</sup> scene of the 4<sup>th</sup> act when Klito remarks towards Dorant: "It takes a good memory to keep up a lie" [Translated from the German] (Corneille, 1954, p. 49). The notion that lying is a skill is also defended by Friedrich Nietzsche in the 54<sup>th</sup> aphorism of *Human, All Too Human I* with the title *The lie*. Being surprised about his observation that people lie so rarely, Nietzsche's question in the aphorism is the following one: "Why do almost all people tell the truth in ordinary everyday life?" (Nietzsche, 1996, p. 4). To this Nietzsche gives the following answer:

Certainly not because a god has forbidden them to lie. The reason is, firstly because it is easier; for lying demands invention, dissimulation and a good memory (which is why Swift says that he who tells a lie seldom realizes what a heavy burden he has assumed; for, in order to maintain a lie, he has to invent twenty more) (Nietzsche, 1996, p. 40).

These lines show Nietzsche's explanation of why people lie so infrequently: the reason is not a moral one but the fact that the liar has to take a quite oppressive onus that claims sophisticated competences from the liar if he wants

to lie successfully. According to this perspective, telling the truth is the more convenient, the more indolent way. Nietzsche's conviction that telling the truth is a manifestation of an intellectual deficit since lying presupposes much more knowledge and skills than sticking to the truth can also be found in the *Unpublished Writings*. The virtue of truthfulness is interpreted by Nietzsche as a striking intellectual inability as the following fragment in the *Unpublished Writings* unambiguously shows: "To look at the things coldly in order that they lie there nakedly and without fluff or colour – this is called 'love of truthfulness' and is in reality nothing else than the powerlessness to lie" [Translated from the German, fragment 3[241]] (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 82). In addition to his withering criticism of the "love of truthfulness", Nietzsche repeatedly clarifies his point of view that he does not consider it scandalous that people lie. In Nietzsche's estimation, the real *éclat* is the fact that people often and to a great degree do not have the skill to lie, or, that is to say, that they are lousy liars. Nietzsche is disturbed by the fact that there are so many ungraceful lies that are so easily unmasked as a lie as he writes in the 183<sup>rd</sup> Aphorism of *Beyond Good and Evil*: "I'm not upset because you lied to me, I'm upset because I don't believe you anymore" (Nietzsche, 2002, p. 74). In this context, it must be specified that in Nietzsche confidence would not be unsettled, not in the least, if the liar had lied competently without being brought to light. With this perspective of lying as a competence Nietzsche hints, in my view, unequivocally at Plato's dialog *Lesser Hippias* that is perhaps the earliest philosophical text about the phenomenon of the lie. In my opinion, in the *Unpublished Writings* there is a fragment which alludes directly to Plato's dialog *Lesser Hippias*: "To lie wittingly and intentionally is more worthy than telling the truth involuntarily – in this respect Plato is right" [Translated from the German, fragment 26[152]] (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 189).

In the dialog *Lesser Hippias* Plato formulates a defence of the liar, evaluating the liar as someone who can decide independently between truth and falsehood. Starting from the question, which man of Homer's poems is the better man, Achilles, who is true and simple, or Odysseus, who is wily and false, Socrates demonstrates that the ability to lie requires not merely saying something wrong, but – and this is the essential point of being capable of lying – to know that an argument or something else is false. The ability to lie presupposes indispensably

the knowledge of the truth and a huge number of intellectual qualities. An ignorant man, who is unable to speak falsely except by accident, is, as shown by Socrates, unable to be a liar. Only the competent man, the good man is able to lie because he knows the truth and, in addition to it, exclusively such type of man has the skill to lie voluntarily. Arguing with Hippias about the question which kind of liar is the best, the man who deliberately contrives a lie, or the man who lies unwittingly, Socrates achieves the alarming moral conclusion that the man who is willingly bad or who lies knowingly is superior to one who lies inadvertently. By implication, Odysseus is assessed to be better than Achilles. Socrates demonstrates that only the good man can voluntarily do wrong, and that it is better to do wrong voluntarily and intentionally, willingly and wittingly, than involuntarily and unintentionally, since voluntary falseness is based on intellectual competences. In a moral sense, the conclusion of Socrates' induction that the more competent soul must be the better soul is without any doubt problematic: "So the one who voluntarily misses the mark and does what is shameful and unjust, Hippias – that is, if there is such a person – would be no other than the good man" (376 b7- 376 b9) (Plato, 1997b, p. 936). In this regard, it is important to note that in Plato the "if" is obviously important. In Plato, the postulation that only good men can err willingly does not imply that there are good men who err willingly. But if it is false that good men voluntarily err, then the argument implies that no man voluntarily errs. This, however, would lead to the conclusion worthy of discussion that all wrong doing is involuntary and that the evil is something determined. This conclusion can be found in the *Laws IX*:

Athenian: ... all wicked men are, in all respects, *unwillingly* wicked. This being so, my next argument necessarily follows.

Clinias: What argument?

Athenian: That the unjust man is doubtless wicked; but that the wicked man is in that state only against his will ... (860 d0 – 860 d4)(Plato, 1997c, p. 1518).

Another passage in Plato which talks about the issue of the involuntary misconduct is in the *Laws V*: "... the first thing to realize here is that every unjust man is unjust against his will. No man on earth would ever deliberately embrace any of the supreme evils, least of all in the most precious parts of himself – and as we said, the truth is that the most precious part of every man is his soul" (731 c2 – 731 c5) (Plato, 1997c, p. 1414). In the *Timaeus* it is written: "But it is not right



to reproach people for them, for no one is willfully evil” (86 d6 – 86 eo) (Plato, 1997, p. 1286). Plato's conclusion of the involuntary evil was picked up on by several authors within the debate about determinism and indeterminism (cf. Rosenberger, 2006, p. 26), especially in the discussion about the appropriate application of the criminal law (cf. Seebaß, 2007, pp. 68, 146). Plato pointed out the criminal significance not only of the criterion of the lack of will, but also of the knowledge criterion (cf. Seebaß, 2007, p. 158).

## **6. Conclusion**

Should the lie be considered an imperative essential skill in the current political climate? I think lying is something that shouldn't be morally rejected without exception. Politicians should be allowed to lie in order to achieve good political objectives, such as to save lives. An effective and responsible politician who intends to do the best for the people has the duty to reflect carefully on how to act to protect citizens from hazardous situations. In some cases, lying can be the only possible way to avoid a devastating disaster. I consider the rigid or blind application of moral principles immensely dangerous and also an easier and more convenient way to go in comparison with adopting an unremitting and critical attitude that scrutinises every moral rule. In my view, lying is too often hastily condemned as being morally wrong by society. There are certain situations in which telling the truth is, in my opinion, the more immoral way. This is true for personal life as well as for political life. With regard to the lie in politics, the interesting aspect is that although society in general knows that all politicians lie, politicians themselves do not speak freely about this fact. They must not confess to the fact that lying is something that is in certain circumstances the only right way. The people don't want to hear that their favourite politician is a liar although they know it in reality. Paradoxically, they want the act of lying to be concealed and, on top of that, they do not wish to recognise that the act of concealing is kept from them.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, people are practicing a kind of pseudo self-deception. If a politician violates morality in order to avoid a big disaster, the truth is that everybody expects that from him. The act of crossing the moral boundary is, without any doubt, a move that can be interpreted as something for which the

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<sup>13</sup> In this context, I want to refer back to Friedrich Nietzsche's 183<sup>rd</sup> Aphorism of *Beyond Good and Evil* that I have quoted in a previous passage of this paper.

politician can be accused, but the result of the transgression should basically excuse him, if the lie results in saving the lives of many people. Nevertheless, in most cases reality is different. Even if the result arouses enthusiasm within the public sphere, the politician has to disguise just the same the act of crossing the moral borders. In this context, I would like to refer to Niklas Luhmann who in his reflections about scandals, cynically comments that if a politician is caught engaging in misconduct, he will be sacrificed in order that everything else can continue its usual run unchanged (Luhmann, 1993, p. 39). However, the truth of the matter is that there are paradoxical situations in which the violation of morality is indeed more moral than following the moral rules. In other words, being moral is more immoral than to act immorally in the sense of violating the moral rules on one occasion to achieve a certain result. So, I think that the person who enters political life has to acquire the ability to discern situations where it is more moral to act immorally. Machiavelli's prominent demand on the prince to learn "... how to do wrong, and to make use of it or not according to necessity ..." (Machiavelli, 1993, p. 117) could be interpreted as implying that there are certain situations where it is absolutely important for the prince to cross the moral borders to prevent big disasters.

To conclude, I defend the thesis that acting immorally can, in certain situations, be more moral if violating moral standards can save a life. In my view, Michaelis or Kant were not right on the point that the obligation to truthfulness applies regardless of all consequences. With reference to this, Dieter Bonhoeffer describes in *Was heisst die Wahrheit sagen?* Immanuel Kant as a cynic who exhibits only a dead idol of the truth, claiming that the imperative to tell the truth pertains without exception everywhere, anytime and in relation to anyone in the same way. According to Bonhoeffer, Kant destroys the existence of the vivid truth between the humans, pursuing a truth-fanatism that cannot consider any form of human weakness (Bonhoeffer, 1948, p. 285).

Given its origin, lying is a morally neutral skill that can be used to realise something good as well as to create horrible evil. The moral direction of lying is absolutely dependent on the responsibility of the agent. A lie utilised for the purpose of saving a life should be morally justified in any case.

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