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Libertas et Falsum

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Im Anfang war die Tat
Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust*

There is much evidence that testifies to man's genius in the world's history. An excellent example is the existence and development of European civilization. Although European history is full of historic and creative events, admiration for human works cannot be blind; violence, barbarity and slavery have also left their mark.

Philosophy attempts to describe and study the nature of man who is capable of deeds both admirable and despicable, freedom being a key concept that serves this purpose. Thanks to freedom, estimable and culpable events occur in the world. Where does this duality of freedom come from? Can it be blamed for evil existing in the world? Or is freedom necessarily linked to "good fruit"?

Considering these issues I intend to refer to Hannah Arendt's conception of freedom and also to a special topic she takes up, that is, the lie understood as a particular form of action.

Arendt indicates that freedom is a phenomenon that requires certain fundamental conditions to be met. First of all, one must mention the existence of space in which human beings act. This space which becomes the arena of freedom is two-sided. First, all that exists within its framework is a phenomenon of sorts – Arendt assumes that this space has a phenomenal nature,

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and states that the specific quality of human action within its framework is decided by the fact that people: "are subjects and objects – perceiving and perceived."[1] Second, this space takes on the character of an interpersonal sphere: it is something that appears between acting people who remain in dialogue.

The subject of freedom is a being endowed with the capacity for action, which is understood as creating the new, initiating beginnings and competently continuing a commenced work. The subject of freedom is also, or perhaps above all, man entering inter-subjective relationships. These are particularly important for Arendt, as they allow freedom to attain an aura of openness: the other is someone who sees me in action, observes my deeds.

In order to analyze the status of the lie, it is necessary to consider the issue of initiating a beginning as such as being possible. How can a beginning be defined? According to Arendt, it is found beyond the scheme of cause and effect in the sense that the rule of an effect always becoming another cause is not valid for the beginning. Therefore, one should grant that a new beginning is not "the automatic consequence of the end,"[2] it is rather something novel and, in some sense, unprecedented. Such qualities distinguish a human deed that appears in the world in an unexpected manner, despite all necessity.

It is worth remembering that Arendt's perspective on the phenomenon of the beginning is an alternative to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Within the latter a belief has been firmly grounded that a true beginning requires the Absolute as the reason for being. This belief has resulted in the understanding that the beginning is an act of God's creation: God grants the beginning to the world, He Himself not having a beginning, as an eternal creator. Seeing the possibility of such a perspective, Arendt proposes a study of the beginning which is the work of man and not God.

[1] H. Arendt: *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York 1981, p. 20.
[2] H. Arendt: *On Revolution*, Penguin Classics, New York 1990, p. 205.

The evocation of Roman and Hebrew founding legends lets one look at those human actions that are so essentially linked to beginnings. A Roman story tells us about the founding of a new city by Aeneas, who set off on a journey after the defeat of Troy. A tale from biblical Pentateuch presents the story of the Jewish nation's flight from Egypt or, to be more precise, the liberation from Egyptian slavery and arrival in the Promised Land. The most important thread in both legends is the promise of future freedom, which has a double meaning of liberation and spontaneous initiative. Acts of foundation are also described, which double as acts of initiating – Aeneas started the rebirth of the ruined Troy just as Moses started the Hebrew nation. This observation allows Arendt to reconcile acts of beginning and foundation which were divided by traditions of political thought.

Freedom that fulfills its promise is similar in nature to the beginning: the beginning is not an automatic consequence of the end, much like freedom cannot appear automatically together with liberation; it is rather something that is to appear. This means that there is a specific moment between liberation and freedom which is called "the abyss of nothingness"[3] by Arendt.

It is also possible to point out a similar state of suspension in case of freedom – this time it is "the abyss of freedom." It is connected to the awareness that "I am able to do something and not to do something."[4] In this sense freedom means the awareness of the possibility to undertake or discard action, which is based on the feeling of "I can." This feeling expresses the potential for spontaneous action. At this moment we grasp the essence of political freedom: it is inseparable from people of action, for whom acting means principally altering the world.

Such an understanding of political freedom opens up the possibility of studying the phenomenon of the political lie. However,

[3] H. Arendt: *The Life...* .
[4] *Ibidem.*

before doing this, I propose going over Arendt's commentaries on St. Augustine's teaching about the creation of the world.

God stands at the beginning of all that exists, and as such is the creator of Heaven and Earth, which means, above all, that He is the being that precedes all creation in the temporal and metaphysical sense. The whole of creation is an act of God's will and, therefore, each created thing has two forms of existence: an ideal existence in God's mind and a real one.

However, the foundation of Augustine's conception of the world's creation is *creatio ex nihilo*, whose consequence is the existence of a world devoid of an eternal dimension. In the deepest sense, the fact of endowing the created world with a beginning equals sentencing it to a distance from the Creator. On the one hand, creation comes from God and is grounded in Him; but on the other, it bears the stamp of temporality.

Augustine's concept of *initium* is evoked by Arendt to describe the beginning of man. It differs from *principium*, which is used by Augustine to describe the beginning of things that preceded the human being. How can this differentiation be understood and why is it of use for Arendt? It signifies that God created man as an addition to creatures existing previously. It also testifies to a special condition of man, which differentiates him from the rest of creation. The difference lies in temporality. Man, as *homo temporalis*, has been endowed with life that is limited by a beginning and an end. The knowledge of his own temporality, of birth as a beginning that has its opposite called death, is an aspect that differentiates man from other living things.

Augustine adds that *Initium ergo ut esset, creatus est homo*, i.e. "that a beginning might be, man was created." Arendt points out that in this way the philosopher identifies the beginning of freedom with the birth of man, who is a beginning. It allows Arendt – who refers to Augustine's thought – to claim that human freedom is grounded in the structure of reality: "we are doomed to be free by virtue of being born, no matter whether we like

freedom or abhor its arbitrariness, are «pleased» with it or prefer to escape its awesome responsibility by electing some form of fatalism."[5]

The author's inspiration from St. Augustine draws our attention to Arendt's assertion concerning the political elements of the Christian perspective on freedom.[6] An example of this could be the meaning of the word "faith": faith that gives birth to miracles, makes miracles happen. This power of faith that, according to the Gospels, is capable of moving mountains, Arendt sees as a counterpart for the power hidden in freedom.[7] Alluding to this thread leads Arendt to define the phenomenon of freedom in a particular way, which draws from the notion of the miracle. She does not see this notion in terms of the supernatural, but understands miracles as: "interruptions of some natural series of events, of some automatic process, in whose context they constitute the wholly unexpected."[8] In her reflections on Christian themes, there emerges a vision of freedom possessed of the power to astonish. Freedom occurs, although it might not exist. It allows the world to embrace an element of uncertainty, a *sui generis* destabilization and change. The power to achieve improbable things, outside of the spontaneous, constitutes an aspect of the human ability to act and, thereby, of freedom itself.

The tradition accepting the phenomenon of the lie in the sphere of politics goes back to Ancient Greece. Despite the fact that just this source of European philosophy established the absolute validity of truth in thinking for nearly all time to come, it is a curious paradox that ancient thinkers did not

[5] *Ibidem.*

[6] Some controversy might be evoked by recognizing the political concept of freedom in St. Augustine's thought. He is generally recognized to be the inventor of the notion of freedom as *liberum arbitrium*, i.e. freedom based on the will. Arendt launches a polemic against this conception. I believe it is not the author's intention to question the traditional understanding of St. Augustine, but rather to point out the presence of other completely different insights into the notion in his philosophy. Cf. H. Arendt: *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, Penguin Classics, New York 1993, p. 167.

[7] *Ibidem*, p. 168.

[8] *Ibidem.*

see a significant contradiction in pointing out the advantages of telling untruths.

Plato, who upheld the need to direct the human gaze to what truly is, at the same time believed that supporting the lasting existence of a state is more worthwhile than opposing lies. The realization of justice in a state was to be a *sui generis* legitimization of this state of affairs. The lie was treated as one of many devices that the rulers should have at their disposal. When reading various excerpts of Plato's *Republic*, one is struck by the naďve ease with which the philosopher allows for falsehood. So, for instance, the relationship between citizens and rulers acquires a particular dimension when one comes across a similar passage:

> Truth should be highly valued [...] a lie is useless to the gods, and useful only as a medicine to men, then the use of such medicines should be restricted to physicians; private individuals have no business with them. [...] Then if anyone at all is to have the privilege of lying, the rulers of the State should be the persons; and they, in their dealings either with enemies or with their own citizens, may be allowed to lie for the public good. But nobody else should meddle with anything of the kind; and although the rulers have this privilege, for a private man to lie to them in return is to be deemed a more heinous fault than for the patient or the pupil of a gymnasium not to speak the truth about his own bodily illnesses to the physician or to the trainer, or for a sailor not to tell the captain what is happening about the ship [...]. If, then, the ruler catches anybody beside himself lying in the State [...] he will punish him for introducing a practice which is equally subversive and destructive of ship or State.[9]

The above-presented asymmetrical relationship between the government and the governed relies on granting the political body a value superior to the individual's. This constitutes, in my opinion, an argument that extenuates the charge of propagating lies that could be brought against Plato. As the lie does not receive priority, it is not valuable in itself.

[9] Plato: *The Republic*, trans. by B. Jowett, Forgotten Books 1974, pp. 99–100.

An illustration of the instrumental treatment of the phenomenon of the lie might be the theme of women who are allowed to take part in political life. A consequence of this project is a controversial program to subordinate the intimate life of men and women to the good of the state. Plato's plan is: "that the best of either sex should be united with the best as often, and the inferior with the inferior, as seldom as possible; and that they should rear the offspring of the one sort of union, but not of the other, if the flock is to be maintained in first-rate condition."[10] Focused on the achievement of the aim, the philosopher suggests falsifying the results of drawing partners if they turn out unsuitable to become parents. Moreover, the very existence of such a sophisticated social policy should be kept in secret. The official declarations of the authorities should maintain their image of those who keep guard of the dignity of the family and marriage – Plato is not afraid to postulate the organization of public show holidays to celebrate the institution of matrimony.[11] In this case, the device of falsehood becomes an element of public propaganda,[12] whose matter should be subordinated to the state's interest (good).

Censorship, which is often promoted by Plato, also testifies to his unorthodox approach to the requisite of truth being present in the political realm.[13] In essence, it means an intellectual acceptance of the human predilection and right to represent things differently from the way they really are. Yet, misrepresentation makes sense only when serving the welfare of the state, and when

[10] *Ibidem*, p. 194.
[11] A larger part of Book V of *The Republic* is devoted to the project of granting equal rights to women and the presentation of other official measures that Plato allows to be at the state's disposal.
[12] A separate issue is the development and role of rhetoric, which is commonly linked to falsehood. The ambiguity of this notion might be interesting as it could be defined as *fallendi artem* (the art of deception) or *ars artium* (the art helpful in combat). In the famous Aristotelian division of philosophy, rhetoric is associated with practical philosophy. In regard with rhetoric and its connections to falsehood, an important question arises as to the character of the relationship between them. Is it sensible to consider the status of falsehood with reference to rhetoric? It seems that in case of defining rhetoric as an art of expression the answer to this question cannot be negative.
[13] Cf. Plato: *The Republic*, Book II.

it does not signify the destruction of truth – it is still valid, but in the political sphere its voice must be controlled. In this line of thought, one sees Plato's clear division of two realms: philosophy understood as an intellectual activity and politics which is, above all, practical action.

The unmistakable similarity in Plato and Machiavelli's approaches to the phenomenon of the lie does not contradict the difference between the assumptions taken by each. Socrates's pupil deeply believes that man has an inherent ability to willingly forego his own benefits for the sake of the common good, that is, the state. For the Florentine, the pursuit of one's own interest is the most important of human drives; while sacrificing egoistic pursuits, especially those connected to power, seems to him a flight of fancy. This is emphatically expressed in chapter XVII of *The Prince*:

> This is to be asserted in general of men, that they are ungrateful, fickle, false, cowardly, covetous, and as long as you succeed they are yours entirely [...] when the need is far distant but when it approaches they turn against you. [...] love is preserved by the link of obligation which, owing to the baseness of men, is broken at every opportunity for their advantage [...] men more quickly forget the death of their father than the loss of their patrimony.[14]

At the same time, Machiavelli does not permit any illusions as far as man's nature is concerned: it is volatile, subjected to the dynamic movement of facts and desires, among which the most potent is the desire for power.

The most effective way to seize a lasting hold on power described by Machiavelli relies on Plato's division of life into two realms with various paradigms. In Plato, as I mentioned, these were philosophy and politics;[15] in Machiavelli's thought, they are

[14] N. Machiavelli: *The Prince*, trans. by W.K. Marriott, Plain Label Books, New York 1868, p. 90.

[15] I mean here Plato's inconsistent attitude to the duty of speaking and thinking in unison with the truth, which results in the impossibility to define the principles or values valid in

politics and morality. It is impossible to uphold the same rules and principles in these spheres that are so different.

Moreover, for Machiavelli, the plane of politics is by nature indifferent to any criteria of good and evil. There are no moral values that could serve to assess the quality of acts taking place within the political sphere; the appropriate measure for political matters being effectiveness. It is this fact that decides on recognizing politics as an autonomous reality, which has equally autonomous laws. It is not much of a surprise, then, when Machiavelli tells people whose passion is politics that the consequence of engaging in political matters is adaptation to the scheme of things which are organized in terms of political success and failure.

One should bear in mind the above comments while reading Machiavelli's famous tips,[16] especially those which concern lying. According to Machiavelli, history shows us the success of those rulers who "have held good faith of little account, and have known how to circumvent the intellect of men by craft, and in the end have overcome those who have relied on their word."[17] It is sensible and, even more importantly, effective to draw practical conclusions from our predecessors' experience, though "Every one admits how praiseworthy it is in a prince to keep faith, and to live with integrity and not with craft."[18] A skillful politician, able to show flexibility when the need arises, should pass as – that is, should pretend to be, which is a kind of lie – righteous, religious, merciful and faithful, "but with a mind so framed that should you require not to be so, you may be able and know how to change to the opposite."[19] If the phrase "should you require"

both of these areas. On the other hand, it is clear that Plato tends to create the political world based on a philosophical order in its broadest sense; an example of this being the comparison of the order in the state with the harmony within the soul.

[16] Cf. N. Machiavelli: *op. cit.*, and *idem*: *The Florentine Histories*, trans. by C. Edwards Lester, New York 1843.

[17] N. Machiavelli: *The Prince.*, pp. 92–93.

[18] *Ibidem*, p. 92.

[19] *Ibidem*, p. 95.

is understood as a situation in which power is threatened, then on the grounds of the assumptions previously accepted, there is no discernible argument to keep one from lying. False testimony, pretence, manipulation of public opinion, and image-making can all be labeled as falsehood and listed as the standard devices at the disposal of those in power.

Why has the political sphere appeared so conducive to falsehood and liars throughout the ages? What is the source of acquiescence to the presence of falsehood in politics on the part of both public opinion and philosophers? Does this state of affairs owe its endurance to the dampened glow of truth?

An attempt to answer this question, among many others, was undertaken by Hannah Arendt, when she reflected on the status of truth within philosophy and politics.[20] Both spheres differ in their perspective on *veritas*. It would be sheer nonsense to separate philosophical investigations from truth; in his metaphor of the cave, Plato clearly underscored the strained relationship between he who tells truth and other people. Truth assumed and tacitly accepted in philosophy becomes an artificial creation in the world of public matters. The reason for the inadequacy of truth in politics is that it is "unpolitical by nature."[21] Irresistibility, indisputability and absoluteness are attributes of truth, for which there is no place within the space of *polis*. The trivial fact that one cannot dispute truth becomes an insurmountable problem in the mutual relationship between politics and truth. Just as it is unproductive to philosophize having discarded the horizon of truth, so the political space cannot be imagined without its discursive character.

Another aspect of the relationship in question is revealed in the following comment:

> Seen from the viewpoint of politics, truth has a despotic character. It is therefore hated by tyrants, who rightly fear the competition of a coercive

[20] Cf. H. Arendt: *Truth and Politics*, in: *eadem*: *Between Past...*, pp. 227–264.
[21] *Ibidem*, p. 246.

> force they cannot monopolize, and it enjoys a rather precarious status in the eyes of governments that rest on consent and abhor coercion.[22]

The question arises if the authorities can be controlled by something non-political, independent of the citizens' will. From the viewpoint of politics, the answer cannot be positive. Arendt quotes Hugo Grotius's staunch words: "even God cannot cause two times two not to make four,"[23] which have to be questioned now.

What is it then, if not truth, that takes this privileged position within the political realm? Its foundation is made by opinions that are always formed within a discourse and refer to facts, and it is an agreement of the majority, not the absolute validity, that decides on the outcome of a debate between opinions.

The helplessness of the voice of truth about facts not only bears similarity to philosophical truth, but also exposes the nature of power. A conscious lie is an appalling threat that comes from the power of government. In Arendt's opinion, this phenomenon significantly differs from the traditional scheme of the relationship between subjects and rulers, who – for the sake of the state or *raison d'état* – resort to political lies (here the philosophical question whether the use of lies can be justified ceases to be meaningful, in light of the nature of the political sphere). In Arendt's view, the traditional lie had in view "intentions, which anyhow do not possess the same degree of reliability as accomplished facts,"[24] and, moreover, was directed at the enemy and not at the subjects of the state. What constitutes, then, the relatively contemporary phenomenon – as the author seems to suggest – of political manipulation of facts and opinions?

Three manifestations of the modern lie are emphatically explicit: a rewriting of history for one's own ends, a politician's image-making, and the current policy of government. The element that binds all three is the factor of violence and the attitude of

[22] *Ibidem*, p. 241.
[23] *Ibidem*, p. 240.
[24] *Ibidem*, p. 252.

refuting generally known information. The severe assessment of the modern lie is well earned by practices of questioning the testimony given by the eyewitnesses of an event, the concealing or making light of crucial facts that could injure a politician's image.[25] A complete destruction of facts that are being negated is a conscious aim of those in power. Arendt optimistically points out that the functioning of pretences based on false propaganda cannot last forever. This is mainly because of the "stubbornness of facts," which in their weakness are, in some way, "superior to power; they are less transitory than power formations."[26] Despite this, the tendency to destroy facts presents an enormous danger, which is:

> A peculiar cynicism – an absolute refusal to believe in the truth of anything. [...] In other words, the result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lies will now be accepted as truth, and the truth be defamed as lies, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world – and the category of truth vs. falsehood is among the mental means to this end – is being destroyed.[27]

The key to understand Arendt's controversial statement on the functions and nature of the political lie is the fact that she understands it as a form of action: "The blurring of the dividing line between factual truth and opinion belongs among the many forms that lying can assume, all of which are forms of action."[28] It is action that introduces change and, this change is a visible result of the policy that negates facts.

In light of this, however outrageous it might seem, Arendt sees unlimited possibilities for the lie, which are due to the nature of facts; their contingency allows for the whole of the public realm

[25] In this context, it is worth remembering that this essay is a reaction to criticism from Jewish circles which was directed at Arendt after the publishing of her *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. The controversy arose around Arendt's saying, among other statements, that the members of Jewish councils cooperated in murdering Jews.
[26] H. Arendt: *Truth...*, p. 259.
[27] *Ibidem*, p. 257.
[28] *Ibidem*, p. 250.

to be different from what it is! Equally surprising is the conclusion that telling the truth about facts does not lead to action and, by the same token, is not an act of freedom. Action, and the experience of freedom achieved through action, are born almost exclusively[29] through the lie. Thus, Arendt would describe a liar as a "man of action." A liar "says what is not so because he wants things to be different from what they are – that is, he wants to change the world."[30] Such an attitude would never be possible but for our inherent desire for freedom. To show the possibility of lying means to testify to human freedom! Action – which, according to Arendt, is the proper domain of freedom – is bound in an inexplicable knot with "this mysterious faculty of ours that enables us to say, «The sun is shining,» when it is raining cats and dogs."[31]

Therefore, those in power, who in a special way have the device of the lie in their hands, enhance the possibilities of developing their own freedom. Such is one of the basic consequences that follows from the notion of freedom upheld by Arendt. It must be added that the author herself sees this consequence, admitting that man also faces the possibility of abusing his own freedom. The political realm constitutes a unique space in which, by virtue of acting, we are exposed to the temptations of falsehood and rationalization of our deeds in defiance of "what we cannot change."[32]

The notion of freedom as action, a particular form of which is the lie, is in agreement with the contemporary philosophical understanding of it. Freedom, comprehended as man's gift to himself, constitutes a creative challenge: it is a task that awaits man. In the pursuit of it, it is possible to draw from the lie, as the human ability to deny truth decides on our freedom.

[29] Although chances are that the opposite occurs: if the entire community is entangled in organized lies, then the virtue of truthfulness may start to shine. Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 250–251.
[30] *Ibidem*, p. 250.
[31] *Ibidem*.
[32] *Ibidem*, p. 264. The formula is used by Arendt here to define the truth [trans.].

Does it weaken Arendt's proposition to understand freedom as action if we uncover the disturbing possibility of the lie within the experience of freedom? It doesn't seem so, especially thanks to Arendt's skill in her critical analysis of the phenomena of the political sphere. Presenting politics as the domain of action and, thereby, of freedom, the author ennobles this sphere in a brave manner. Indicating the lie as a particular form of freedom, she underscores potential dangers that might come from this sphere. The politically permissible fight against truth reveals the serious limitations of the political sphere – it is not possible to radically exclude truth from the realm of politics.[33] Maintaining political fictions, falsifying information, attempts at ruining people who might testify to truth are – as experience shows – practices limited to a certain period of time, and they usually come to light in the end.

What is extremely crucial – and, as I believe, decides on the immense significance of Arendt's political philosophy – is the recognition of the autonomy belonging to the political sphere and its specific rationality. Asking for the reasons why truth is present (or absent) within the sphere of politics leads the thinker to a decisive discarding of politics as a realm appropriate for the pursuit of truth. This standpoint opens a discussion of many issues essential for the philosophy of politics. One of these is the fundamental question about the place of morality within the political realm.

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[33] Arendt purposefully focuses on underscoring the negative relationships between politics and truth. Therefore, she only briefly mentions public institutions whose existence would not be possible without truthfulness; universities and the judiciary belong to such institutions. A separate issue is the protection of the press from political pressure, which is advocated by Arendt. Cf. H. Arendt: *Truth...*, pp. 260–261.