

It's Easier to Lie if You Believe it Yourself: Derrida, Arendt, and the Modern Lie

Law, Culture and the Humanities
2017, Vol. 13(2) 193–210
© The Author(s) 2013
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1743872113485032
journals.sagepub.com/home/lch



Marguerite La Caze

The University of Queensland, Australia

Abstract

In “History of the Lie: Prolegomena” (2002) Jacques Derrida examines Hannah Arendt’s analysis of the modern lie in politics in her essays “Lying in Politics” (1972) and “Truth and Politics” (1968/1993). Arendt contrasts the traditional lie, where lies were told and secrets kept for the greater good or to defeat the enemy, with the modern lie, which comprises deception and self-deception on a massive scale. This article investigates the seriousness of different kinds of lies in political life in the light of Arendt and Derrida’s reflections on lying and contemporary lies in politics and shows where concern should focus.

Keywords

The modern lie, the traditional lie, Derrida, Arendt, politics

Let me begin with two examples of contemporary political views about lying and of lies. Commentators have suggested that political lies have reached a new low, heading towards or reaching a complete loss of concern for truth. The first concerns the disparagement of the reality-based community, as a senior advisor to George W. Bush called the journalist Ron Suskind and others. The aide said such people as Suskind “believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality” whereas “that’s not the way the world really works anymore ... We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors ... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.”¹

1. Ron Suskind, “Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush,” *The New York Times*, October 17, 2004. This practice can be known as “putting facts on the ground.” The notion of the creation of a new reality is similar to Arendt’s claim that only a totalitarian regime can arrange the whole quality of existence, which I will discuss further on. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1976), p. 363.

Corresponding author:

Marguerite La Caze, The University of Queensland, School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics, St Lucia, Brisbane, QLD 4072, Australia.
Email: m.lacaze@uq.edu.au

Another instance is the lies that are circulating about Barack Obama. The new low may also be seen in the motivations for the lies, as they are generally not for self-interest or to cover up a mistake but seem to be guided by sheer racial bigotry and hatred.² Political commentator Christopher Hayes points out the power of the forwarded email containing a smear about a politician, for example, to work independently of mainstream media and long after such media have shown the falseness of the claim.³ One of the most persistent lies is that Barack Obama is a Muslim who attended a radical Islamic school.⁴ Furthermore, confusion, or more people thinking he is Muslim, fewer thinking he is Christian and numbers of those who do not know, continues to increase.⁵ An interesting point made by Melani McAlister, American Studies professor, is that public opinion is influenced to the extent that such claims are treated as smears rather than errors.⁶ In other words, it is thought necessary to strongly repudiate any possibility of Obama being Muslim. It is similar with the other claim that Barack Obama is an Arab.⁷ It would be too simple to conclude that if many believe the emails they send, they are not really lying. Some are cynically starting up the stories, as Hayes went to the trouble of finding out.⁸

The views expressed by the Bush aide and the lies permeating the internet are more complex than they may appear at first sight and they lead us to consider more carefully what is meant by a lie. Here I examine the thought of Jacques Derrida and Hannah Arendt concerning lies in political life. Both these philosophers may be thought to either condone lying or not to have the normative authority to be able to criticize lying or not to care about lies. The idea that acting is more important than telling the truth, as Bush's aide stated, may be associated with the work of Hannah Arendt, but as I will show, she would not accept that view as such.⁹ Arendt's work on lying challenges the view that a lie is a deliberate and conscious false assertion, and Derrida argues passionately that we

2. Christopher Hayes, "The New Right-Wing Smear Machine," *The Nation*, November 12, 2007. Hillary Clinton has also been targeted in disturbing ways. See Jane Caputi, "Character Assassinations: Hate Messages in Election 2008 Commercial Paraphernalia," *Denver University Law Review* 86, 2009, 585–613.
3. See Mike D'Asto, <http://www.MyRightWingDad.net> for a sampling. Accessed 5.31.12.
4. During the 2008 election campaign there was an official Website devoted to rebutting the false claims. Barack Obama, <http://www.fightthesmears.com/>: Fight back with the Truth! Accessed 12.7.12. This site is now <http://www.barackobama.com/truth-team/> Accessed 3.11.13.
5. Chris Cillizza, "Confusion grows about Obama's religion," *The Washington Post*, August 19, 2010.
6. Melani McAlister, "A Virtual Muslim is something to be," *American Quarterly* 62(2), 2010, 221–31.
7. Colin Powell pointed that out that being Muslim does not disqualify someone from being President. *Meet the Press*, NBC. October 19, 2008.
8. Christopher Hayes, "The New Right-Wing Smear Machine."
9. Martin Jay, for example, uses Arendt to support the view that "truthfulness is not a genuine political virtue" in "The Ambivalent Virtues of Mendacity: How Europeans Taught (Some of) us to learn to Love the Lies of Politics," *The Humanities and the Dynamics of Inclusion Since World War II*, David A. Hollinger, ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), p. 116.

should not only be truthful but we need to consider whether we have searched hard enough to find the truth. My article proposes to consider both their work on lying, in particular Derrida's reading of Arendt, to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of lies in politics.

I begin by examining the frank concept of the lie as a deliberate intention to deceive, a concept in the philosophical tradition that Derrida demonstrates is a kind of limit concept of lying. I then consider the problem of the modern lie, as articulated by Arendt, which involves self-deception and on her view is worse than the frank or traditional lie that is a knowing deception of others. Derrida also identifies another form of dishonesty, that of the counter-truth (*contre-vérité*), that is constituted by a negligent or motivated failure to search for the truth. Derrida takes up the idea of the modern lie, stating that this kind of mystification, often found in media images, "is at once less and more serious than the lie. Less serious because no one has, in bad faith, sought to deceive anyone else. More serious because the absence of any transcendent referent, or even any meta-interpretive norm, makes the effect of the operation not only difficult to measure and to analyse, but fundamentally irreparable."¹⁰ Derrida says that lies have an "irreducibly ethical dimension"¹¹ and also that, like Nietzsche, Arendt treats the history of the lie "in an extra-moral sense" in a neutral or theoretical and epistemological sense.¹² However, he believes that an abyss opens between the epistemological problem of the relation between errors and lies and the ethical problem of lying. My article examines these dimensions of greater and lesser seriousness in relation to the question of ethics and ethical judgement in political life in the light of Arendt and Derrida's reflections on lying. I trace both Derrida's complications of our concept of lying, through the distinction between an unconditional opposition to lying and a conditional acceptance of some lies, as well as the link between Arendt's approach to lying and self-deception and Kant's conception of truthfulness to illuminate the forms of lying in politics and to show where ethical and political concern should focus.

I. The Concept of the Frank Lie

In "History of the Lie: Prolegomena," Derrida outlines the possibility of a history of lying through reading a history of philosophical understandings of lies, and through readings of philosophical views of lies as having a history, especially in Arendt's work. The first distinction he introduces is between the *frank concept* of the lie and other, murkier concepts, such as error or fabrication, a concept he traces to Aristotle, and calls the classical and dominant one.¹³ Derrida's understanding of the frank lie is that "To lie would be to address oneself to another ... in order to direct his way a statement or

10. Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 65.

11. Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, p. 29.

12. Derrida is referring to Friedrich Nietzsche's "On Truth and lies in an Extra-Moral Sense," *Early Greek Philosophy and Other Essays*, ed. O. Levy, trans. M.A. Mügge (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964), pp. 503–15.

13. Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, p. 33.

more than one statement ... that the liar knows, consciously, in explicit, thematic, current consciousness, form assertions that are totally or partially false.”¹⁴ The distinction between truth and lie is not the same as the distinction between truth and falsity, as one can deceive and mislead by telling the truth. One may tell the truth but know that it will be interpreted incorrectly. Derrida notes this possibility,¹⁵ and Arendt gives the example of where “Hitler was completely sincere and brutally unequivocal in the definition of the movement’s true aims, but they were simply not acknowledged by a public unprepared for such consistency.”¹⁶ The concept of the frank lie is distinguished from error, mistakes, self-deceptive lying, and the creation of fictions not intended to deceive. While Derrida allows that there are other forms of deception than this frank lie, his acceptance of it as a kind of paradigm makes it difficult for him to see how we can judge that someone has lied. He claims we can never prove that someone has *intentionally* lied,¹⁷ as even if they were to confess to lying or be caught saying one thing to one person and something else to another, we cannot know their intentions.¹⁸ Derrida has made the possibility of proof too stringent here, as if we need to have absolute certainty that someone has lied, rather than good reason to think they have done so. He implies that they may instead have forgotten, or compartmentalized the experience or been the subject of some other non-intentional phenomena. In spite of this problem, Derrida highlights another important form of lack of truthfulness, that of the counter-truth. He says the conception of the lie as frank does not touch silent dissimulation, lying through gesture, the unconscious, performative aspects of lying,¹⁹ the concept of testimony, and of ideology. I will return to these other forms of lying farther on. Here I want to show how Derrida’s concern with the frank lie, the clear and obvious deliberate lie, is linked to an unconditional constraint against such lying.

The unconditional imperative against lies is of course associated with Immanuel Kant. In his famous essay, “On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy,” written as a reply to Benjamin Constant,²⁰ Kant examines whether one should lie to save a friend from a murderer who is inquiring into your friend’s whereabouts.²¹ He argues

14. Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, p. 34.

15. Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, p. 31; p. 63.

16. Hannah Arendt, *Origins*, p. 343.

17. Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, p. 34.

18. See “‘Le Parjure,’ *Perhaps*: Storytelling and Lying,” in *Without Alibi*, pp. 161–201, for more detail on the difficulty of proving that someone has really lied.

19. Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, pp. 36–7.

20. Benjamin Constant, “Des réactions politiques” [1797], *Écrits et discours politiques*. Tome I. ed. O. Pozzo di Borgo (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1964), pp. 21–85.

21. Constant claimed that a “German philosopher” had put this argument, and contended that such a view would make all society impossible (Constant, *Écrits*, p. 68). In his essay, Kant accepts that he was that German philosopher and defended a view, an unconditional stricture against the *right* to lie, that he had not previously put. It is unclear why he did this and the essay continues to intrigue. Jules Vuillemin suggests that the example of the murderer may have been confused with a quite different example in Kant’s *The Metaphysics of Morals* (*Practical Philosophy*, 6: 431) of a servant who obeys his master’s order to say that he is not at home, and meanwhile the master commits a crime. “On Lying: Kant and Benjamin Constant.” *Kant-Studien* 73(4), 1982, 413–14.

that we should not lie to the murderer as it is our duty to be truthful. Kant famously concludes that “To be truthful (honest) in all declarations is therefore a sacred command of reason prescribing unconditionally, one not to be restricted by any conveniences.”²² The repugnance of Kant’s conclusion about the case of the friend here can distract readers from the interesting point he is making about formulating principles of right or justice. Kant is arguing that we cannot build exceptions into these kinds of principles as that undermines them as principles. This is what he means when he says “Someone who is not indignant at another’s question as to whether he is going to be truthful in the statement he is about to make – indignant at the suspicion it expresses that he might be a liar – but asks permission to think about possible exceptions is already a liar (*in potentia*); for he shows that he does not recognize truthfulness as a duty in itself but reserves for himself exceptions to a rule that by its essence does not admit of exceptions, since in doing so it would directly contradict itself.”²³ Elsewhere Kant condemns lying as a violation of our duty to ourselves as moral beings.²⁴ His concept of lying concerns situations where we are unable to avoid a direct answer to a direct question, thus a very deliberate lie.

Derrida’s approach to these questions is influenced by that of Kant’s to the extent that he believes we should continue to take seriously the unconditional ethical obligation to truthfulness even when we may believe it is morally justified to break it or act as if it is conditional in certain circumstances. While he does not discuss this idea in detail in this particular essay, one can see the parallels with his analyses of the logic of other concepts, such as the gift, forgiveness and hospitality.²⁵ Derrida’s account of unconditionality emerges from his deconstruction of particular ethical concepts. He deconstructs these concepts into their pure and impure or unconditional and conditional forms. Pure hospitality involves a complete openness and welcome of the other independent of any “invitation” whereas conditional hospitality depends on a wide range of criteria concerning identity, length of visit, and so on. Conditions on hospitality may be necessary but they are not true hospitality. Thus Derrida finds an ethical imperative in the logic of the concepts themselves. Insofar as we aspire to the *pure* gift, *pure* hospitality or *true*

-
22. Immanuel Kant, Mary J. Gregor, trans., *Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 8: 427. Alasdair MacIntyre argues that we need to formulate a general principle that incorporates a commitment to truthfulness and truthful relationships, but that allows we may lie in extreme circumstances, in “Truthfulness and lies: What can we learn from Kant?” *Ethics and Politics; Selected Essays*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 139.
 23. Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, 8: 430. See Robert J. Benton, who argues that Kant’s position here reflects his understanding of the nature of right, and how right is more basic than political expediency, in “Political Expediency and Lying: Kant vs. Benjamin Constant,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 43(1), 1982, 135–44.
 24. Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, Trans. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 6: 429. See also *The Groundwork*, where Kant discusses how we cannot will a lying promise as a universal law or be treating others as ends if we make a false promise. *Practical Philosophy*, 4: 403; 4: 430.
 25. Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, Trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London: Routledge, 2001).

forgiveness, they provide an ethical demand by highlighting the ethical inadequacy of conditional gifts, hospitality and forgiveness.

This idea of the contrast between an unconditional ethical imperative against lying and a conditional acceptance of lies in certain circumstances works throughout the essay. For example, Derrida writes that “what looks like a hyperbolic and untenable prescription on Kant’s part ... can also be described as a modest and tenacious description, a simple, constative analysis of the essence of language.”²⁶ This description is that “I can address myself to someone only by promising him at least implicitly the truth, my truth, that is, my veracity” and it is “A very strong proposition, difficult to refute.”²⁷ However, this veracity is always haunted by the specter of the lie and the possibility we have of lying. One could speculate that Derrida would propose a solution to the problem of the relationship between the unconditional imperative of truth-telling and a conditional acceptance of some lies similar to his solution for other concepts. That answer is one in terms of negotiation between pure and impure forms, yet a negotiation that never loses sight of the unconditional imperative.²⁸ Derrida’s delineation of the frank lie as linked to deliberate intention, that sets a kind of “standard” for lying, and his argument that we can never be sure that someone really has lied, sets his position apart from Arendt’s and may lead him to miss some of the subtleties of her account, as I will show. Together their work provides insight into both the nature of lying and its ethical and political ramifications.

Derrida examines Hannah Arendt’s discussions of the modern lie in politics in her essays “Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers”²⁹ and “Truth and Politics.”³⁰ Arendt contrasts the traditional lie with the modern lie. The traditional lie or lack of truthfulness involved reasons of state, where lies were told and secrets were kept for the greater good or to defeat the enemy. This doctrine itself is one that is not entirely clear and that has arguably been stretched in recent times to cover up government mistakes rather than to protect national security.³¹ In any case, in contrast, modern political lies are, Arendt argues, “so big that they require a complete rearrangement of the whole factual texture.”³² Good examples are the lies of the Nazi and Stalinist regimes, the lies

26. Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, p. 45.

27. Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, p. 45.

28. See Jacques Derrida, *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews 1971–2001*, Trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), for a series of discussions of this approach in particular instances, and my paper “Terrorism and trauma: Negotiating Derridean ‘autoimmunity,’” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 37(5), 2011, 605–20, for an examination of how negotiation might work in our responses to terrorism.

29. Hannah Arendt, “Lying in Politics,” *Crises of the Republic* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1972), pp. 1–48.

30. Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” *Between Past and Future* (London: Penguin, 1993), pp. 227–64.

31. For example, a *New York Times* editorial argues that both the Bush and Obama administrations in the US have used the doctrine of what they call “state-secrets privilege” to cover up “illegal and embarrassing acts.” See “Tactical Secrets,” *The New York Times*, January 24, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/25/opinion/25tue2.html>. Similar questions concerning the necessity for secrecy arise in relation to Wikileaks.

32. Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” p. 253.

of both sides during the Cold War, and in “Lying in Politics” Arendt argues that the military and civilian advisers during the Vietnam War used similar tactics of “concealment, falsehood, and ... the deliberate lie” for domestic consumption.³³ The “weapons of mass destruction” justification for the invasion of Iraq, obliquely referred to by Bush’s adviser in the reality-creating remark, is a contemporary case in point. These modern lies comprise deception and usually self-deception on the part of both the deceivers and the deceived on a massive scale. Derrida engages with Arendt’s delineation of the modern lie, and suggests other permutations of it. The questions Arendt’s and Derrida’s work raise and help us to answer concern what forms of lying are common in politics and which are more ethically and politically serious.

II. The Modern Lie

It should be noted that the concept of the modern lie seems to have originated with Alexandre Koyré in his 1945 article “The Political Function of the Modern Lie.”³⁴ Arendt lists Koyré’s essay in the bibliography of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, first published in 1951, so there can be no doubt that she had read the essay before writing her essays on lying and truth-telling. Arendt writes: “The difference between the traditional lie and the modern lie will more often than not amount to the difference between hiding and destroying.”³⁵ What she means is that in the past secrets were more important, but in the modern lie, the liar tries to figuratively and literally obliterate people and events, a notorious example of someone who suffered this fate being Trotsky. In addition “the traditional lie concerned only particulars and was never meant to deceive literally everybody; it was directed at the enemy and was meant to deceive only him.”³⁶ Lies stood out against a background of truth, and the liars did not fool themselves about what was true. Koyré argued that totalitarian regimes reversed the usual priorities and made the lie primary.³⁷ He also makes the interesting point that the “intellectual quality” of lies has deteriorated, a claim many today are likely to sympathize with.

The question of self-deception comes in here and Arendt’s view is that it is worse both for the liar and for others if the liar is self-deceived because the political consequences are deeper and more far-reaching. For her “the more successful a liar is, the more likely it is that he will fall prey to his own fabrications.”³⁸ One of the reasons that it will be worse is that the liar will then appear more trustworthy. People will think “At any rate they weren’t just making this up.” A second is that the “cold-blooded liar” at least still recognizes the truth, and so both reality and the liar can be redeemed. They still bear a relationship to truth and recognize what truth is. Arendt’s view can be contrasted with Aristotle’s, that the person who prefers to lie and chooses to, is always worse than the

33. Hannah Arendt, “Lying in Politics,” p. 14.

34. Alexandre Koyré, “The Political Function of the Modern Lie,” *Analysis* 12, 2003, 99–108 [*Réflexions sur le mensonge*, Paris: Editions Allia, 1996].

35. Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” p. 253.

36. Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” p. 253.

37. Alexandre Koyré, “Modern Lie,” p. 100.

38. Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” p. 254.

“involuntary liar.”³⁹ Yet the difference here might not be as substantial as it appears, as Arendt and Aristotle may be thinking on two different levels in relation to this particular point, in one case the phenomenological, and in the other the ethical. Their views come closer together if they are both compared on ethical grounds.

A more extensive result of the modern lie is that in political cases where propaganda images take hold, efforts will be directed at maintaining the image and those who challenge it will be treated as more treacherous than actual adversaries. Arendt has in mind the worst propaganda excesses of the totalitarian states and yet also crisis moments in democracies, particularly times of war, or when regimes are attempting to justify war. In “Lying in Politics,” Arendt sees a reversal of the usual process of deception leading to self-deception in the case of the Vietnam War advisers. Instead they began with self-deception about their capacity to deceive others, and then did not notice their own failure.⁴⁰ While the claim made by Bush’s aide is quite lucid, a new reality can only be created if most of those involved come to believe in it. Self-deception itself can take a variety of forms. Derrida says the lie to oneself is not bad faith in the ordinary sense or in Sartre’s sense.⁴¹ By “in the ordinary sense” he probably means bad faith as insincerity, or not really meaning what we say, and in Sartre’s sense as a denial of our responsibility. We could put the modern use of “plausible deniability” as a parallel to self-deception, where a politician, for example, tries to ensure that they do not have the information that would unmask their lie as untrue.⁴² I will return to this question of how to understand self-deception when I consider Derrida’s criticisms of Arendt. Here I consider Derrida’s delineation of another way in which we can fail to tell the truth.

III. Counter-truth

Derrida identifies another type of lying. He describes a counter-truth (*contre-vérité*) that does not try to find the truth and aims at an effect of truth to justify an opinion or prejudice.⁴³ While this idea of counter-truth could be more simply called an “untruth” or taken as a very French, very polite way of calling someone a liar, Derrida is trying to suggest that there is a phenomenon more complex than our usual concepts of truth, lies, and self-deception allows. His way of proceeding, he says, is analogical to Kant’s

39. Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, p. 30; Aristotle, *Metaphysics* V, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Ed. Jonathan Barnes, Vol. 2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1025a1–13.

40. Hannah Arendt, “Lying in Politics,” p. 35.

41. Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, p. 57.

42. Something like this was going on in the John Howard (former Australian Prime Minister) “children overboard” affair, although it later transpired that there was no deniability, as he had been contacted with the correction several times (Robert Manne, “Man of Wood,” Review of John Howard’s *Lazarus Rising*, *The Monthly*, December-January, 2010–11, 89). John Howard had claimed that asylum-seekers were throwing children off their boat and so did not deserve asylum.

43. This idea of “counter” does not mean precisely against, as one can also think of counter-signature, counterfeit and other uses of that prefix.

reflective judgement. In other words, he will look at examples, and then see what we may draw out from them.⁴⁴ The rather self-indulgent example Derrida gives concerns Tony Judt writing in the *New York Times* that French intellectuals, including Derrida himself, had neglected to acknowledge France's responsibility for Jewish deportations in World War II or to pressure the government to do so.⁴⁵ Derrida is able to correct the record by stating that he and others sent an open letter to President François Mitterrand requesting he make this acknowledgement.⁴⁶ He argues that counter-truth is not a lie or ignorance or error or self-deception and is not accounted for by traditional thinking about the lie, even by Arendt's.⁴⁷

Derrida describes the idea of counter-truth in this case: "If Professor Judt did not seek to know more or enough about the subject, or everything that a historian and conscientious journalist should know before speaking, it is also because he was in a hurry to reach a conclusion and therefore to produce an 'effect of truth' confirming at all cost his general thesis on French intellectuals and politics."⁴⁸ This might be what we call bias, prejudice or drawing hasty conclusions. This counter-truth is constituted by a negligent or motivated failure to search for the truth, although Judt may be quite sincere in his statements about French intellectuals in that he really means and believes them when he makes them.⁴⁹ Derrida's discussion of this instance contributes to the development of thinking about the concept of truth and lying,⁵⁰ in that there are so many different means by which we may be less than truthful. Arendt does not explore this idea of counter-truth in detail, perhaps because she would believe it is obvious that we must carefully seek out the truth before expressing ourselves, an aspect of all thinking for her. The counter-truth captures distinctive aspects of the spread of misinformation on the internet, where anyone quickly scanning a blog or article or reading a "joke" email can form opinions resistant to correction, such as that Barack Obama is a Muslim or even that a political leader is a liar. What I will focus on now are the nuances of Arendt's account of lying

44. See Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

45. Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, pp. 53–4; Tony Judt, "French War Stories," *The New York Times*, July 19, 1995.

46. Responsibility was eventually acknowledged by President Jacques Chirac in 1995. Kevin Anderson pointed out the fact of the petition in a letter to the editor (Anderson, "French Intellectuals Wanted Truth Told," *The New York Times*, July 23, 1995). Furthermore, as Derrida notes, *The New York Times* had published an article about the petition in 1992 (Alan Riding, "Paris Asked to Admit Vichy's Crimes against Jews," *The New York Times*, June 22, 1992).

47. Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, p. 56.

48. Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, p. 56.

49. See William Ransome for a detailed example explaining how insincerity and self-deception may come apart, in *Moral Reflection* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 58–63.

50. One might propose that the idea of a counter-truth relies on an absolute truth: Derrida and others really did sign the letter, as Samir Haddad suggested at the Derrida Today Conference, London 2010. The example could be taken further in a deconstructive vein to imply there was some truth even in Tony Judt's counter-truth, since Derrida argues for a hyperbolic ethics in which we can never be satisfied with our efforts (Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, p. 51) although he is torn between this ethics and a more pragmatic vision.

neglected by Derrida in order to draw out the relevant lessons for comprehending mendacity in politics.

IV. Derrida's Interpretation of Arendt

At the end of "History of the Lie," Derrida both praises Arendt for certain aspects of her approach and criticizes Arendt on a number of grounds, which he argues limit the prospects for a history of the lie. He commends her for avoiding "moral denunciation" in her account of lying, for acknowledging the way media can transform lying so that it cannot be traced to intentional lying, for restricting the scope of the political, and for linking the lie with freedom, action or performance and imagination.⁵¹ Derrida's criticisms are that Arendt does not give a detailed account of testimony and witnessing; she neglects the concept of ideology; and she is too optimistic about the eventual triumph of truth.⁵² In relation to self-deception, he states that self-deception conflicts with the frank concept of the lie, so must be thought of differently and suggests a split concept of the self that needs to be developed.⁵³ This would involve both a psychoanalytic approach and the performative aspects of speech act theory, and he claims that Arendt neglects to think about the "technical mutations in the history of consciousness and the unconscious."⁵⁴ Arendt did not adopt the concept of the unconscious, yet she would not be averse to giving a history of changes in consciousness, as she believes that there can be unprecedented changes in the way we think, for example, when people change their ethics like table manners and when temptations reverse so that the temptation to kill becomes the temptation not to kill under the Nazi regime.

However, Derrida's praise for Arendt does not do justice to the complexity of her account of lying, which can unite with his to provide a subtle picture of the nature of lies in politics and where ethical and political concern should center. It is true that her primary concern is not with moral denunciation, particularly of individual lying *per se*.

51. Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, pp. 64–6. Of course, truth-telling can also be a kind of performance, recent apologies for past oppression and injustice being good examples. This point connects with Arendt's interest in the specific role that promises play in politics in *The Human Condition*, 2nd edn (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 236–43.

52. Charles Barbour discusses this strange moment in Derrida's paper, where he seems unaware of her extensive discussions of witnessing or her experience as a witness, in "The Acts of Faith: On Witnessing in Derrida and Arendt," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 37(6), 2011, 629–45. Peg Birmingham also shows how central testimony and witnessing is to Arendt's work, particularly in relation to the question of deception, in "Elated Citizenry: Deception and the Democratic Task of Bearing Witness," *Research in Phenomenology* 38, 2008, 198–215.

53. Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, p. 67.

54. Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, pp. 67–70. See Sigmund Freud, "Two Lies Told by Children," *The Standard edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. XII (1911–1913), [*The Case of Schreber, Papers on Technique and Other Works*], Trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1958), pp. 303–310. Martin Jay rightly indicates that Derrida is exaggerating Arendt's optimism here, in "Pseudology: Derrida on Arendt and Lying in Politics," *Derrida and the Time of the Political*, Ed. Pheng Cheah and Suzanne Guerlac (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 250.

Arendt links the view that all lying is seriously morally wrong with Puritanism, and believes that lying may be necessary in politics.⁵⁵ Repeated and exaggerated accusations of lying are a significant problem in politics, where a misplaced moralism can dominate public discussion, and tie up the political process in endless inquiries, commissions, and trials into whether a politician has lied. For example, arguably this is what happened when Bill Clinton obfuscated about his relationship with Monica Lewinsky to top aides.⁵⁶ However, as I will show, Arendt took egregious lies and self-deception in politics seriously on an ethical level, so in that sense Derrida's compliment is misplaced.

V. The Ethics of Lying

The positive point that Derrida sees Arendt as delimiting the political realm has some basis in her texts, in that she tends to talk about politics as a sphere of action separate from much of our everyday lives and indeed from much of what people usually call politics. However, politics cannot be entirely separated off from other realms. Arendt's position may seem to be strongly contrasted with Kant's unconditional denunciation of lying in "On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy"⁵⁷ because she links the lie with freedom, action, and imagination, but I argue that Arendt is more influenced by the Kantian view of truth-telling than at first appears. While she accepts some exceptions to the need for honesty in politics, she is concerned about the increase in lies and the expansion of lies through self-deception in modern politics. Arendt's concern about lying can be linked with a Kantian concept of the relationship between thought and communication. She notes that the judicial realm, where the whole truth is important, has some overlap with politics, but does not share its characteristics of plurality and opinion. Universities and the press play the vital role of discovering, interpreting and telling the truth.⁵⁸ Furthermore, Arendt concedes that philosophical or rational truths can become part of the political sphere through example, writing "philosophical truth can become 'practical' and inspire action without violating the rules of the political realm only when it manages to become manifest in the guise of an example."⁵⁹ Setting an example is a kind of action and through that we persuade others. Her cases here are of courage and goodness. Living these kinds of principles is a way that good examples can be set.

Arendt does link the lie with action, freedom and imagination, but that is at the phenomenological level; at the ethical level she has something quite different to say. While Derrida

55. Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," p. 232. In *On Revolution*, Arendt is also very critical of excessive concern with unmasking hypocrisy, which she argues was one of the factors in the horrors of the French Revolution (Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), pp. 96–106).

56. Clinton later famously explained his claim that "there is not a sexual relationship" with Monica Lewinsky through his idea that it depends on what the meaning of "is" is – whether it refers only to the immediate present tense at the time of speaking or includes the past and future as well.

57. Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, pp. 607–615. The essay was first published in 1797.

58. Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," p. 261.

59. Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," p. 249.

suggests Heidegger's idea that Dasein contains the possibility of lying should be explored, Arendt is clearly taking this view as part of her argument.⁶⁰ She is presenting a phenomenological account of the human capacity to lie, a capacity she believes is essential to us. Arendt says that lying shows human freedom. She writes "our ability to lie – but not necessarily our ability to tell the truth – belongs among the few obvious, demonstrable data that confirm human freedom."⁶¹ In "Lying in Politics," Arendt further links this capacity to imagination, saying "the deliberate denial of factual truth – the ability to lie – and the capacity to change facts – the ability to act – are interconnected; they owe their existence to the same source: imagination."⁶² Lying is a kind of action and in that sense creative.⁶³

However, this feature of lying does not mean that we should choose to lie. The phenomenological account of the human capacity for mendacity can be set beside Arendt's views on the ethics and politics of lying. While she seems to glorify lies by saying they are a form of action whereas truth-telling is not, she says that human freedom "is abused and perverted through mendacity."⁶⁴ Like the capacity to choose between right and wrong, the capacity for lying is important to our humanity; telling particular lies is not. Another qualification Arendt makes to the claim about action is that being truthful is a kind of action when organized lying is prevalent. Systematic lies are always linked to violence and destruction, Arendt argues.⁶⁵ The over-confident boast that reality can be created for others to study was linked to the invasion of countries, the war on terror, the use of extraordinary rendition, indefinite detention without trial, and torture. She writes: "Persuasion and violence may destroy truth, but they cannot replace it"⁶⁶ and concludes that politics must accept that it is limited by truth. In a surprisingly Kantian flourish at the end of "Truth and Politics" Arendt states: "Conceptually, we may call truth what we cannot change; metaphorically, it is the ground on which we stand and the sky that stretches above us."⁶⁷ Thus her view is that truth is a kind of foundation for our living in the world.

60. Derrida also suggests that Arendt should have examined Heidegger's work in relation to lying as a capacity of Dasein, or rather, implies that she avoids it (Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, p. 67). This is an odd suggestion as the lecture series where Heidegger discusses Dasein and lying, a Marburg seminar from 1923–24, is one that Arendt would have known about since she came to study in Marburg in 1924, and the conception of lying as a basic capacity of the human being evidently informs her work. See Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Phenomenological Research*, Trans. Daniel O. Hahlstrom (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), pp. 18–22.

61. Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," p. 250.

62. Hannah Arendt, "Lying in Politics," p. 5.

63. The film *The Invention of Lying*, rather crassly, makes a similar point (Ricky Gervais and Matthew Robinson, dir., *The Invention of Lying*, 2009).

64. Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," p. 251.

65. Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," pp. 252–3.

66. Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," p. 259.

67. Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," p. 264. Compare to Kant: "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the more often and the more steadily one reflects on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me." *Critique of Practical Reason* (Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, 5: 162). Riley gives a very good account of Kant's political philosophy and Arendt's idiosyncratic reconstruction of it (Patrick Riley, "Hannah Arendt on Kant, Truth and Politics," *Essays on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Howard Williams, ed. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992), pp. 305–323).

Furthermore, Arendt cannot be taken to support the view that lies and distortions of the facts are okay in politics on the grounds that politics is the realm of opinion and so free of both the truth and ethics. This is in spite of the fact that she exalts both opinions and politics.⁶⁸ She distinguishes a number of important kinds of lies in politics in “Truth and Politics.” One is where things that are known by the public are treated as secrets, such as the existence of concentration and extermination camps in Hitlerian Germany and Stalinist Russia.⁶⁹ Another is the transformation of facts into opinions. The examples Arendt gives here are “the fact of Germany’s support of Hitler or France’s collapse before the German armies in 1940 or of Vatican policies during the Second World War.”⁷⁰ Another example is where Holocaust deniers are treated simply as people who have a different opinion about whether the Holocaust was perpetrated.

Arendt is distinguishing a fact from different interpretations we may have of that fact as well as opinion. Far from thinking that we can ignore facts in politics, she argues that “Freedom of opinion is a farce unless factual information is guaranteed and the facts themselves are not in dispute. In other words, factual truth informs political thought just as rational truth informs philosophical speculation.”⁷¹ Thus a political realm of mendacity would be one not only where truth was meaningless but one where opinion was meaningless as well. Moreover, history itself becomes distorted when lies proliferate to the extent that the truth is not known or recorded. Lies can alter history itself so that a history of the lie is no longer possible. Even when the “weapons of mass destruction” justification for the invasion of Iraq was exposed as false it was still often publicly referred to as true. Arendt is clearly concerned with the ethical problem of lying. In the next section I wish to respond to Derrida’s comments about the *limitations* of Arendt’s thought about lying in politics in order to show that her work can shed light on the different dimensions of lying in politics.

VI. Self-deception and Ideology

Arendt’s work can be reconstructed to account for self-deception, and she explicitly discusses the role of ideology in furthering mendacity. Derrida implies that only recourse to Freud’s work can enable us to comprehend the possibility of self-deception. So, how can Arendt account for self-deception without appealing to the unconscious? I argue that self-deception for Arendt must be something like shutting down part of the interior dialogue I have with myself. She maintains that we are essentially dual; that there is

68. Ronald Beiner usefully challenges the sharpness of the distinction Arendt makes between opinion and truth in “Truth and Politics” in “Rereading ‘Truth and Politics,’” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 34(1–2), 2008, 130–33. In “Philosophy and Politics” Arendt stresses much more the significance of truthful opinions and the idea of an “abyss” between them as a problem (Hannah Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics,” *Social Research* 57(1), 1990, 83–5).

69. Arendt discusses the use of propaganda by these regimes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, as well as (pp. 341–64) the delivering of prophecies or predictions that are later made true (pp. 349–50).

70. Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” p. 236.

71. Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” p. 238.

difference in identity within the self.⁷² Using Socrates as her exemplar, she writes that “to Socrates, the duality of the two-in-one meant no more than that if you want to think, you must see to it that the two who carry on the dialogue must be in good shape, that the partners be friends.”⁷³ In self-deception, instead of a dialogue where a view is questioned or challenged, a monologue continues to reiterate the convenient or desired belief. Eichmann is an obvious case of very thorough self-deception, although sometimes Arendt seems to let him off the hook even of that, when she says that he was unable to think or “thoughtless.”⁷⁴ This is despite the fact she said that everyone has the faculty of thought, so it must be that someone like Eichmann was not trying to think.⁷⁵ Self-deception takes some effort on our part, at least to initiate, and can be maintained only through blocking the dialogue of thought. Self-deception can be understood through Arendt’s own account of mental activities, and is linked to the operation of ideologies in political life.

Arendt also discusses ideology and its difference from prejudices. She is cautious about prejudices that block our thinking. In “Introduction *into* politics,” part of a lecture series from 1955, Arendt considers prejudices against politics itself, which she maintains are driven by hope and fear linked to a sense of politics as destructive. She writes “The prejudices that we share, that we take to be self-evident, that we can toss out in conversation without any lengthy explanations, are ... themselves political in the broadest sense of the word – that is, something that constitutes an integral part of those human affairs that are the context in which we go about our daily lives.”⁷⁶ Tony Judt’s claim that French intellectuals tend to focus on distant crises could be understood as a form of prejudice, as can the various stubborn beliefs concerning President Obama’s background. Arendt accepts the obvious retort that prejudices are necessary to ordinary human thought when we are in an unfamiliar situation. In order not to have prejudices and make our own judgements on every matter, we would have to have a kind of superhuman intellect, perceptiveness and awareness. Nevertheless, she believes we should not give up the hope of understanding and dispelling them, at least to some extent, as they are harmful in politics. Prejudice for Arendt is a kind of legitimate judgement from the past that has become frozen through our lack of reflection on it. Her thinking is that prejudices obstruct our capacity to judge and indeed perceive what is occurring. She suggests tracing the original source of whatever truth or former judgement they contain as part of that process.⁷⁷ Prejudices are a kind of pre-judgement used to subsume things under categories, rather than the judgement that approaches each event or action as something new. For Arendt, prejudices are shared rather than individual or idiosyncratic and rely on an appeal to authority. Prejudices make it easy for us to assert counter-truths and avoid pursuing truth.

72. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 187.

73. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, pp. 187–8.

74. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, p. 4.

75. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, p. 191.

76. Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, Jerome Kohn, ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), p. 99.

77. Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, p. 101; p. 152.

However, prejudices are only partial and Arendt reserves the term “ideology” for more general explanations that do not take experience into account. Her claim is that prejudices are transformed into something more general in times of crisis, as they lose their legitimacy through not being really accepted. Then they become more rigid in response, as pseudotheories, “closed worldviews or ideologies.”⁷⁸ Ideologies differ from prejudices in their breadth, their claim to explain all, and to “protect” us from experience. In Arendt’s view then, ideologies usurp both prejudice and fresh judgement. The importance of ideology to terror is one of the themes Arendt takes up in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, where she argues that the Nazi and Stalinist regimes politically exploited ideologies in a way they had not been before. One of the features of ideologies is their claim to be a scientific application of an idea to history. Here she defines them this way: “Ideologies always assume that one idea is sufficient to explain everything in the development from the premise, and that no experience can teach anything because everything is comprehended in this consistent process of logical deduction.”⁷⁹ The explanation in this case is that a certain law-like logic is the motor of history rather than any external features, for example “Racism is the belief that there is a motion inherent in the very idea of race.”⁸⁰ The racism directed against Barack Obama can link to a more pervasive racist ideology of superiority and the clash of cultures.

The serious problem with ideologies, Arendt argues, is that they all contain three totalitarian elements, even if those elements are not always developed. These elements are: a total explanation that takes in past, present, and future; ideological thought is separated from experience and reality, which may be aided by propaganda; and that process is achieved through a deduction from an accepted premise.⁸¹ In the totalitarian form, reality is created to fit the ideology, such as “a ‘dying class’ that consisted of people condemned to death; races that are ‘unfit to live’ were to be exterminated.”⁸² Racist ideologies presented as predictions can be seen in non-totalitarian states like Australia, where similar language was used in public discourse to describe the situation of indigenous Australians. The “axis of evil” slogan was also an attempt to inculcate a global ideology. In the worst case, states Arendt, “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.”⁸³ We must be wary of general and all-consuming explanations even if they are precisely what it is most difficult for us to be aware that we are being taken in by. They have to be countered by our acting, by bringing something new into the world, and by upholding or possibly reasserting the importance of actual experience and ideals of thought. The role of technology in furthering ideologies means that lies can

78. Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, p. 103.

79. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 470. Consistency is also a feature of propaganda, for example, the identical confessions of the accused in Stalinist show trials, Arendt argues (p. 352). Kateb notes that ideologies are connected to thoughtlessness, although they are different (George Kateb, “Ideology and Storytelling,” *Social Research* 69(2), 2002, 351).

80. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 469.

81. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 471.

82. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 471.

83. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 474.

proliferate and so do the opportunities to correct them. Ideologies may play into the altering of history and the prevalence of lies and self-deception that totalitarian and sometimes, democratic, regimes carry out. Thus, Arendt has a clear view of the role of ideology in facilitating mendacity and how this problem may be overcome.⁸⁴ Finally, I turn to Derrida's claim that Arendt is overly confident concerning the historical triumph of truth over lying and suggest how her insights could improve political life.

VII. Excess Optimism

As I noted, Derrida remarks that Arendt is perhaps too sanguine about the stubbornness and resilience of facts.⁸⁵ She does point out the difficulty of rewriting history. However, Arendt clearly recognizes the danger that the truth may be eclipsed by lies. Such a legacy perpetuates oppression and violence by not acknowledging it, as Holocaust deniers, for example, would like to do, or by politicians who are scornful of concern for truth.

Arendt's view of lying implies that the more lies there are, the more confused, the more indifferent, the more cynical we become about the possibility of the truth existing. She notes that cynicism results from a consistent substitution of lies for truth as "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."⁸⁶ Furthermore, the more lies there are, the greater the chances of self-deception taking over the liars and the lied to, and so the worse political outcome will result. Instead of a community of active, engaged citizens, we have a confused, aggrieved, and apathetic population buffeted by internet scandal. One could appeal to bitter experience to justify the view that lies must be resisted or to the connection between thought and communication raised by Kant and alluded to by Arendt. Kant argues in "What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?" and "What is Enlightenment?" that we should be free to communicate our thoughts publicly so that we can think properly.⁸⁷ In the first, he says "Yet how much and how correctly would we *think* if we did not think as it were in community with others to whom we *communicate* our thoughts, and who communicate theirs with us!" This is a rhetorical question to which the answer must be – very little and very badly. Conversely, if in the public world, we are surrounded by lies and deceptions, we are apt to become befuddled and fuzzy in our thinking. There are no touchstones or too few to test our thought against.

This problem is even worse in the case of the self-deceptive lie, as is implied by Arendt's account of the problem of lies on a massive scale. Lies have the character of boundlessness and so are self-defeating.⁸⁸ She describes the proliferation of lying "throughout the ranks of all government services, military and civilian" during the

84. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 384.

85. Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, p. 68; Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," pp. 258–9.

86. Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," p. 257.

87. Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, 8: 144; *Religion*, 8: 38.

88. Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," pp. 257–8. See *The Human Condition* for a discussion of the boundlessness and unpredictability of action (pp. 190–91). In "Lying in Politics," Arendt reiterates the point that lies rely on a notion of the truth, so truth is primary (p. 31).

Vietnam War.⁸⁹ One of the phrases she uses that is the most telling against support for lying in politics is that of “the commitment to nontruthfulness in politics”⁹⁰ which can be contrasted with a commitment to truthfulness. The point is not that one should never lie in politics, but that there should be a basic commitment to truthfulness, and lies should always be seen and felt as a deviation from that commitment. This, I think, is what Derrida would also take from the Kantian legacy. To use Arendt’s image, a proliferation of lies does more than rip a hole in the fabric of factuality,⁹¹ they destroy or rearrange its entire texture. In other words, as the aide claimed, they create a new reality, a new fabric, and that is much more frightening than, say, a broken promise about the timing of the next election. The previous fabric of reality is not easily restored.

Arendt links the idea of an ulterior purpose behind false justifications for violence, such as waging war in Vietnam in order to protect the US’s reputation as a great power, with the worst kind of lying.⁹² The motives and effects of our lies have to be assessed so we can see if they are serious lies or not. Arendt’s historical examples can be taken further in thinking about recent events, not just the “weapons of mass destruction” justification for attacking Iraq, but the phenomenon of embedded journalists and how the language used to discredit those who questioned the decision, such as “the reality-based community,” increases disinformation. Furthermore, we should reflect on the long-term effects of widespread lying in normalizing previously unacceptable practices.

Arendt could hardly have anticipated the internet or the way disinformation can be spread so quickly and widely through the media. Yet having lived through World War II and the Vietnam War, she had a good idea of the potential of technology to both disseminate lies and to be a vehicle for correcting them. Contemporary technology, as I showed in the examples at the beginning of the article, has made it possible both to proliferate lies of various forms and to track down their sources in ways we could not before. Even if the “smearers” believe the falsities they are spreading, we have to examine the possibilities of counter-truth, self-deception, prejudice, and ideology in what they do. Both the lies themselves and the implications that are taken to follow from the lies have to be fought.

Exploring Derrida’s reading of Arendt highlights the ethical and political questions at stake in the concept of lying. His interpretation leaves out some of the subtleties in her account and does not see the ways in which she develops a phenomenological and ethical account of lying in politics. Admittedly Arendt does not separate them very explicitly herself. Seeing her work from these two points of view shows how she can both extol the capacity to lie and be horrified by the lies coming out of the Pentagon. This examination also enables ethical and political lessons to be drawn. The proliferation of lying will not make us more able to distinguish truth from lies. Lies need a background of truth from which to stand out. A history of the lie in a philosophical context will tend to make a judgement about lying, and so we must judge that although some lies may be justifiable, we should discourage the practice of lying, and stop them from proliferating. What

89. Hannah Arendt, “Lying in Politics,” p. 4.

90. Hannah Arendt, “Lying in Politics,” p. 4.

91. Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” p. 253.

92. Hannah Arendt, “Lying in Politics,” p. 43.

Arendt's work demonstrates is that while the frank lie is more ethically serious in the sense of a worse individual fault, the self-deceptive lie, the lie that changes the fabric of reality as in the Bush's aide example, may have more serious and wide-ranging consequences. The lies that concern Barack Obama begin as frank lies, but then are repeated as a kind of counter-truth by those who do not care to check their veracity. The counter-truth may work with prevalent ideologies to make these political lies difficult to oppose. Recent political events, especially the justification for the war in Iraq and the persistence of unjustified slurs, suggest that the unconditional demand for truthfulness can be even further undermined through discrediting the value of truth-telling itself. What can be concluded from an investigation of Arendt and Derrida's work is that we need to shift focus from the individual lies of politicians to the lies that pervade our political landscape.