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David I. Simpson

University of Wollongong, dsimpson@uow.edu.au

Publication Details

Simpson, D. I. (2011). Laž i liberalna demokracija (Lies and liberal democracy). In I. Primorac (Eds.), *Politika i moral* (pp. 183-200). Zagreb: KruZak.

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Lies and Liberal Democracy

David Simpson

Igor Primorac (ed.), *Politika i moral* [Politics and Morality, in Croatian], Zagreb: KruZak, 2011

1. Introduction

Lying is difficult to account for as a moral phenomenon because our intuitions regarding it have an awkward tension. Almost everyone thinks that lying is wrong; but almost everyone thinks that it is sometimes justified, and perhaps on occasion obligatory; yet, even when lying is justified or obligatory, it remains wrong. Perhaps lying, as a moral phenomenon, shares features with killing.

My second starting point is the observation that the governments of liberal democracies are routinely mendacious. They lie, make insincere promises, dissemble, misrepresent, allow falsehood to be expressed behind barriers of plausible deniability, and so on. Furthermore, a significant proportion of this behaviour is directed towards the governments' own citizens.

My purpose here is twofold: to offer an account of the ethics of lying and intentional deception that accounts for the moral phenomenology; and to consider political lying in the light of that account. I will consider what justifications might be available in defence of political lies, and suggest that while they are hard to come by we ought to step back from an outright condemnation of political lies.

2. Deception and Lying

The general category of act we are considering is intentional deception, an act carried out with the intent to bring it about that some person or persons believe as true what the deceiver takes to be false. Of course, lying is a special sub-category of intentional deception, and this has something to do with the role of language in a lie, but for the most part in this discussion I won't emphasise the distinction, for two

reasons. First, for the most part in the discussions I will be looking at, although 'lying' is the most common term used, a difference between it and other forms of intentional deception seems not to be relevant. Second, the vague idea that there is a moral difference is invoked in political casuistry, and we ought resist that. I therefore think that Gaita,¹ who uses 'mendacity' as an umbrella term, is correct to resist the distinction. I think that lying *can* be distinguished as a form of intentional deception, but I don't think that this establishes the kind of moral wall that some might hope for.

If we were to attempt to justify an act of intentional deception, we might focus on the consequences of the act, and treat the act itself as morally neutral. Bentham, for example, says that²

falsehood [intentional deception], take it by itself, consider it as not being accompanied by any other material circumstances, not therefore productive of any material effects, can never, upon the principle of utility, constitute any offence at all.

However, he goes on to say that

combined with other circumstances, there is scarce any sort of pernicious effect which it may not be instrumental in producing.

The first kind of effect is obviously harm caused to the target of deception by their ignorance: you tell me that there are no robbers on the road, and I walk off to my peril. Aside from this, four other sorts of harm seem relevant. If I, the deceiver, am discovered in my deception, my reputation as a trustworthy person will tend to suffer; and if I lie too easily I may tend to undermine my character in various ways (become an habitual liar, or develop a calculating and alienated attitude to other people). If we widen the scope, my acts of deception, if discovered, may tend to encourage a general loss of confidence in those social practices that require trust in the word of others; and (more vaguely) acts of deceptive communication may tend to undermine the viability of communication itself. So a consequentialist concerned with the

1 R. Gaita, 'Breach of Trust: Truth, Morality and Politics', *Quarterly Essay* 16, Black Inc., Melbourne, 2004, p. 26.

2 J. Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, ed. J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996, p. 205.

maintenance of social life and social institutions will be wary of intentional deception.³

In search of justification,⁴ and depending again on the scope of our moral concern, we might claim, of particular acts, that the target of deception is likely to be better off; or we might claim that overall benefit will accrue; or we might appeal to the harm that the target of deception is likely to cause us or those for whom we are responsible. So we might refer to paternalistic, utilitarian, and defensive deception. What matters is that the benefits of lying or deceiving outweigh the harm such acts can cause. If the sum does come out in favour of deception, then the act seems, not only permissible, but obligatory.

This sort of approach is plausible when we consider situations of clear peril or evil; however, it is ultimately inadequate. Setting aside epistemic problems that might beset consequentialism, the approach seems not to address our moral intuitions, because 'pernicious effects' are only one dimension of the moral concern that intentional deception provokes. As Primoratz points out,

[A] utilitarian will have to opt for lying not only in ... extreme situations, but *in each and every case* in which the consequences of lying would be *even slightly better* than the consequences of telling the truth. And *that* ... would be just too much lying for most of us.⁵

He goes on to note that the utilitarian cannot adequately explain why lying, unlike truth-telling, always calls for justification, and why, even when we have good moral reasons to lie, we tend to feel guilty for lying. Primoratz says that we experience this feeling of guilt 'as a perfectly authentic, justified and proper one to have, while utilitarianism implies that it is a feeling predicated upon a false belief and thus

3 Similarly, Plato, not a consequentialist, but who regards 'verbal falsehoods' as warranted by their usefulness, and morally neutral, condemns falsehoods directed at the rulers of his imagined city because of the harm this disinformation will bring about, and he presents this as analogous to falsely informing one's doctor, or trainer, or the navigator of one's ship (Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, rev. C. D. C. Reeve, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1992, 389a-389d). The point here is that in relation to philosopher kings (and trainers, doctors and navigators), ordinary citizens are not in a position to assess the outcome of an act of deception.

4 Bentham, however, does not himself provide justifications.

5 I. Primoratz, "Lying and the 'Methods of Ethics'", *International Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 14 (1984), no. 1, p. 38.

unreasonable and uncalled for'.⁶ Sometimes, of course, feelings of guilt *are* uncalled for – we just need a bit of therapy – but Primoratz is surely right in this case, and he draws out one consequence of the first starting point of this essay.

This leads naturally enough into the idea that there is something intrinsically wrong with lying and deception, and one way of articulating that idea is via Kant. But via Kant, comes also the claim no lies *at all* are permissible.

For Kant, genuinely moral maxims must be categorical, not conditional, and intentionally untrue declarations fall foul of the categorical imperative. We cannot will that lying be a universal law, because all practices that depend on truthfulness, and indeed the practice of lying itself would disappear were lying to be universalised, so we would be willing a logical contradiction. Similarly, we cannot will that lying be a law of nature, because laws of nature cannot be contradictory. Furthermore, lying is ruled out by the third version of the categorical imperative, the principle of humanity, because to lie to someone is to treat them as a means to an end, and to fail to treat them as a possessor of a rational will. That is, when we deceive someone, as when we coerce them, we deny them the rational exercise of their will, and a good will is the only source of unconditional good.⁷

In the essay 'On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy', Kant says that even benevolent untruthfulness undermines a duty of right, however great the disadvantage that may result from being truthful. He says that in being untruthful, even with the best motives,

I bring it about, as far as I can, that statements (declarations) in general are not believed, and so too that all rights which are based on contracts come to nothing and lose their force; and this is a wrong inflicted on

6 See Primoratz, "Lying and the 'Methods of Ethics'", p. 39. I will not go into varieties of consequentialism in general and utilitarianism in particular. Primoratz, however, gives good reasons to think that when it comes to lying rule utilitarianism ultimately collapses into act utilitarianism ("Lying and the 'Methods of Ethics'", pp. 43-47).

7 See I. Kant, "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals", in *Kant: Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. M. J. Gregor, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 420-423 and 429-430 (page numbers of all Kant's writings are those of the standard German edition of Kant's works, published by the Prussian Academy).

humanity generally.⁸

His point here is not the consequentialist one that intentional untruths will tend to undermine these practices; it is that even a single untruth involves willing that statements in general are not believed, and is thus an assault on the possibility of civil society.

In that same essay Kant makes the apparently surprising claim that when we lie, even benevolently, we thereby become responsible (legally and morally) for whatever follows.⁹ So if, out of benevolence, you deceive me about my ill health, you carry the burden of having presumed that this is the best thing for me.

There is something plausible about this claim. In deceiving me you have, so to speak, usurped my capacity for rational judgment, and because of that you are responsible for what follows.¹⁰ The intuition that supports Kant here relates to a comment by Primoratz cited earlier, that lying always requires justification, whereas truth-telling doesn't. Yet, that doesn't mean that truth-telling carries no responsibility. In an important sense, the truth-teller who bluntly informs me of the state of affairs, regardless of the likely impact, also bears responsibility for that act.

Kant dismisses apparently well-motivated deception because, it seems, for him the issue is not so much what we do to the other, to the target of the deception, but how we thereby place ourselves in relation to humanity in general, and to the humanity in ourselves. Thus, he says that a lie 'always harms another, even if not another individual, nevertheless humanity generally, inasmuch as it makes the source of right unusable'¹¹, so the context-dependent, apparently benevolent or defensive aim of a lie is always going to be overwhelmed by the universal considerations.

The sort of example that Kant addresses is well-enough known. Jones comes to my

8 Kant, "On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy", in *Kant: Practical Philosophy*, p. 427.

9 Kant, "On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy", p. 427.

10 So calculated reticence, in as much as it counts as deception, may not generate this burden. For a valuable discussion of these and related issues, see J.E. Mahon, "Kant on Lies, Candour and Reticence", *Kantian Review*, vol. 7 (2003), pp. 102-133.

11 Kant, "On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy", p. 426.

door and asks whether Smith is with me. Jones pretends to intend no harm, but I happen to know that Jones intends to murder Smith. Kant says I must respond truthfully if I cannot avoid speaking at all. Korsgaard¹² gives reason to think that he need not respond this way, at least with regard to the first version of the categorical imperative, as she thinks that we can without contradiction will that we deceive deceivers.

However, as she says, Kant does have to respond this way when the scenario is changed to make the murderer a non-deceiver. Jones is, let's suppose, a Gestapo officer in occupied France in World War II, and enquires about a Jewish family I am hiding. If I lie to Jones now I am, on Kant's account, willing a contradiction.

Cases like this seem to make it clear that Kant's 'rigorism' goes wrong. As Korsgaard says, Kant's moral philosophy 'seems to imply that our moral obligations leave us powerless in the face of evil'.¹³ No matter that we agree with Kant that the wrongness of lying is intrinsic, it is very hard to agree that there are *no* situations in which lying is permissible, and indeed, no cases in which it is obligatory. The examples seem to be cases in which a truth-teller who, having no option but to lie or tell the truth, expects that truthfulness will lead to evil, and acts as they do simply *for the sake of truthfulness*. Such a person is surely to be condemned as some sort of moral monster.

At least part of what is at fault here, I suggest, is that for Kant, in spite of the apparent logic of the principle of humanity, the moral problem of intentional deception is not for him essentially other-related. Deception (setting aside inner deception) is of course practically other directed, but the wrongness Kant finds is not in what one does to the target of one's deception. Korsgaard says that the application of the principle of humanity to the case of lying shows that lying 'is one of the two most fundamentally wrong things [coercion and deception] you can do to others'.¹⁴ However, to the extent

12 C.M. Korsgaard, "The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil", in her *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 136-137.

13 Korsgaard, "The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil", p. 133.

14 Korsgaard, "Two Arguments Against Lying", in her *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, p. 347.

that this wrongness for Kant is other-related, the 'other' is humanity in general. My claim has been that our intuitions regarding the moral issue focus also on the liar's treatment of the actual target or targets of the lie. The non-deceptive intending murderer may deserve the truth according to the principle of humanity, and this may, at least in part, explain the guilt a liar appropriately feels. However, the non-deceptive intending murderer does not, nevertheless, deserve the truth – and the intended victim certainly does not deserve our truthfulness towards the murderer. Korsgaard says at one point:

Kant's rigorism about lying ... comes from an attractive ideal of human relations which is the basis of his ethical system. If Kant is wrong in his conclusions about lying to the murderer at the door, it is for the interesting and important reason that morality itself sometimes allows or even requires us to do something that from an ideal perspective is wrong.¹⁵

I think that she is right regarding the demands of morality, but I think that Kant's ideal of human relations is not as attractive as Korsgaard thinks and, more importantly, that his ideal of human relations does not help explain why we find him wrong.

3. Lying and Betrayal

Thus, both consequentialist and Kantian approaches to the question of intentional deception are implausible in part because they do not adequately accommodate the moral dimension of our interpersonal relationship.

In most, if not all intentional deception of persons, I do not merely aim to bring it about that the target of my deception is misled; in doing so I also refuse to engage with them as rational and autonomous beings. I treat the target as an object to be manipulated, and in doing so my act, irrespective of its outcome, is a type of insult to, or an attack on, their rationality, since I try to bring it about that they are not able to form beliefs and desires on the basis of the facts as I take them to be. If I am to justify my act of deception I need, in contrast to the consequentialist, to justify this deeper assault.

15 Korsgaard, "The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil", p. 135.

However, this assault takes place in a moral context that includes my relation to the target of deception, and also my responsibilities towards others. My act does not occur in a vacuum, abstracted from those relationships and responsibilities, which is, I suggest, how Kant treats it.

This may be clearer if I now define lying.¹⁶ For the sake of the definition, I will stipulate that I assert when I directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly, express a proposition in a context in which it is mutually accepted that my act is done seriously. We thus except 'assertions' in a play, or ironic assertions. When I lie, I purport to assert, but fail to believe the relevant proposition. When I assert in a serious context, I express and communicate a certain epistemic commitment, and in communicating that commitment I concurrently invoke my audience's trust in me. My epistemic commitment is part of the reason provided for my audience to come to so believe.¹⁷ So when I lie I simultaneously invoke and betray my audience's trust, and I therefore manipulate what is arguably the core of the possibility of our interpersonal. This is why, I suggest, we think that lying is wrong come what may, and that when we are morally obliged to lie the circumstances do not expunge the wrongness.

I want to resist too sharp a distinction between lying and other forms of deception because assertion is not merely a form of words,¹⁸ and we go wrong if we allow

16 For further details, see D.I. Simpson, "Lying, Liars and Language", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 52 (1992), pp. 623-640. I have previously thought that we should say that lying is wrong pro tanto. I now think that wrong. Acts such as pretended assertion in a play, and ironic assertion, clearly need to be set aside for my purposes here, but they provoke, as is well-known, many conceptual problems of their own.

17 This invocation and betrayal of trust that defines a lie, also makes lying a sophisticated cognitive and interactive development. For a liar must have a conception of the other's intentional states, and must be able to adjust his or her own actions so as to manipulate those states. It may be that children do not fully develop the necessary understanding and skill until around the age of 12. As an introduction to some of the work in this area, see R.L. Selman, *The Growth of Interpersonal Understanding: Developmental and Clinical Analyses*, Academic Press, New York, 1980, and M.E. Vasek, "Lying as a Skill: The Development of Deception in Children", in *Deception: Perspectives on Human and Nonhuman Deceit*, ed. R.W. Mitchell and N.S. Thompson, SUNY Press, Albany, 1986, pp. 271-292.

18 This may not be the proposition I explicitly state; it may be a proposition I only implicitly purport to assert. The important point is that it is a proposition to which I am mutually taken to be committed, and to which my genuine commitment is a prerequisite for truthful assertion. See R.M. Chisholm and T.D. Feehan, "The Intent to Deceive", *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 74 (1977), pp. 143-159, and Mahon, "Kant on Lies, Candour and Reticence", pp. 103-104. In

legalism and casuistry to step too easily across our moral intuitions. Hence, as I noted earlier, I sympathise with the use of ‘mendacity’.

If we find consequentialist evaluations of lying unsatisfactory it is because they fail to take account of the betrayal that a lie involves. It is also why we in the 21st Century are likely to find that Augustine’s reason for condemning lies – that in lying we abuse the purpose of God’s gift – also misses the point, or our point.¹⁹ Furthermore, I think that it is why we tend to find the device of mental reservation merely amusing.²⁰

In saying that lying is wrong come what may, I may seem to have realigned myself with Kant. However, this account differs in placing emphasis on our relationships with others. In engaging with others I seem also to take on a responsibility for their well-being and the maintenance of those relationships. So the moral significance of interpersonal relationships is the source of the wrongness of lying, but it may also be the source of an obligation to lie, nevertheless.

4. Truthfulness and Relationships

I therefore have a good deal of sympathy with Alasdair MacIntyre’s approach to these questions in his Tanner Lectures. The difference between MacIntyre’s and Kant’s approach is evident in the difference in starting point for the formulation of a principle regarding deception.

Instead of first asking “By what principles am I, as a rational person, bound?” we have first to ask “By what principles are we, as actually or potentially rational persons, bound in our relationships?”²¹

Kant’s terms, I make an untruthful ‘declaration’ in as much as I invite you to believe a false statement true. See Kant, “The Metaphysics of Morals”, in *Kant: Practical Philosophy*, p. 430; Kant, “On a Supposed Right to Lie”, p. 426; Mahon, “Kant on Lies, Candour and Reticence”, p. 102; MacIntyre, “Truthfulness, Lies, and Moral Philosophers”, pp. 342-343.

19 See Augustine’s “On Lying” and “Against Lying” in *Treatises on Various Subjects*, trans. M.S. Muldowney et al., ed. R.J. Deferrari, Catholic University of America Press, Washington, 1965. See also S.R. Clark, “The Evolution of Language: Truth and Lies”, *Philosophy*, vol. 75 (2000), p. 418, against the presumption that truth-telling is the purpose – whether God-given or natural – of language.

20 So, one might say, “I did not do it”, and then add to oneself, or to God, “not today”. See S. Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*, Vintage Books, New York, 1979, pp. 35-37.

21 A. MacIntyre, “Truthfulness, Lies, and Moral Philosophers: What Can We Learn from Mill and Kant?”, in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, vol. 16, ed. G. B. Patterson, University of

MacIntyre emphasises the importance of our relationships for the fostering and sustenance of autonomy and critical interdependence. He thinks that truthfulness is crucial in relationships understood in these terms, for the learning that takes place in relationships, for the critical engagement that the participants have to bring to the relationship, and in order that we avoid corrupting fantasies regarding ourselves and our relationships.

MacIntyre says that the liar exercises illegitimate power, and deprives the deceived of their autonomy in the relationship with the liar. He says that the truthfulness required for a relationship 'has to embody a respect for the rationality of all persons who are or could be involved in all actual or potential relationships'.²² However, he also thinks that we come across situations in which defensive lies are permissible, because of a threat to the relationship understood in his way.²³ He thus formulates the following rule:

Uphold truthfulness in all your actions by being unqualifiedly truthful in all your relationships and by lying to aggressors only in order to protect those truthful relationships against aggressors, and even then only when lying is the least harm that can afford an effective defense against aggression.²⁴

MacIntyre's approach is valuable because of the way it draws attention to the role our interdependent relationships with others play in the moral phenomenology of lying. Yet his rule cannot be correct. Were we to conduct our relationships according to the rule, lying only if ever to aggressors, being truthful *without consideration* within our relationships, then our relationships would, I suggest, soon wither. Truthfulness is necessary if we wish a relationship to be one that sustains autonomy and critical interdependence. However, even if we assume that the sustenance of autonomy and critical interdependence *is* the ultimate good of relationships, relationships themselves are not sustained by utter truthfulness, without care.

Utah Press, Salt Lake City, 1995, p. 352.

22 MacIntyre, "Truthfulness, Lies, and Moral Philosophers", p. 355.

23 MacIntyre, "Truthfulness, Lies, and Moral Philosophers", pp. 352, 356-357. MacIntyre sets up his account of defensive lies in the context of justified defensive killing, drawing attention to the relationship between lying and killing noted in passing at the beginning of this essay.

My point is that the truthfulness that enables the sort of flourishing that MacIntyre encourages can only play that role in a relationship that itself sustains truthful interaction. That, I suggest, is a relationship in which those involved take each other to regard each other with good will, which in turn requires that they can rely on each other to use truth, and dishonesty, with care. The problem is not that in a relationship lacking good will I will not believe you when you speak bluntly; the problem is that from here we do not have the basis for a relationship. That is to say, flourishing relationships depend on trust: trust in the word of the other, but also trust in the concern of the other – and the concern of the other will be realised, and be expected to be realised, sometimes by truthfulness, sometimes by reticence, and sometimes by (caring) dishonesty.

The paradoxical nature of this claim is, I suggest, appropriate to the complexity, and tension, of the roles and responsibility that our various relationships actually involve. Thus the question of whether a lie is justified cannot be captured by a rule, inasmuch as the rule fails to account for the roles and responsibilities of the relationship in which it occurs.

There is a further complexity. In this talk about the moral standing of acts of deception I have taken it for granted that the actor is single-minded and clear-minded – which is, of course, absurd. All of us are on different occasions and to varying degrees, self-deceiving, wishful-thinking, ambivalent, and disengaged. So when we turn the moralist's gaze on some act, it is important not to presume that the act, and the actor's mindfulness regarding it, are easily specified. This point is distinct from the argument I have developed so far. That is, the question of whether lying can fall under a rule is distinct from the question of whether particular acts can be clearly identified.²⁵

24 MacIntyre, "Truthfulness, Lies, and Moral Philosophers", p. 357.

25 Note also that self-deception, fantasy, and disengagement can themselves be seen as moral failings, and one of the roles of truthfulness in MacIntyre's account is to minimise such failings, because of their corrupting effects. On the interrelationship between deception and self-deception, see R.C. Solomon, "What a Tangled Web: Deception and Self-Deception in Philosophy", in *Lying and Deception in Everyday Life*, ed. M. Lewis and C. Saarni, Guilford Press, New York, 1993.

5. Excusing Lies in Politics

All of this preliminary to the question of mendacity in politics. I want first to address how we might justify political lies, and how the account given so far translates into the sphere of politics in liberal democracies.

Before moving ahead, we need to be clearer about the acts involved. We need, at least, to distinguish lies told by individual politicians about their own affairs from lies told on behalf of political parties, and those told on behalf of governments. The second and third categories are what interest me, and I want to ask how might lies by (or on behalf of) such entities be justified?

I think that the best model for such a justification is the one we associate with Plato.²⁶ The argument that we can find in the *Republic* has three parts. First, the citizens are epistemically and psychically compromised. They are epistemically compromised because they have access only to phenomena, and not to reality, and they can only have opinions. They are psychically compromised because they are ruled by their passions, not by reason. Therefore, the citizens are condemned to a partial understanding of their best interests, and are not able to grasp the real relationship between the best interests of the city and their own best interests. If this partial understanding were to determine the path of the city, it would collapse. Second, while falsehoods about reality (the forms) are utterly unacceptable, verbal falsehoods can be useful (as noted earlier) against children, against one's enemies, and against our friends when they are mad. Third, the imagined philosopher-kings do have epistemic access to reality, are ruled by reason, and can grasp the coincidence between their own best interests and those of the city.

So, philosopher-kings may, and in fact should, make use of falsehoods in their

26 For the purposes of this discussion, I will present what follows as the position developed in the *Republic*. However, it is arguable that the philosopher-kings of the *Republic* are not required to lie (the guardians have to lie, but this reflects their inadequacy). Further, it is probable that the 'lies' in the *Republic* are not all what we would call lies, and that Plato does not share our understanding of lies – so it would be better to refer to 'falsehoods'. For further discussion, see D.I. Simpson, "Administrative Lies and Philosopher-Kings", *Philosophical Inquiry*, vol. 18 (1996), pp. 45-65.

governing practice. Falsehoods are a necessary tool for the task of ruling, which is sometimes seen in medical terms, sometimes in artistic terms. The two crucial elements in this story are the character and knowledge of the rulers, and the character and knowledge of the citizens. The non-philosopher citizens are at times represented as childlike, at times as insane (in being driven by passion), and at times almost as if they are enemies to the city.²⁷ We can reintroduce terms from earlier in the discussion by saying that the relation is one between rational rulers and non-rational citizens. In this light the rulers' deception is both justified and obligated by a duty to protect the citizens from themselves and, perhaps, nurture the development of reason in them, in the same way we might rationalise some of our treatment of our own children.

Plato gives this situation a positive (in its own way, terrifying) spin.

[A]s they [the rulers] work, they'd look often in each direction, towards the natures of justice, beauty, moderation, and the like, on the one hand, and towards those they're trying to put into human beings, on the other ... until they'd made characters for human beings that the gods would love as much as possible.²⁸

It is arguable that the position of the *Republic* is not sustainable even presuming Plato's metaphysics and epistemology. It seems doomed to fail because the qualities that make philosopher-kings able to lie well derive from a combination of nature, education, and lifestyle; but the life of government, requiring as it does engaging in the marketplace, means that the sustaining lifestyle will be compromised, and so ultimately the character of the philosopher-kings will be compromised. That is, Plato seems to be demanding an unsustainable split between the human and the divine that ought most likely to lead to corruption.

Whether or not this is the case, the clear problem is that *our* leaders are not philosopher-kings, and we citizens are not children. They are epistemically, morally

27 Compare, in the context of MacIntyre's comments on the importance of truthfulness in relationships, Plato's discussion (noted earlier) of the danger of falsehood in the relationships between patient and doctor, athlete and trainer, sailor and navigator – and of course, citizen and ruler. But the concern is always one-way: patient to doctor, athlete to trainer, and so on. See Plato, *Republic*, 389b-389d.

and psychologically on a par with the rest of us, and they cannot, therefore, lie well. So their lies are potentially as dangerous to the welfare of the state as Plato thinks those of ordinary citizens are. Perhaps Arendt captures the mindset of administrators who adopt a Platonic rationale, while remaining mortal, in her description of the perpetrators of the deceptions identified in the then newly released *Pentagon Papers*:

This deadly combination of the “arrogance of power” – the pursuit of a mere image of omnipotence, as distinguished from an aim of world conquest, to be attained by nonexistent unlimited resources – with the arrogance of mind, and utterly irrational confidence in the calculability of reality, becomes the leitmotif of the decision-making processes from the beginning of escalation in 1964.²⁹

The threat of the Platonic rationale, when brought down to earth, is that the power that governments have becomes confused with a capacity that they lack. Without the capacity adequately to evaluate the relation between self-interest and national interest, to judge consequences, and to avoid the corruption of judgement that threatens even philosopher-kings, then the rationale seems to collapse.

6. Liberal Democracy and What Matters

When one looks at philosophers who have identified the sort of phenomena I am referring to – Arendt, Gaita, and O’Neill,³⁰ for example – one tends to find imperatives to the effect that things ought to change. There is the idea, implicit and explicit, that we should put our faith in, and actively encourage, critical reason, and a discourse of clarification and exposure. I have no inclination to dismiss such prescriptions out of hand, and I think it’s clear that they have an important role to play in the nurturing of civil society and a critique of government – yet it is hard not to think these prescriptions are to some extent naive.

In a situation in which political mendacity becomes rampant, in which trust is replaced by calculation, and in which political discourse is degraded, then ‘liberal

28 Plato, *Republic*, 501b.

29 H. Arendt, “Lying in Politics”, in her *Crises of the Republic*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1972, p. 39.

30 O. O’Neill, *A Question of Trust*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002.

democracy' is little more than a rhetorical device. It is natural to want to stand beside Arendt, Gaita, and O'Neill against this. However, I think that two qualifications are important. First, we ought not let ourselves be swept away by the foundation myths of liberalism, in which government is simply an extension of civil society. I suggest that our relation to government (because of the nature of government) in liberal democracies is a matter of calculation, as well as trust, and that we accept, at least to a degree, that political discourse and the political process are agonistic as well as deliberative. More importantly, I suspect that if a rigorism regarding these matters were to take over, liberal democracy would be unworkable. Assuming that liberal democracy is something to hold on to, and assuming that my suppositions here are granted, then we should avoid rigorism. Second, rigorism in the sphere of politics ought to be challenged for similar reasons to those raised earlier regarding lying in general.

Plato's philosopher-kings were justified liars because they could lie well, which we might think of as being able to take responsibility for the consequences of their lies, and being able to calculate the consequences. They are thus in the epistemically privileged position of being able to face up to Kant's threat. I suggested, however, that while the truth-teller doesn't face the justification requirement of a liar, he or she does take on a responsibility for the truth, and this seems to carry over into politics. A 'Kantian' government that, unable to choose reticence, knowingly releases information that leads to a run on the currency, or some other mass panic, does seem to be responsible for the harm caused to those they represent, and would likely be held responsible.

If that speculation is correct, then we might say that governments have a responsibility to take care with the truth. They are not, of course, given this responsibility explicitly; but I am suggesting that the 'relationship' that constitutes liberal democracy involves at least an analogue of the paradoxical reliance to be found in the types of relationships discussed earlier, of civil society and personal

relations.³¹

I am not, I should emphasise, objecting to O'Neill's, Gaita's or Arendt's responses to the actual mendacity they focus on. My concern is that we recognize, as well as those cases that rightly provoke our outrage, those cases – of betrayal of our trust – which display an appropriate exercise of responsibility, and those cases that are unavoidably part of the operation of the political sphere.

This is, of course, a fraught situation. The government that courageously takes responsibility for the truth is a short step from the arrogance of power and of mind to which Arendt refers. The corruption that threatened the philosopher-kings is even more immediate in the real situations we confront. Furthermore, repeated betrayal can easily generate acquiescence or cynicism, leading to what is effectively voluntary disenfranchisement, or to nothing but mercantile calculation.

The question of honesty in democratic government is as fraught, that is to say, as it is in all relationships, but it is made more intense by the structures and processes of representative democracy. The difficulty of the position I am defending here, is that I am arguing for an account of lying in politics that is *not* couched in terms of an ideal that reality fails to match, and could never match in a liberal democracy. My thought is that we ought instead direct our concern at the actual possibilities for and limitations on truthfulness.³²

31 This may help explain why, although dishonesty will be cited as a reason for a government losing power, the discovery of dishonesty tends not, of itself, to lead to a government losing power.

32 An early version of this paper was read at a seminar of the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics, University of Melbourne (October, 2005). I would like to thank the participants, especially Tony Coady, Igor Primoratz, and Jessica Wolfendale, for valuable comments. I would further like to thank Igor Primoratz for comments on a draft of the current version.