

STUDIJE I ČLANCI
STUDIES AND ARTICLES

II

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The Reality of Lies

Abstract *A lie is neither a false proposition, nor a mistake, nor a mere fiction; it is a type of fiction, an act, and precisely an intentional act. An act calls for a subject, and therefore a lie is inseparable from its subject. Together, they make up a real object: it has to be real, since a lie produces effects, and the cause-effect relationship only holds between real beings. Like every real object, a lie unfolds in a (phenomenological) context. But there is more: it identifies a (dialectical) context.*

Keywords *lie, fiction, falsity, deception, intentional act, object, Kant, Meinong, Sartre, Derrida*

105

Who he was who first, without ever having gone out to the rude chase, told the wandering caveman at sunset how he had dragged the Megatherium from the purple darkness of its Jasper cave, or slain the Mammoth in single combat and brought back its gilded tusks, we cannot tell, and not one of our modern anthropologists, for all their much-boasted science, has had the ordinary courage to tell us. Whatever was his name or race, he certainly was the true founder of social intercourse. For the aim of the liar is simply to charm, to delight, to give pleasure. He is the very basis of civilised society, and without him a dinner-party, even at the mansions of the great, is as dull as a lecture at the Royal Society, or a debate at the Incorporated Authors, or one of Mr. Burnand's farcical comedies.

Oscar Wilde, The Decay of Lying

Products of imagination are fictions not in so far as they are extraneous to our world, but in a specifically ontological sense.¹ If we consider the role, at times very pertinent, that fiction has performed and continues to perform in life, it is difficult to deny it a relationship with reality; if something produces or can produce effects, it cannot be a mere nothing. Literature furnishes us with the most obvious examples, in producing stories, characters and fictional worlds, which exercise an impact on us, in the sense that we are moved emotively, and indeed, such works can

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cause us to act in one way rather than in another. To exercise political power meant, and still means, to exercise control over the collective imagination by means of fictions. Fiction that delights us when it takes a literary form, deceives, and therefore becomes a lie, when it is passed off as reality. It is at this point that fiction becomes falsehood.

Falsehood, fiction and lie emerge as the main figures of the *ψεῦδος*. In this paper I would like to examine only one aspect of what I propose to call *pseudomorphia*, but the analysis of the lie inevitably requires that one also take into consideration the other two forms.

1. Elements for a first definition of lie

106

In *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne* [*On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense*], the young Nietzsche describes intellect as a means for an individual's self-preservation through the elaboration of fictions; indeed he calls it "master of pretence [*Meister der Verstellung*]" (Nietzsche [1873]/1973: 382; Engl. transl. 151). By 'fiction' he intends several things: "deception, flattering, lying and cheating, speaking behind the backs of others, keeping up appearances, living in borrowed finery, wearing masks, the drapery of convention, play-acting for the benefit of others and oneself" (*ibid.* 370; Engl. transl. 142). Men live deeply immersed in illusions and dream images, and the most substantial evidence of this situation is the fact that they allow themselves to be deceived in dreaming every night, for a whole lifetime, without their moral sentiment trying to prevent it. When Mephistopheles decides to punish Faust for the impudence shown by attempting to hold him in his office, he orders the spirits to put the unfortunate man to sleep and then enjoins them to "Spellbind him with dream-forms, cast / Him deep into illusions' sea" (Goethe 1808: vv. 1510–1511). The greatest lie, according to Nietzsche, is not using fictions, but rather trying to rub off their traces, behaving *as if* we were not simulating. Language, a result of mere conventions, is the means most often used to this end. "The liar uses the valid tokens of designation — words — to make the unreal appear to be real" (Nietzsche [1873]/1973: 371; Engl. transl. 146). The two-fold metaphor required for the constitution of words — when an object is perceived, a nerve stimulus is transposed in an image, and the latter in a sound — is witness to the distance between language and reality. That which we call 'reality' is nothing but our own construction, made out of concepts, and lying is the ordinary life condition of man; what is worse, we have forgotten that we always deal with illusions, hence with

lies, which we call 'truths' by convention (cf. *ibid.* 374–375). Lying is not a specific act of man: it touches upon every cognitive or linguistic act.

When we want to display the significance of a concept, we try to lay it out in its widest extension; at the same time, though, we risk calling by the same name things that are far apart, rather than alike. As Derrida (2005: 8) points out, since Nietzsche asserts continuity between errors and lies, between truth and truthfulness, he treats lies from an extra-moral point of view, as a theoretical and epistemological question. It is a very interesting approach, except that lying, by its very nature, has nothing to do with the problem of knowledge and truth. *Some fictions are not lies*, e.g. tales, or mistakes, which do not depend on intentions. *Yet, every lie implies a fiction. A lie is a kind of fiction, with a certain intentional element added to it* (giving out truth as falsehood, or conversely). The thesis is a classical one, which has often been reiterated in the history of philosophy; it does not need to be proven, but to be clarified. Let us begin by examining three classifications of lies, one classical and two contemporary: the proponents, Augustine and Jankélévitch, are certainly more sober than Nietzsche when it comes to the pervasive character of lies.

107

In *De mendacio* [*On Lying*], Augustine ranks the kinds of lies in a decreasing order of gravity: (1) the worst are those touching on religious doctrine and aimed at converting someone, then come (2) those that unjustly hurt someone without bringing any advantage to others, (3) those benefiting someone and hurting another, (4) lies *tout court*, told for sheer pleasure or (5) for the sake of success in a conversation, (6) those that favour someone without harming anyone else, (7) that again favour someone without prejudice and furthermore help saving a life, (8) that do harm to no one and protect someone from suffering bodily damage². Lies must be assessed according to their seriousness, yet under no circumstances can they be approved, regardless of their nature. The last three forms benefit someone without injuring anyone; despite this, they must be shunned, for “good men should never tell lies” (*De mendacio*, 8.11). Augustine seems to show some condescension towards the liar in cases (7) and (8): although any question compels a truthful answer, and might therefore put someone into an obligation to betray a friend who has sought refuge with him, or to consent to a rape, the constraint may be eluded by misleading the evildoer (cf. *ibid.*, 9.16, 13.22–24). Still,

² Cf. Augustine, *De mendacio*, 14.25, which summarizes what he explains since chapter 7.10, and the final synthesis in 21.42.

it is preferable to avoid one's own sin rather than someone else's, even though the former is less serious than the latter (cf. *ibid.*, 9.14).

For when you have granted that some evil is to be admitted, that another and more grievous may not be admitted; not by the rule of truth, but by his own cupidity and custom does each measure the evil, accounting that to be the more grievous, which himself more greatly dreads, not which is in reality more greatly to be fled from (*ibid.*, 18.38).

Augustine's point of view is clear: it is preferable to save the soul rather than the body, and since a lie corrupts the soul and puts eternal life at jeopardy, it must never be used in order to guard temporal life, be it one's own or someone else's (cf. *ibid.*, 6.9).

108

In his essay *Du mensonge*, Jankélévitch provides a classification of lies based on the relationship they entertain with truth, and another based on the motives urging a man towards them. According to the former, lies may be sorted into (1) dissimulations, which hide the truth, (2) alterations, which modify its nature, (3) distortions, which extend or restrict it, (4) antegories (*antégories*), which assert its contrary, and (5) fabulations, which forge 'truth' altogether (cf. Jankélévitch 1942/1998: 223). Following the second classification, there exist "lies for self-preservation, for interest (pragmatic or economic lies), for pride or self-love, exaggeration, embellishment, gratuitous fabulation" (*ibid.* 225). All these — Jankélévitch argues — are aimed at smoothing away the incompatibility between ourselves and the others, and installing us more comfortably in the world. Lies, therefore, fulfil a social role. Yet, what is the price to pay? A liar averts the difficulties that life lays before him, rather than solving them, and by doing so, he runs into huge complications. Since lies do not always have a 'local' character, a liar is in a state of permanent alert, constantly striving to bolster up and defend his constructions. The consequences of lying are phrased in terms that seem to echo — as we will see — the words of Kant or Sartre:

The true punishment of charlatans is the loss of their ipseity: since they are neither what they are, which they bury in silence, nor what they are believed to be, which they are only through fraud, it must be concluded that they are nothing at all (*ibid.* 230).

It is a severe judgment, but not a conclusive one, as we will see later.

Needless to say, there are other classifications as well. One is provided by Aristotle on the basis of the liar's goals and intentions: in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (IV 13, 1127a13–b32), a nameless virtue (our truthfulness) is

described as something halfway between boasting and dissimulating. The boaster tends to claim for himself merits he does not have and, for that reason, is less blameworthy than the dissimulator, who to the contrary tends to underplay the qualities he possesses. The boaster can act (1) without any ulterior aim, (2) out of a desire for reputation and honour, (3) for money. Aristotle is quite explicit about the types of liar; they parallel those of the braggart: “one man is a liar because he enjoys the lie itself, and another because he desires reputation or gain” (*Eth. Nic.* IV 13, 1127b15–17). Dissimulators are (1) either “humbugs”, when they deny they possess merely trifling or obvious qualities, or (2) “refined”, if they play down merits they possess. There is, therefore, a trajectory of increasing importance in the forms of boastfulness, and a decreasing one in those regarding dissimulation (εἰρωνεία). Another classification may be found in Rousseau’s *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* [*The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*]:

To lie for our own advantage is deceit; to lie for the advantage of another is fraud; to lie in order to harm is slander and is the worst kind of lie. To lie without profit or prejudice to ourselves or another is not to lie: it is not a lie; it is a fiction (Rousseau 1782/1959: I, 1029; Engl. transl. 48).

It is hard to reach a shared classification: the behaviours listed so far may certainly qualify as lies; yet, what common features allow us to categorize them under the same heading of ‘lies’? First of all, a relationship with the truth. A lie is connected to the truth in a twofold way: on the one hand, it rules it out; on the other hand, it can entail it. Someone who is lying is not telling the truth; at the same time, he can be telling it and still be a liar, either because he does not realize that it is the truth, or because he does, but thinks he will not be believed. Therefore, lies are not contrary to the truth in the sense of mutual incompatibility, since they can be present at the same time. The second element joining the different kinds of lies is the motive, the goal, the intentional factor. We may call it the subjective element, as opposed to the objective one already mentioned: the latter concerns the truth, which is not subjective, although it is the subject who acknowledges it as such, or denies it.

2. A lie is neither a false proposition, nor a mistake

Given all that has been said, we can put forth a tentative definition of lie, for working purposes: a lie is the utterance of a proposition, addressed to someone else, by someone who believes it to be true and gives it out

as false (or conversely), with the intention of deceiving others and gaining some benefit (the last condition does not always hold). This traditional definition, shared by many classics of the history of philosophy, contains much of what I shall say, but not everything.

As it possesses an intentional element (concealing reality, selling off falsity as truth or vice versa), *a lie is distinct both from a false proposition and from an error*, i.e. a false statement uttered without the intention of lying. A student who is asked by his teacher where Napoleon died, and answers he died in Paris, is not lying: he is simply coming up with a wrong answer. Combining the objective dichotomy of true vs. false (= non-true) with the subjective one of lying vs. being truthful (= not lying) leads to the following tabulation:

		<i>telling the truth</i>	<i>telling a falsehood (= non-truth)</i>
110	<i>lying</i>	truth-bearing lie	straight lie
	<i>being truthful (= not lying)</i>	straight truth	error

Therefore,

1. one can lie by telling the truth, which leads to a truth-bearing lie;
2. one can lie by telling a falsehood, which leads to a straight lie;
3. one can be truthful by telling the truth, which leads to a straight truth;
4. one can be truthful by telling a falsehood, which leads to error.

It follows that a lie possesses a propositional content, but may not be identified *tout court* with it; moreover, errors and lies belong to distinct contexts — even though in some cases the line may be blurred.

Here, a digression is required in order to avert Nietzsche's claim that we live plunged in lies. For example, suppose that I am talking to a friend and I tell him that the Lang Lang concert in Amsterdam on June 21st, 2009 lasted from 8.15 pm to 10.45 pm: if the true proposition is the one giving the exact times, I am obviously asserting a false proposition, because there may be a slight error in measurement, and because any measurement may be falsified by another carried out with a more precise unit of measure. But then, on the same premises, all propositions expressing a quantitative measurement are false: the distance between two towns, the capacity of a petrol tank, the results of a blood test, or the age of each of us — the latter involving the further complication of becoming. At the same time, though, saying that the concert began at 8.15 pm is not entirely wrong; it would be so, if I claimed that it began at 6 pm. Likewise, saying that Pesaro is 160 kilometres away from Bologna

is not wholly incorrect, as it would be if I maintained that the distance is 15 kilometres³.

The obvious problem here is setting the boundary where a proposition becomes false. This problem notwithstanding, it is a fact that we can successfully organize our existence amidst all these 'lies'; hence they cannot be lies, nor can they be completely false. For a full account, a theory of degrees of truth (or falsity) of propositions (and probably also of lies and clusters of lies) would be required (the scheme outlined above would accordingly become more complex); yet, I shall not dwell on it here. For the present purposes, it will suffice to stress that the examples previously cited are not lies: not only are they not meant to deceive anyone, but they allow us to find our way in the world.

3. A lie is not a mere fiction, but it is an act

111

The definition of lie proposed above is essentially taken after the one given by Augustine:

For not every one who says a false thing lies, if he believes or opines that to be true which he says. [...] Wherefore, that man lies, who has one thing in his mind and utters another in words, or by signs of whatever kind. Whence also the heart of him who lies is said to be double; that is, there is a double thought: the one, of that thing which he either knows or thinks to be true and does not produce; the other, of that thing which he produces instead thereof, knowing or thinking it to be false. Whence it comes to pass, that he may say a false thing and yet not lie, if he thinks it to be so as he says although it be not so; and, that he may say a true thing, and yet lie, if he thinks it to be false and utters it for true, although in reality it be so as he utters it. For from the sense [intention] of his own mind, not from the verity or falsity of the things themselves, is he to be judged to lie or not to lie (Augustine, *De mendacio*, 3.3).

Lying involves a contradiction between thoughts and words. It is not simply that a mistake is not a lie, but — as I said above — *a lie is not just a fiction*. When it is construed as a story made up by the author — which is what happens in literary texts — a fiction is not a lie, since it does not deceive, it does not pretend to be true (in the sense of direct correspondence), and consequently it may not be false either. Dürrenmatt is not shamelessly lying by writing in *Justice* that Felix Spät, one of the characters of the novel, sent him a manuscript. What a lie does, instead, is precisely give out falsehood as truth. On the other hand, an

3 For a relevant opinion on this point, see Aristotle, *Metaph.* IV 4, 1008b31–1009a5.

ancient proverb — ascribed to Solon and related by Aristotle — asserts that “πολλὰ ψεύδονται ἄοιδοί (many lies are told by the poets)” (*Metaph.* I 2, 983a3–4). I am not going to deal with the problem of fiction in this context; nonetheless, I must point out some of the many connections between literature and lies. (At any rate, If I had to choose between chapter X of *The Republic*, and chapter 9 of the *Poetics*, I would not hesitate to side with the latter).

A lie is an act — a semiotic act taking place between a speaker, who utters a judgment, and a listener, to whom the judgment is addressed. Unlike linguistic statements, a lie is *inseparable from the subject*: taken jointly, the two constitute a real object.

112

In *Hippias Minor*, Socrates upholds the thesis that wisdom is always preferable to ignorance, even when the one who knows is a cheater: he who does evil willingly is better than someone who does it unwillingly, and he who lies and knows is better than an ignorant, who does not know and therefore cannot lie (cf. Plato, *Hipp. mi.*, 372a–376c). Those are liars, who “very much have the power to do many things, and especially to deceive people” (*ibid.* 365d); they are shrewd and deceitful, wily and intelligent; in short, “liars are wise and have the power to lie” (*ibid.* 366b). They choose to do so through a voluntary act: they could tell the truth, for they know it, but they can also tell a falsehood, precisely because they know. On the contrary, “a person who did not have the power to lie and was ignorant would not be a liar” (*ibid.*). Lying is an act of freedom, which presupposes knowledge (cf. *ibid.* 366e–367a). As remarked by Hannah Arendt (1968/1987: 291, n. 5), ψεύδος can signify falsity but also fiction, error and lie, and this is why Plato is forced to distinguish “involuntary” and “voluntary” ψεύδος. In Hippias’ view, while Achilles lies “not on purpose but involuntarily”, Odysseus’ lies are always “voluntary and on purpose” (Plato, *Hipp. mi.*, 370e), “when Odysseus tells the truth, he always has a purpose, and when he lies, it’s the same.” (*ibid.* 371e). A lie is an *act* (cf. *ibid.* 373d–375d), something more than a simple false proposition, and something different from error, which descends from ignorance and not from an intention to deceive. According to Jankélévitch, Plato asserts such a cynical thesis — that wisdom is in every instance to be preferred to ignorance, even when a person knowingly deceives, and therefore whoever does harm intentionally is better than someone who does so involuntarily (cf. *ibid.* 372a–376c) — “because he does not seriously believe that one can do evil with full knowledge of the facts” (Jankélévitch 1998: 216).

Contrary to Derrida (2005: 10), I would not say that Plato's text fails to assign an intentional character to lies, and that it is rather Aristotle (in *Metaph.* V 29, 1024a17–1025b13) who defines a liar as someone who does not simply happen to lie, but chooses to. It is true, on the other hand, that Aristotle rejects the inductive procedure of the *Hippias Minor*, which leads Socrates to the paradoxical thesis hinted at above. Aside from the threefold meaning of the term ψεῦδος (referring to things, statements and men), the novelty brought by Aristotle is the identification of a distinct kind of lie, i.e. the gratuitous lie, which is ranked fourth by Augustine: “a false *man* is one who is ready at and fond of such accounts, not for any other reason but for their own sake” (*ibid.* 1025a2–4).

This is how Derrida formulates the “traditional definition of lie”:

In its prevailing figure, acknowledged by everyone, the lie is neither a fact nor a condition: it is an *intentional act*, the act of lying. There is no such thing as “a lie”; there is a way of speaking, or willing-to-speak, which we call lying. We should not ask ourselves: what is a lie? But rather: “What does the act of lying do, and first, what does it want?” Lying implies addressing other people (we can only lie to someone else, not to ourselves, except if we consider ourselves as someone else), supplying them with one or several statements which the liar knows, in full consciousness — an explicit, thematic, and actual consciousness — to constitute totally or partially false assertions (Derrida 2005: 19).

113

Most of what we read in this passage may be found in Plato, Aristotle or Augustine: after all, this is the “traditional definition”. Still, Derrida underscores one particular point: a lie is not a fact, it is an act; there is not “a” lie, but the act of lying. We might say there are no kisses, but “the kissing”; no slaps, but “the slapping”. It is difficult, though, to conceive — also accepting Derrida's view of lying — the act of lying without a propositional content, allowing to distinguish lies from each other.

A peculiar affinity connects some of Derrida's theses on lying with others laid out by Alexius Meinong in *Über Annahmen* [*On Assumptions*]. Both authors maintain that (i) lies fall under the category of fiction, but not every fiction is a lie; (ii) a sheer fictional account (a *tale*) is neither true nor false, neither veracious nor mendacious, and for that reason (iii) is not aimed at deceiving anyone; (iv) lies, on the contrary, include an intentional element, since we freely choose to lie, whereas (v) we can be mistaken, and thus tell something false, without lying, that is, without deceitful intentions.

Meinong's discourse on lying has a narrower scope than Derrida's, which extends to an ethical and political context, but is more analytical when it deals with lying as an act. The primary aim for Meinong is not talking about lies, but rather bringing out a particular kind of mental life-experiences, which he dubs 'assumptions'. Along with judgments, assumptions make up the class of thoughts; they are affirmative or negative, like judgments, but unlike these, they have no pretence to truth (cf. Meinong 1902: 2-3, 257; 1910²: 2-4, 340, 368; Engl. transl. 242, 262-263). In some cases, the presumptive character of mental experiences is evident, for example when the subject himself puts forward his own experience as an assumption, by saying 'suppose that...'. Other than through hypotheses, assumptions may be expressed by interrogative, optative or imperative propositions, or subordinate clauses (*daß-Sätze*) of propositions as in 'I fear that *p*, I deny that *p*'. First and foremost, though, an assumptive element is implied in the case of fictions, in 'as-if' contexts, most notably in art, play and — what is important to us — lies (cf. *ibid.* 1902: 26 ff., 37-40; 1910²: 33 ff., 106-109; Engl. transl. 80-82).

Concerning play, Meinong has specifically in mind the child who pretends (*fingiert*) to be someone else, to possess such-and-such qualities and find himself in such-and-such situations. In other words, he pretends to believe the fiction, as long as the game is on; but he does not deceive himself. He acts as if the chair were a horse, but does not take it for a horse (cf. *ibid.*, 1902: 41-42; 1910²: 110-112; Engl. transl. 83). Adults, too, play by pretence or simulation: it is the case, for instance, of war games in military schools, or firemen's practice drills, which involve simulating fires.

There is a close analogy between the play of a child, who is 'pretending' or 'fancying' (*sich einbildet*) to be someone else, and art, especially drama: this is mirrored in the manifold meanings of the German word 'spielen' (as well as its English equivalent, 'to play'). What does an actor have in common with a child at play? Both fancy themselves as the character they are representing. During his performance, the actor behaves as if he were the character he is putting on stage. This act of identifying (*sich hineinversetzen*) with another person, of fancying oneself as someone else or 'putting oneself in someone else's shoes', does not exhaust the secret of drama, yet it brings out the role of assumptions, both in the actor's behaviour and in his mental life. An author, who is writing a story, equally identifies himself with the characters he depicts; sometimes he relates real-life events, but for the most part he

constructs fictions, and “fiction is just assumption” (*ibid.*, 1902: 45; 1910²: 115; Engl. transl. 86).

Meinong explains lucidly what the duplicity or double-dealing in the act of lying consists of. According to him, there is a well-known affinity between art and lying — suffice to think of the excellent description by Oscar Wilde (1889) — though one can be reluctant to marry the baseness of the latter with the stature of the former. However, the borderline between lying and exerting imagination is not always clear-cut: this is true both of children and of adults who gladly narrate or play. An example may be discerned if one reads the exchanges between Jessica and Hugo in Sartre’s *Les mains sales* [*Dirty Hands*]⁴. Moreover, in order to lie, good acting talents are often needed, as tone and gestures are important when uttering a lie. It becomes all the more evident that lying is different from a simple false statement: in order to lie, both the tone employed in uttering the lie and the manner and mien adopted are important, whereas these elements are wholly lacking in simple statements. Still, Meinong reminds us, following tradition, that one feature differentiates the behaviour of a liar, as opposed to a player or an artist: the attempt to deceive (1902: 45–46; 1910²: 116–117; Engl. transl. 86–87). Someone who wants to mislead another will not fall victim to his own deception. More precisely — given that a liar can still tell the truth against his will — his opinion is not the one he pretends to have; he does not formulate for himself the judgment he wants to induce in others. Essentially, it is a rephrasing of Augustine’s thesis of the “double heart”, even though Meinong had almost certainly not read the bishop of Hippo. “The liar does not himself believe what he assumes the appearance of believing” (*ibid.*, 1902: 47; 1910²: 117; Engl. transl. 87). How, then, can he conceive what he wants other people to believe? There is no question of a contradiction between words and thoughts — as was suggested by Augustine, who seemed to deny that one might think something without believing it. On the contrary, according to Meinong, a liar does *not* believe what he says: he thinks it without believing it, as we may conceive many things we do not believe. This is exactly what happens in play and art, but the behaviour of the liar has a completely different character by virtue of the intention he bears in mind. Therefore even

4 Cf. Sartre 1948: 75. I will cite here only the conclusion: “HUGO. JESSICA! I’m serious. JESSICA. So am I. HUGO. You’re only playing as being serious. You yourself said so. JESSICA. No, it’s you. HUGO. You must believe me, I beg you. JESSICA. I’ll believe you, if you believe I am serious. HUGO. Well. Okay, I believe you. JESSICA. No, you’re only playing at believing me. HUGO. There’s no way out of this.”

the liar feigns, imagining himself in the other's position, putting himself, as it were, in the other's shoes, while the aim of deceiving represents the discriminating element compared to the child, the actor or the writer. Someone who sets out to influence someone else's convictions in a specific way, will deal with his own intention as with an object of desire: first of all, he will have to conceive it. In order to induce a belief in another person, the liar must conceive it himself — conceive exactly *that* judgment, not an abstract judgment 'given by someone'. He can do so by behaving as in a game or a performance (*Spiel*): that is, by pretending, taking someone else's place, identifying as much as possible in a situation, as if he truly believed what he is saying, or what he gets other people to believe (cf. *ibid.*, 1910²: 119; Engl. transl. 89) — just as Iago is convinced of what he is saying to Roderigo and wants Othello to believe, that is, that Desdemona is in love with Cassio (cf. Shakespeare, *Othello*, act II, scene I). Quite often, indeed, someone who is trying to deceive other people ends up deceiving himself as well, for he eventually believes his own lie.

4. A lie produces effects

Let us recap what has been said so far: a lie is neither a false proposition, nor a mistake, nor a mere fiction; it is a type of fiction, an act, and precisely an intentional act. An act calls for a subject, and therefore a lie is inseparable from its subject. Together, they make up a real object: it has to be real, since a lie *produces effects*, and the cause-effect relationship only holds between real beings. Therefore, like every act — we might as well say: like every real object — a lie unfolds, or takes place, in a (phenomenological) context. But there is more: it identifies a (dialectical) context, and at this level, it may become an instrument of knowledge, although it is no piece of knowledge by itself.

Finally, we have examined lies from an extra-moral point of view. Since a lie implies the presence of at least two people — as Derrida told us, “we can only lie to someone else, not to ourselves, except if we consider ourselves as someone else” — we have dealt with lies in an interpersonal setting. Nevertheless, we have restricted ourselves to the private sphere; lies, though, play a relevant role in a political context as well, exactly because they act on our world as a portion of reality. A distinction, specific to lies, between ethical and political sphere (or rather, ethical and legal) has been drawn by Kant, precisely on the basis of the effects that they may produce.

In his essay *Des réactions politiques* (1797), Benjamin Constant claims that the abstract principles of reason could only be enforced through realistic “middle principles”. If taken literally, as an abstract rule, the unconditional moral prohibition of lying (i.e. the unconditional duty to tell the truth) “would make any society impossible”. Constant cited as evidence for his thesis the consequences that “a German philosopher” (Kant) could have drawn from that principle, namely, that “it would be a crime to tell a lie to a murderer who asked whether our friend who is being pursued by the murderer had taken refuge in our house” (Kant 1797: *Ak.* VIII, 425; Engl. transl. 63). In fact, Kant had never entertained such a thesis earlier. In his *Die Metaphysik der Sitten* [*The Metaphysics of Morals*] he cites the example of a servant who, in obeisance to what his master had requested, denied that the latter was at home, and, in this, allowed him to flee and to commit a crime which the police, who had come to arrest him, would otherwise have been able to prevent (cf. 1797/1798²: *Ak.* VI, 431; Engl. transl. 227). Yet Constant could not have read the Kantian example in the *Metaphysics of Morals* for the simple reason that the second part of this work was published after the publication of *Des réactions politiques*. Nonetheless, Kant took up the challenge Constant had thrown his way, and replied with a short essay *Über ein vermeintes Recht, aus Menschenliebe zu lügen* [*On a Supposed Right to Lie because of Philanthropic Concerns*], in which he adopts the example given by his adversary. The clarity with which Kant expresses himself here has struck a number of readers as disconcerting, indeed disarming. I will not comment on the terms of the dispute; I shall confine myself to laying out Kant’s viewpoint.

117

The Kantian text discusses two issues. The first is “whether a man (in cases where he cannot avoid answering Yea or Nay) has the warrant (right) to be untruthful”. Kant’s reply is sharp and does not leave much room for interpretation:

Truthfulness in statements that cannot be avoided is the formal duty of man to everyone, however great the disadvantage that may arise there from for him or for any other (Kant 1797: *Ak.* VIII, 426; Engl. transl. 64).

This statement is poles apart from Constant’s thesis that telling the truth is only a duty towards those who have a right to it. Kant remarks that there is no such thing as a right to the truth, since the truth does not depend on someone’s willingness to utter it; there exists only a right to truthfulness, that is, the subjective truth in one’s own person. Even when

lying does not bring injustice to the person who unjustly compels us to an answer, it is still “an injustice to humanity in general”. Drawing on a thesis he had defended in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant maintains that a lie, defined as “an intentionally untruthful declaration to another man”, “does not require the additional condition that it must do harm to another”, for it always produces such harm, perhaps not to an individual, but to humanity as a whole, “inasmuch as it vitiates the very source of right” (*ibid.*; Engl. transl. 64–65). Does every lie truly offend humanity? Kant’s thesis that we are morally obliged to tell the truth under all circumstances — regardless of the distress that may arise from it — is abstract, formal, and terrible in its consequences. Those who hid the Jews from the Nazis were trying to save human lives, risking their own: if questioned, should they have told the truth, to avoid offending humanity?

118

It has to be specified that that theoretical context is legal, not ethical. According to the *Metaphysics of Morals*, lying is the greatest violation that man, regarded as a purely moral being, can perpetrate against himself. Such a stern assessment of voluntary falsity in conveying one’s thoughts holds on an ethical level but not on a juridical one: in ethics, no authorization is derived from harmlessness, whereas in a legal sense, an intentional untruth is only a lie if it violates another’s rights⁵. By writing that the damage caused to oneself or to others has no bearing on the issue of lies, it appears that Kant is leaving the effects out of the picture; in fact, he is simply attempting to distance himself from arguments of a pragmatic kind. A lie always has effects, even disruptive ones: it annihilates man. In Kant’s words, “By a lie a man throws away and, as it were, annihilates his dignity as a man”. A man who does not believe what he tells someone else is worth less than “a mere thing”: while there is always some usefulness in a thing, a lie contradicts the natural end of communicating one’s thoughts. This is why a liar “is a mere deceptive appearance of a man, not a man himself” (Kant 1797/1798²: *Ak.* VI, 429; Engl. transl. 225–226).

Let us now turn to the second issue examined in *On a supposed right to lie*, that is, whether man “is not actually bound to be untruthful in a certain statement which he is unjustly compelled to make in order to prevent a threatening misdeed against himself or someone else” (Kant 1797: *Ak.* VIII, 426; Engl. transl. 64). This is where Kant discusses the case of a benign lie (lying for saving a life), which had been envisaged by

5 Cf. Kant 1797/1798²: *Ak.* VI, p. 429; Engl. transl. 225. The same distinction is made *ibid.*, *Ak.* VI, 238 Anm.; Engl. transl. 63–64 fn.

Augustine and retrieved by Constant. So, a murderer asks you whether his enemy is with you. If you lie, you prevent the crime, but you are responsible for the consequences of your act, which you may be legally required to account for; conversely, if you tell the truth, public justice may not lay a hand upon you. After all, once you have answered honestly to the assassin, his enemy might sneak off your house and hide in a safe place: in this case, by telling the truth, you have avoided the murder. By lying, on the other hand, you would get the assassin to leave and run into his enemy who was escaping, unknown to you, and thus to kill him: in that case, you may rightfully be held responsible for his death. If you had simply told the truth, perhaps your neighbours would have intervened and caught the murderer, and no crime would have been committed (cf. *ibid.* Ak. VIII, 427; Engl. transl. 65).

The argument is not particularly persuasive, not just because nobody is a murderer before killing someone, but for the large number of possibilities that should be examined, once the example is up for discussion. However, the key contention is clear: when a lie brings injury on others, the liar is accountable before a law court, because “truthfulness is a duty that must be regarded as the basis of all duties founded on contract” (*ibid.*). A principle admits of no exceptions (cf. *ibid.* Ak. VIII, 427, 430; Engl. transl. 65, 67); being veracious is an imperative of reason, which holds unconditionally and does not discriminate between those towards whom we have this duty and those towards whom one can be excused from it.

The first conclusion of an iron application of such a principle is that the examination of the consequences, even when they are very probable, does not exempt man from the duty to *always* tell the truth. The broader conclusion is that “right must never yield ground to politics, politics must always yield to right” (*ibid.* Ak. VIII, 429; Engl. transl. 66). Hannah Arendt (1968/1987: 224) synthesized Kant’s position with the proverbial maxim “*Fiat iustitia, et pereat mundus* (Let justice be done though the world may perish)”.

In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant makes it clear that someone who lies — even if he does no harm to anyone, and obtains some advantage for himself or a friend — is not worthy of happiness (cf. Kant 1797/1798²: Ak. VI, 481; Engl. transl. 270). Not lying is an absolute necessity, required by reason; it is a duty, and “a man’s observance of his duty is the universal and sole condition of his worthiness to be happy” (*ibid.* Ak. VI, 482; Engl. transl. 270).

Kant is believed to be akin to Augustine in several aspects, and he is indeed. I will briefly point to three such aspects: first of all, the thesis that we must never lie, even if this can bring some good; secondly, the devastating consequences that a lie would entail — for one author the corruption of the soul, for the other the destruction of man and his debasement below the level of inanimate things; finally, the punishment that ensues, i.e. the loss of eternal life and its Kantian equivalent, which is unworthiness of happiness.

120

Yet, is a liar really unworthy of happiness? When Kant made this claim, we must suppose that he had in mind situations with a high ethical, legal or political significance; if he did not, then his idea of unconditional commitment to the truth ignores the complex world of life. Lying — to mention just one facet — is also seduction, and it is hardly necessary to think of Marquise de Merteuil and Vicomte de Valmont, for whom seduction is tantamount to corruption, but, for example, of Cielo d'Alcamo's far more joyous and playful *Contrasto* (*Rosa fresca aulentissima* [*Fresh and very perfumed rose*]), in which lying is an integral part of the game of seduction: both protagonists are fully aware that the other is lying, but they are both playing, as a prelude to their happiness. In *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* [*Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*], Kant had taken quite a different stance: being evil is not simply committing an act that conflicts with the moral law, but choosing maxims that contradict the law as guiding principles of one's actions (cf. Kant 1793/1794²: Ak. VI, 20; Engl. transl. 46). Those unworthy of happiness would then be people like Iago or Dolmancé, and not everybody who tells a lie.

As for Augustine, he has fewer reasons than Kant for displaying so much rigour: not because he wrote "love and do what you will", but because of the theory of grace, which implies lapsing into sin. The principle is high, but Grace is still higher: in a contingent situation, I make a responsible decision against the principle, and place my trust in Grace. "What does it mean to tell the truth?" Dietrich Bonhoeffer asked himself in Tegel prison in 1943/44. As a Lutheran minister, he was well acquainted with both Augustine and Kant. His answer is, first of all, that one should assess how things really stand: it is simply cynical to claim that we must 'tell the truth', no matter where, when and to whom; by doing so, we produce a "mock-up of the truth", which has nothing to do with the "living truth". "A truthful word is not a quantity which is constant: it is alive as life itself" (Bonhoeffer 1949: 309). Truth is not transparency and

lying is not just speaking against one's own thoughts. In order to tell the truth, I must consider who is inducing me to speak, what entitles me to do so and where I happen to be; besides, I must place the object of my discourse within that context. Augustine and Kant present us with a dramatic scenario, where the alternative is either to *always* tell the truth, or else to face unhappiness or the loss of eternal life. If that is the case, either of them will appoint himself as the supreme judge of other people's consciousness, and pass a sentence without appeal.

So far, we have dealt with lies from the point of view of the liar; for the point of view of the deceived, let us turn to Sartre's *Cahiers pour une morale* [*Notebooks for an Ethics*] (written in 1947–1948, but edited only posthumously in 1983). The section on violence includes both dimensions of lying, the private and the public (or political). The starting point is that a lie bears effects:

a lie is used to incite someone to do what one wants him to do or not to do what one does not want him to do (Sartre [1947–1948]/1983: 203; Engl. transl. 195).

A lie originates from the avowal of a failure: “In the presence of reality as it is, the Other's action will not follow my wishes. Therefore I hide this reality from him” (*ibid.*). The other is still free to choose, but he will do so on wrong premises, since I have altered them. A boaster who, in order to be praised, claims to have accomplished an act which he did not truly accomplish, puts forward a fictitious situation, which he induces another person to believe as real. No doubt freedom is preserved throughout, yet it is reduced to a thing, “because it is surrounded by emptiness” (*ibid.* 205; Engl. transl. 196). Another example: a member of Gestapo executes Jean-Pierre Bourla (one of Sartre's students at the Lycée Pasteur in 1941) and his father, then he gets his father's lover to believe that both are alive in a detention camp, and induces her to write letters, which he would deliver to the two men; instead, he burns them. All the woman's gestures are free and, in a sense, effective, since she actually writes the letters, breaks down emotionally, cries, gives up hope, then hopes again; yet her freedom is a limited one, which runs aground in imagination. “[T]he contents of the consciousness of the deceived one”, Sartre says, “are *explainable* only by the intentions of the deceiver” (*ibid.* 206; Engl. transl. 198).

“So the lie transforms man into a thing”, even though in most cases it tends to keep him free. Such reification encompasses the cheated as well

as the cheater: a boaster is praised for merits he does not own, hence he is also not praised, for the object of the praises is not himself as he is, but as others take him to be, or rather, it is the one who truly performed the act, even if the boaster provides the substance for the praise. The liar's duplicity is directed at exerting control over the relationship between the reality and another person's subjectivity. The liar's goal is the truth, understood as "a certain subjective state of the other that one judges to be conform to the truth"; still, he does pursue such a goal by not telling the truth. Why so? "Because it might be misinterpreted". Thus there is mistrust in the other person (*ibid.* 207; Engl. transl. 198–199).

122

Like violence, mendacity regards freedom as both a means and an end; it aims at achieving the end immediately and by any means, and subdues a free consciousness, changing it into a thing. Like violence, it is self-justifying: "If I deceive, I have the right to do so". On the other hand, the element of destruction in a lie is reversed with respect to violence: while the latter affirms the primacy of the world over consciousness, the former destroys the world-for-another's-consciousness, concealing it with fictions. A special category of lies is "what one does for a *cause* to the upholders of that very cause" (*ibid.* 209; Engl. transl. 201). To this effect, Sartre introduces two different examples, which he takes to be similar: religion for the people, and the lies that the leaders of a party tell to party members.

Popular religion is aimed at preserving the social order. To this purpose, an enlightened elite carries out a complete mystification of every individual's acts. A religious person lives in a lie; his whole life is stolen from him, since "All these acts are done from the perspective of a divine will and justice that do not exist" (*ibid.*). What he thinks he is doing — saving his soul — is nothing. A religious man is robbed of his thoughts, which are projected beyond him and determined by artificial motives (fear and hope), as well as of his acts, which are as worthless as the efforts made in a dream. He is dehumanized, reified, subject to continuous violence.

Sartre's arguments runs parallel to a passage from the *First Letter to the Corinthians* (15,17), where Paul declares that "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile": now, according to Sartre, God does not exist, hence Christ was never resurrected; the consequence is obvious. Still, a false belief is not necessarily a lie. Founding one's life on a false conviction makes it useless, not mendacious. In *L'être et le néant* [*Being and*

Nothingness], Sartre (1943: 86) distinguishes between error and lie; in the *Cahiers pour une morale*, conversely, he seems to be including the former within the domain of the latter. His argument presupposes (i) that an enlightened atheist élite deceives the people consciously and intentionally, (ii) that religion permeates the whole life of a people, every gesture and thought of any of its members. As a matter of fact, these two universal theses have a limited import: (ii) is certainly true of many people and of some particular moments in history, but not today for most of what Sartre calls 'the people'; (i) draws attention to the role that the relationship between religious leaders and the people plays in shaping a given religion, yet it is far from explaining that complex phenomenon which we call 'religion'.

At any rate, if living for something that never materializes amounts to being cheated, the principle applies indiscriminately to all those who have spent their life for an ideal which has not come true. Sartre is aware of this, which is why he examines the "lie in the party", bringing out the following aspects: (1) the cheater and the cheated belong to the same party and fight the same battle; (2) "the essence of an individual is what he was. But the essence of a party member is what he was, what is, and what must be at the same time"; (3) "the underlying will and the underlying interest emanate from this essence"; (4) every member must be entitled to express the will of the party, but may also be asked to relinquish his own freedom and become a means for an end; (5) "the leader *understands me* [a party member] *better than I understand myself*" (Sartre [1947–1948]/1983: 214; Engl. transl. 204–205), he knows the underlying will of the party, I live under his gaze. The leader is not comparable to the élite that wants a religion for the people, but is rather like a priest; eternal life is comparable to a future that is out of reach, "blocked off by a Revolution which figures death" (*ibid.* 215; Engl. transl. 206).

In sum, the more a goal is beyond compare, the less definite it is, the more the relation of goal to means is indeterminate, the more it appears to be independent, the more admissible it is to make use of any means whatsoever to reach it, since by itself it does not exclude any of them (or almost none) (*ibid.* 215; Engl. transl. 206–207).

The situation may be likened to the case of popular religion. What is the solution? Bringing the goal closer.

When the goal is concrete and finite, and the future is on a human scale, violence — according to Sartre — is ruled out: resorting to it will be limited and will in any case appear unwarranted. Violence and lies are alike

in that they tend to speed things up and get straight to the result. If I form a world where man is treated as an end and not as a means, and if this world recedes away *ad infinitum*, then I will use the men as means, and I will destroy the end.

The solution to this antinomy is not to distinguish the end from the means, but to treat man as an end to the same extent that I consider him a means, that is, to help him think of himself and freely want to be a means in the moment when and to the extent that I treat him as an end, as well as to make manifest to him that he is the absolute end in that very decision by which he treats himself as a means (Sartre 1983: 216; Engl. transl. 207).

124

However, since truthfulness is assumed to reside in the actual realization of the goal, and not in its realizability, such a commitment does not help to overcome the dilemma brought up by Sartre: if the world where man is an end and not a means fails to come true, those who have lived for such an ideal have lived in a lie.

Sartre has us observe the other side of the coin, that of the deceived person. According to him, the victim of a fraud leads a false, stolen, deceived life. A fraud is pervasive; it involves life as a whole, every gesture, every word. From this point of view, the liar himself is not much better off, except that he is leading the game. Even outside religion and politics, everyone can believe that one is right, but quite often one cannot know it; on the other hand, the fact that the leaders cheat does not necessarily imply that the aim is not to be pursued. If one holds that the distinct convictions of others imply that they lead a life characterized by lying, one is doing nothing other than electing oneself a judge of other people's conscience. Just like Augustine and Kant, Sartre portrays a grim scenario, which seems to debar mercy and benevolence for men and their weaknesses.

A different feeling pervades the answer given by Jankélévitch (1942/1998: 238–240) to the question of why a liar lies. His reply is that the liar does so for want of love and generosity by the others (and we know he was not lenient with liars). Is this the only reason? No, but it is one of the reasons.

5. A lie unfolds in a (phenomenological) context and identifies a (dialectical) context

Although pure lying is possible, one mostly lies in order to get or obtain something. The child lies to its mother hoping to avoid punishment,

the politician pulls the wool over the electorate's eyes in order to enlarge the sphere of consensus surrounding him (in politics, lying is linked, predominantly, to concepts of demagoguery and manipulation). Patricia Highsmith's Tom Ripley is a talented liar, who lies without shame, knowingly, in order to deceive and derive from it a personal advantage. Lies always have consequences. If we are to trust Augustine, Kant, Jankélévitch and Sartre, these consequences extend to the liar himself, despite the fact that he himself often aims to produce a certain effect on others.

We have previously said that a lie, as an act, is inseparable from the subject, and that it constitutes a real object since it bears effects. Like any real object, *a lie takes place in a (phenomenological) context and identifies a (dialectical) context*. Here, I shall assume an ontological model which does not construe what we call an 'individual' as an independent, separate and autonomous being, but rather as a *continuum*: that is, individuals are shaped by a continuity of reactions and relations with both the phenomenological context — the spatio-temporal context which the object is part of — and the dialectical context, which consists of the relations that the object sets up, according to its properties. The dialectical context is given by a network of objects, not necessarily perceptible or belonging to the phenomenological context, which enter into relationships with the initial object, and whose existence is necessary for its own existence, and accounts for the fact that it is the way it is; eventually, we end up defining a constellation of objects, which all contribute to shape the identity of the object we set out to describe⁶. Therefore different objects, situated in the same phenomenological context, may be associated with different dialectical contexts.

125

On my desk there are books, and a mobile telephone. They share the same phenomenological context, but the dialectical one is different: the books relate, amongst other things, to their authors and editors, whereas the phone relates to a cellphone company, to a set of aerials, relay stations, a satellite, telephone switches, transmitting stations, mobile networks, and electromagnetic waves. Without such entities, it would not be a mobile phone, since it would not work as one. Together, the context and the object make up a 'portion of the world'; thus every object, in accordance with its properties, entertains relationships with other objects and identifies a portion of the world. All artefacts refer to the dialectical

6 I have dealt with this issue in Raspa 2008.

context constituted by the beings which are involved in their creation and — in the case of technological artefacts — by those allowing them to operate.

The same ontological model applies to living beings: an example is the process of chlorophyll photosynthesis, whose general import is obvious since plants are at the bottom of nearly all food chains on the planet. A man may hardly be regarded as a distinct and autonomous being, since he depends on all four Empedocles' elements (water, air, earth and fire) and on many other entities, whose existence is essential in order for him to be. Moreover, the model holds for social objects (promises, contracts, rights, marriages), which require at the very least the presence of two or more individuals performing an *act* (perhaps a tacit one), thereby producing an *object*, ratified by an *inscription*.⁷ Finally, it holds for the objects of our historical world, the facts, the propositions that describe them, and even the lies. At this level, lies can become instruments of knowledge, and play a relevant function in political, social, and economic life.

126

It has been said that causal relations may only exist between real objects and facts; they never hold between non-beings, such as the alleged fact (which did not obtain) related by a lie, and beings, such as the concrete acts of the person who has been deceived by the lie. At the same time, this particular non-being is an important one, as it gives a direction: lies do not produce identical effects, and if we are to distinguish them from each other, we must admit that each expresses something fundamentally different. If connected to real beliefs, this 'something' may have a role in producing effects, but it is the beliefs that ultimately bring them about. A context must therefore be given; furthermore, the lies must be voiced by certain subjects rather than by others.

Iago's lies have the effect of driving Othello to assassinate Desdemona. Now, Iago is no ordinary person: he is someone who enjoys Othello's complete trust. If the same sentences had been pronounced by an anonymous gentleman, they would hardly have produced such an effect. The same is true of George W. Bush's assertion that 'Saddam owns weapons of mass destruction'. If I had uttered that same sentence in a bar, the effects would not have exceeded an animated discussion with a friend and a couple of extra beers. If Silvio Berlusconi had said it, some

⁷ I assume Ferraris' (2009: 176, 183–184 and *passim*) definition of a social object. For more details on the idea of social objects here exposed see Raspa 2012.

would have believed him, others wouldn't, Italian media would have commented on it, and finally an official statement would have been issued by the Government, declaring that the Prime Minister's view has been misinterpreted by left-wing newspapers. In both cases, the effects of that assertion would have been limited, and it certainly would never have been related to the need for a war on Iraq. Instead, it was pronounced by Colin Powell at the UN (on February 5th, 2003) and repeated by George W. Bush in his address to the nation (on March 18th, 2003): that is, it was pronounced by two persons who were holding precise political and institutional positions. A sketchy analysis brings out two fundamental characteristics of mendacious discourse: (a) the identity of the subject who lies (who he is, but also what he is) and (b) the importance of context, not just the phenomenological, but also the dialectical one. From now on I will only refer to Bush.

127

What are Bush's constitutive features, those implied when we pronounce his name, which allow us to refer to him even though our knowledge of him is not complete (as it could never be)? One such feature is, quite obviously, that he has been the President of the United States during a certain historical period. In this capacity, throughout the eight years of his term, he was both the US head of State and the commander-in-chief of the army. Clearly, Bush possesses many other qualities and characteristics (physical, moral, and the like). Finally, since any concrete object can only exist in a context, he must be located in a spatio-temporal context, which we have called 'phenomenological', and in a dialectical one. Like every animal, Bush needs all the Empedoclean elements in order to exist. If we regard him as a man, we may point to other elements necessary for his existence and for his being what he is: for instance, relationships with individuals of the same species who have been important for cultural, social, economic, emotional intercourse, and who have had a role in defining the officer, then the governor, and eventually the president of the United States. Therefore, Bush needs a context, made up of the entities he relates to; for a large part, this context is common to all living organisms, to all men, to men and women in the United States in the early twenty-first century. As is well known, by Aristotelian divisions we do not reach the individual, but the lowest species; this is why we have amended Aristotle's 'vertical' approach with a 'horizontal' one, i.e. Hegel's account of properties in terms of relations.⁸ Because of some properties of his, Bush entertains a

8 On this topic see Raspa 2011.

series of relations with other beings, without which he would not exist or would be different from the way he is.

As an object which is distributed continuously over time, Bush appears in different contexts; let us consider him while he is addressing the nation in Washington, as a president of the United States, on March 18th, 2003. Bush's phenomenological context is common to other members of the government, while his dialectical context is different, since no one else is the president of the United States: this role causes Bush to enter into specific relationships with a whole network of objects, institutions and individuals, with the United States as a country as well as with other NATO countries. Let us now consider the assertion 'Saddam owns weapons of mass destruction'. Its dialectical context is defined on the basis of the fact that the sentence has been uttered by the president of the US, and not by someone else who happened to be in the same place. Through him, that lie has established connections with our world, and it has been exploited for performing concrete acts, like waging war, destroying, killing, profaning, and finally — yet another lie — exporting democracy.

128

Once a lie has made contact with our world, its identity is not determined by its properties and propositional content alone, but also by a system of relations that cause it to play a certain role, that is, to bring some particular effects. This is what happened with 'Saddam owns weapons of mass destruction', uttered by Bush and relayed by the media all over the world. We all understand what this sentence means; moreover, we know that it designates nothing concrete, since they actually searched for the weapons and could not find them, and they eventually had to admit to the world public opinion that, indeed, they were wrong. We also know, though, that the lie in question has been the main reason alleged by Bush for waging war on Iraq. If we think of those 'weapons', we are not thinking of nothing: behind that expression there are things like official statements, or pages of the US intelligence reports, hence they are not a simple nothing, because they connect to a vast portion of the world which may be identified precisely on the basis of that 'nothing'.

An important distinction is in order here, which connects to what has previously been said: admitting a mistake does not mean confessing a lie. If we assume that lying has to do with good faith, we may prove — as Derrida (2005: 18–19) remarked — that someone was wrong, but we may

never have conclusive evidence that he lied; the consequences of this view “are frightening and boundless”. Why, then, do we say it was a lie?

First of all, we are not dealing with a mistake, intended as a wrong answer to a question, because no one had asked such a question, nor are we discussing a general theoretical thesis, since that proposition was supposed to designate a specific fact. The suspicion that it was a lie arises from considering that such a statement entailed political and economic advantages. More important yet, expressing an opinion and passing it off as a true and objective statement are not quite the same. I may hold some convictions and express them in perfect good faith, but if I have no elements for claiming that my opinion is something more, i.e. a truth, then no matter how strong and intense my belief is, it will not qualify as a true proposition. I am not entitled to take that step, and if I do take it for specific reasons — in the case at issue, justification of the outbreak of a war — then it is reasonable to believe that I have lied. Although I cannot produce evidence that Bush told a lie, that he acted in bad faith, I can support my belief with arguments, which are not meant to prove it, but to justify it; and this is just what philosophy generally does with its discourses.

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- 130
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Venancio Raspa

Stvarnost laži

131

Apstrakt

Laž nije ni pogrešna tvrdnja, ni greška, niti pak puka fikcija; ona predstavlja određeni tip fikcije, čin – tačnije – intencionalni čin. Činu je potreban subjekat, te je stoga laž neodvojiva od svog subjekta. Oni zajedno čine stvaran objekat: on mora biti stvaran, budući da laž proizvodi posledice, a odnos uzroka i posledice važi jedino između stvarnih bića. Kao i svaki objekat, laž se obelodanjuje u (fenomenološkom) kontekstu. Ali to nije sve, ona identifikuje (dijalektički) kontekst.

Ključne reči Laž, fikcija, lažnost, prevara, intencionalni čin, objekat, Kant, Majnong, Sartr, Derida.