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## Post-truth Politics Responsible Irresponsibility and Ethics— Postmodernist Philosophers Revisited

### INTRODUCTION

The notion of ‘post-truth’ has attracted considerable interest both in academic circles and in public debate more generally. A ‘post-truth society’, has been defined as a society in which “‘objective facts’ are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”.<sup>1</sup> This also implies a society in which fake news is disseminated on purpose and statements about various events that contradict what people observe are justified by calling them ‘alternative facts’. A consequence of this is that in a post-truth society nothing can be trusted and that nothing is what it seems to be; everything is floating.

In spite of its adversarial relation to truth, it appears that an interesting and important feature of post-truth is that it is *not* about lying. The post-truth situation, post-truth society or post-truth *tout court* is characterised by its non-relation to truth. It is beyond, after, above and besides truth and any discourse related to truth, or so journalist Peter Pomerantsev claims in a magazine article on this topic.<sup>2</sup> This is supported by neurologist Sebastian Dieguez, in his recent work on Harry Frankfurt’s notion of bullshit, in which he points out that bullshitting rather indicates an indifference to truth. In this respect it is different from the lie, as the latter maintains a relation to the real world, so to speak.<sup>3</sup> Bullshit does not aim at convincing. Arguments relying on ‘facts’ are absent or subordinated to other purposes. Dieguez suggests that post-truth may be characterised in this fashion too. The core element of post-truth is thus not to be *false* in the sense of opposing truth, but *phony*. While the lie moves away from reality, post-truth draws close to reality and may even imitate it, according to Dieguez.<sup>4</sup> This implies that liars must know the truth—or at least believe they know the truth—and be aware of it. Hence the liar can be said to

<sup>1</sup> Oxford Dictionaries Online: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>, accessed 26 May 2018.

<sup>2</sup> POMERANTSEV, Peter: *Inget är på riktigt*, in: *Axess* 7 (2015), 34–36.

<sup>3</sup> DIEGUEZ, Sebastian: *Total bullshit! Au cœur de la post-vérité*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France 2018, 11.

<sup>4</sup> DIEGUEZ, Sebastian: *Total bullshit!*, 63–64.

act under the guidance of truth.<sup>5</sup> Philosopher Hannah Arendt maintains that if lying and deception are to be efficient they must depend completely on a 'clear notion of the truth which the [...] deceiver wishes to hide'.<sup>6</sup> The bullshitter, on the other hand, is indifferent to the real. While the liar has a certain respect for reality, Dieguez suggests that bullshitters as post-truth practitioners do not care about anything factual, unless it serves their purpose.<sup>7</sup> Hence there is a relation between truth and lie, while post-truth goes beyond this relation between truth and non-truth.

Peter Pomerantsev discusses post-truth with the help of the example of *Russia Today*, a Russian international television channel rebranded as *RT* in 2009.<sup>8</sup> Pomerantsev claims that some of *RT*'s staff have the particular task of inventing news, that is to say, creating stories that can be spread around. These stories are obviously not true. On the other hand, Pomerantsev affirms, the word *lie* does not easily apply either. The rationale behind the production and diffusion of these stories under the heading 'news' is not to convince people, and therefore it seems inappropriate to speak about lies. The main purpose is to spread confusion.<sup>9</sup> *RT*'s motto is simply 'question more', according to historian Ilya Yablokov writing on the same topic.<sup>10</sup>

My second case has a different character. The Trump administration in the US apparently states things with purposes other than disseminating 'truth'. It says things that are obviously false, exemplified by its claims about the number of people at the inauguration ceremony in January 2017.<sup>11</sup> When the information given by the White House was disputed, the administration simply argued that there were *alternative facts*.<sup>12</sup>

Pomerantsev claims that *RT*'s goal is to make people doubt; ultimately, nothing can ever be known, and all information is impossible, uncertain or insecure. You never know who is right or wrong.<sup>13</sup> In a parallel way, the

<sup>5</sup> DIEGUEZ, Sebastian: *Total bullshit!*, 66.

<sup>6</sup> ARENDT, Hannah: *Lying in Politics. Reflections on the Pentagon Papers*, in: *The New York Review of Books* 18 November (1971), 9.

<sup>7</sup> DIEGUEZ, Sebastian: *Total bullshit!*, 68.

<sup>8</sup> POMERANTSEV, Peter: *Inget är på riktigt*, 34–36. *Russia Today* was established in 2005, sponsored by the Russian government. In 2009 *Russia Today* was rebranded *RT* (see YABLOKOV, Ilya: *Conspiracy Theories as a Russian Public Diplomacy Tool. The Case of Russia Today (RT)*, in: *Politics* 35 (2015) no. 3–4, 301; 305.

<sup>9</sup> POMERANTSEV, Peter: *Inget är på riktigt*, 34–36; see also SUROWIEC, Paweł: *Post-Truth Soft Power. Changing Facets of Propaganda, Kompromat, and Democracy*, in: *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* XVIII (2017) no. 3, 21; 24. YABLOKOV in: *Politics* 35 (2015) no. 3–4, 305–306; 310–311.

<sup>10</sup> YABLOKOV in: *Politics* 35 (2015) no. 3–4, 311

<sup>11</sup> FØRLAND, Tor Egil: (*He's lying*): *Presidenten, poststrukturalistene og behovet for aktive henvisninger*, in: *Historisk tidsskrift* no. 4 (2017), 496.

<sup>12</sup> FØRLAND, Tor Egil: (*He's lying*), 496.

<sup>13</sup> POMERANTSEV, Peter: *Inget är på riktigt*, 36.

Trump administration appears to be immune to any counter-arguments. Nothing is ever agreed upon, not even seemingly simple observable things such as the size of a crowd attending a given event. There are always alternative facts. Both cases exemplify a general thrust in contemporary public exchange: namely, post-truth. Probably few people would claim that, for instance, President Donald Trump is widely read in contemporary philosophy and social theory and has subsequently been contaminated by it. It has, however, been suggested that many contemporary theories have prepared the ground for post-truth as incarnated by Trump and others, including *RT*, as illustrated in the examples above.

Norwegian historian Tor Egil Førland is one of those who perceive connections between post-truth and contemporary theories, identifying two intellectual currents during the 20<sup>th</sup> century that he claims can be charged with having prepared the ground. First, noting that the core idea in Thomas Kuhn's theory of how science works is that facts cannot be understood without a theory or a paradigm to frame them, Førland claims that this annihilates every attempt to get at real, hard fact beyond our concepts.<sup>14</sup> Second, and very broadly speaking, Førland allocates responsibility to the nebulous notion of postmodernism.<sup>15</sup> These currents have together generated an intellectual climate in which facts are no longer trusted. For Førland the charge against postmodernism<sup>16</sup> is central, as he suggests the concept comprises and represents the ideas of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century in the following terms: a thorough critique of stable truth claims that interpretation is all and there is nothing beyond and, finally, the affirmation that there is no objectivity. Hence, Førland concludes, facts and fiction are blended. This constitutes the groundwork for post-truth, which in turn makes post-truth society possible.<sup>17</sup>

Names frequently mentioned as representing 'postmodernism' are Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard, together with their forefathers Martin Heidegger and Friedrich Nietzsche.<sup>18</sup> These philosophers rarely identify themselves as 'postmodernist'. Many others, however—both friends and foes—use this label. Typically, when the link is made between post-truth and 'postmodernism', the terms are

<sup>14</sup> FØRLAND, Tor Egil: (*He's lying*), 499.

<sup>15</sup> FØRLAND, Tor Egil: (*He's lying*), 497–498. For a similar view see, for instance, KAKUTANI, Michiko: *The Death of Truth*. London: William Collins 2018; POOLE, Steven: *Lies, Damned Lies and Alternative Facts. The Post-Truth Era Isn't New: We All Trade in Bullshit*, in: *New Stateman* 19–25 May (2017), 91–94, and POMERANTSEV: *Inget är på riktigt*, 34–37.

<sup>16</sup> One would think that many different intellectual currents could be targeted, for instance, 'constructivism', 'feminism', 'postcolonialism' and perhaps 'queer theory'—and some of them are sometimes exposed. 'Postmodernism' remains, nonetheless, the recurring label for what is denounced as the intellectual flagship of the post-truth era.

<sup>17</sup> FØRLAND: (*He's lying*), 498–499.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, KAKUTANI: *The Death of Truth*, 47, and FØRLAND: (*He's lying*), 498–499.



employed in a broad and very general sense without further qualifications and certainly without close readings of any particular texts. That is an understandable and a wise strategy, I think. Those who are critical of 'post-modern thinkers' and who believe they have influenced the contemporary world in ways that have prepared it for post-truth argue that there is some sort of cultural disease. It would be much more difficult to denounce one particular philosopher as the root, especially because not all philosophers and theorists are equally read and discussed everywhere. In this article I have chosen a similar approach. The broad and general fashion of relating post-truth to postmodernism in order to counter it does not work—that is my thesis—although there are certainly a number of variations in the argument. I also suggest a different approach, very broadly speaking. Many more precise arguments could and should be brought forward.

Now, as philosopher Jeffrey Nealon admits, those who make the charge that 'postmodern philosophy' has fostered post-truth do not do so randomly, without grounds for their claims. It is true that much of what Føllesdal among others says can be questioned; his argument is sketchy and it bears all the signs of aspiring to acceptance mainly among those who are already convinced that 'postmodernism', for instance, is a cultural disease.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, there is something compelling about Føllesdal's argument. As Nealon says, in some philosophical circles—in particular among certain so-called continental philosophers, often referred to as 'postmodern'—one may see people comparing, for example, truth with poetry.<sup>20</sup> I have myself written texts in which such seemingly peculiar conclusions may be drawn.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, Nealon continues, post-truth must be a theme in philosophy, in particular continental philosophy of a certain brand, a branch that many call 'postmodern'. Yet, he also emphasises that dealing with post-truth is not simply a passive or defensive enterprise. It is not simply about taking responsibility for what has been said and correcting some mis-steps. Philosophers of this ilk can also make a significant contribution to understandings of post-truth and, in consequence, help find a way out of its

<sup>19</sup> For an analysis of this see HÄMÄLÄINEN, Nora: *Är Trump postmodern? En essä om sanning och populism*. Helsingfors/Helsinki: Förlaget 2019.

<sup>20</sup> NEALON, Jeffrey T.: *Jokes and the Performative in Austin and Derrida; or, the Truth Is a Joke?*, in: *Cultural Critique*, no. 95 (Winter 2017), 16.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, FRIDLUND, Patrik: *Ambivalent Wisdom as the Fruit of Reading*, in: *Logoi.ph* 1, no. 2 (2015), 175–177, based on a reading of Paul RICŒUR: *Du texte à l'action. Essais d'herméneutique II*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil 1986, and RICŒUR, Paul/KEARNEY, Richard: *The Creativity of Language*, in: *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers. The Phenomenological Heritage*, ed. Richard Kearney. Manchester: Manchester University Press 1984. Similar threads are found in Derrida, for instance, in *La double séance* in: DERRIDA, Jacques: *La dissémination*. Paris: Seuil 1972, 199–318, and certainly many other examples could be provided.

destructive aspects, Nealon argues.<sup>22</sup> Put differently, a certain kind of continental philosophy has been accused of undergirding post-truth. This should be taken seriously, as there *are* some philosophers who sometimes express themselves in ways that lend themselves to such interpretation. Yet Nealon claims that it is precisely this very kind of philosophising that may also be the most helpful in understanding post-truth, and hence also be the most promising way to handle it. I share his view. Obviously, there seems to be an agreement between Nealon and many others, including myself, that post-truth is a problematic phenomenon, and thus that some measures are required. The aim is to point out that an established mainstream *approach* to post-truth politics that frequently appears to link post-truth politics and postmodernism is not very illuminating; nor is it efficient if one wants to deal with post-truth politics, as well as its problematic implications. Traditional 'counter activity' and attempts to employ traditional critique have failed. I want to point out that other routes are possible.

In the following, I limit the discussion to post-truth in politics. Arguably, it is an important field. A post-truth society will be characterised by alternative facts, fake news and the like in many fields. Yet political and economic decisions have direct and immediate consequences, as they may bring impecuniosity to people, war to states and destruction to the planet—all backed by various discourses.

#### TRADITIONAL CRITIQUE AND ITS PROBLEMS

Attempts to counter incorrect statements or fake news by invoking facts, evidence, reality and so forth have proved unsuccessful or even counter-productive. Nealon reminds us that when statements positing weapons of mass destruction and Saddam Hussein's relation to al-Qaeda as reasons for war against Iraq were repeated with force and authority, facts had little to say in the matter. Countering the allegations with facts was inefficient.<sup>23</sup> Mathew Ingram claims of the electoral campaign in the US in 2016 that, despite all the fact checking, journalistic digging and editorial writing, the impact on the apparently twisted picture of reality that Donald Trump's campaign disseminated was feeble or even counter-productive. Mainstream media tried to 'puncture Trump's ascendance' but the effect was probably the opposite of what was desired, giving rise to perceptions of Trump as the underdog and outsider, exactly the role he wanted to play.<sup>24</sup> To con-

<sup>22</sup> NEALON, Jeffrey T.: *Jokes and the Performative in Austin and Derrida; or, the Truth Is a Joke?*, in: *Cultural Critique* no. 95 (Winter 2017), 19–20.

<sup>23</sup> NEALON: *Jokes and the Performative in Austin and Derrida*, 19.

<sup>24</sup> INGRAM, Mathew: *Here's Why the Media Failed to Predict a Donald Trump Victory*, in: *Fortune* November 9 (2016).

clude, there was an increase rather than decrease in support. To be more precise, there was no actual decrease in Trump's numerical support—that is, in the number of favourable votes—although antagonism towards him has reached a higher level. He seems simply to have more antagonists than before. A preliminary conclusion is that if post-truth is to be countered, it cannot be easily countered by 'facts'. There is, rather, a need to understand post-truth, not only to brandish 'the truth' in public. As politics is a central area of interest, it appears necessary to engage in reflection regarding the character of politics and post-truth in politics. Work has to be undertaken in order to see the functioning of political discourses.<sup>25</sup>

### CHARACTERISTICS OF POLITICS

It could be argued that trotting out the truth to counter the promotion of alternative facts is not only insufficient, but also grounded in an inadequate analysis of political language. Indeed, there are reasons to believe that political arguments are not necessarily about 'truth' (at least not in a significant sense).<sup>26</sup> They are, perhaps, not about 'sharing my beliefs' either, or even 'sharing my standpoints' in order to convince others. Perhaps political arguments are better seen as instrumental or, put differently, perhaps one should see that political arguments are made in order to obtain something. One can see that political communication fundamentally has to do with values, rather than reporting facts or states of affairs.<sup>27</sup>

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu defines the political field in a way that underlines its character as a competition<sup>28</sup> in which agents struggle to transform the power relations.<sup>29</sup> Baruch Spinoza is quoted by Bourdieu as saying that there is no intrinsic force to the true idea.<sup>30</sup> Hence, what is at stake in politics is being able to impose a particular vision of the world as

<sup>25</sup> This is a motivation for George Lakoff and Elisabeth Wehling when writing their *The Little Blue Book* (LAKOFF, George/WEHLING, Elisabeth: *The Little Blue Book. The Essential Guide to Thinking and Talking Democratic*. New York: Free Press 2012). Interestingly enough, this book was published several years before Trump was elected president of the USA and before the term post-truth was on everyone's lips.

<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Elisabeth Wehling in a discussion of political language: 'Fakten ohne Frames sind bedeutungslos' she says (WEHLING, Elisabeth: *Politisches Framing. Wie eine Nation sich ihr Denken einredet – und daraus Politik macht*. Köln: Herbert von Halem Verlag 2016, 47).

<sup>27</sup> LAKOFF, George/WEHLING, Elisabeth: *The Little Blue Book*, 13.

<sup>28</sup> BOURDIEU, Pierre: *La représentation politique. Éléments pour une théorie du champ politique*, in: *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 36–37 (1981) no. février/mars, 3–4.

<sup>29</sup> FRITSCH, Philippe (éd.): *Introduction*, in: *Propos sur le champ politique – avec une introduction de Philippe Fritsch*. Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon 2000, 61.

<sup>30</sup> FRITSCH: *Introduction*, 68–69.

the framework of discussion.<sup>31</sup> The political field must be seen as one of struggle to uphold or transform a given understanding of the social world. This takes place through conservation or modification of categories, Bourdieu continues. Hence, political action is about establishing as objective what hitherto has been subjective—that is, making it exist publicly.<sup>32</sup>

There are two threads to this. The political field entails the struggle to establish a view of the world, and this has to do with values. This implies a reading of public interventions as not being about reporting facts. Dieguez refers to a fictitious example of an orator on Independence Day, the Fourth of July, in the US. The orator is not necessarily concerned with how the audience judges the story being told—about the Constitutional Fathers, for instance; what is central is what the orator wants to communicate about themselves. Whether they are trying to cheat on certain ‘facts’ is not even an issue in this activity. The important thing is that they want to be seen as a good patriot and devout Christian believer and so on. Dieguez concludes that this is very typical of political discourses.<sup>33</sup>

Insofar as political arguments are instrumental by virtue of being delivered in a certain way in order to induce a particular effect, they are perhaps best understood as pragmatic. In an article published in *Cultural Critique*, philosopher Jeffrey Nealon, mentioned above, suggests a new approach to the role of truth in politics, launching the idea almost *en passant* that what is central is the “performative engagement, not solely insistence on the unforced force of the constative ‘truth’”.<sup>34</sup> Here Nealon brings forward the notion of ‘performative’,<sup>35</sup> but from my point of view he seems to stop almost in the middle of a gesture, as it were. Yet the understanding of political discourse as pragmatic and performative can be brought to another level, I believe.

Performative is an interesting and useful, but also tricky notion. For instance, philosopher J.L. Austin prepared the ground for a very fertile and

<sup>31</sup> Bourdieu, quoted in FRITSCH, Philippe: *Introduction*, in: *Propos sur le champ politique – avec une introduction de Philippe Fritsch*. Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon 2000, 20.

<sup>32</sup> BOURDIEU, Pierre: *Espace social et genèse des ‘classes’*, in: *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 52–53, no. juin 1984 (1984), 3–14, and *La délégation et le fétichisme politique*, in: *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 52–53, no. juin 1984 (1984), 49–55.

<sup>33</sup> DIEGUEZ: *Total bullshit!*, 48–49. Cf. LAKOFF, George/WEHLING, Elisabeth: *The Little Blue Book*, 13, 15. See also, WOLTERSTORFF, Nicholas: *The Role of Religion in Decision and Discussion of Political Issues*, in: *Religion in the Public Square. The Place of Religious Convictions in Political Debate*, ed. Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield 1997, 107–108. Cf. John Finnis expressing an opposite view in FINNIS, John: *Religion and Public Reasons. Collected Essays*, volume V. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011, 106. FRIDLUND, Patrik: *Religion in the Public Sphere*, in: *The Routledge International Handbook of Education, Religion and Values*, eds James Arthur and Terence Lovat. London: Routledge 2013, 233–234. cf. FRITSCH, Philippe: *Introduction*, 15, 24.

<sup>34</sup> NEALON, Jeffrey T.: *Jokes and the Performative in Austin and Derrida; or, the Truth Is a Joke?*, in: *Cultural Critique* no. 95 (Winter 2017), 20–21.

<sup>35</sup> NEALON: *Jokes and the Performative in Austin and Derrida*, 19–20.



productive linguistic and philosophical discussion regarding various forms of utterances built on the distinction between *constative* and *performative* utterances.<sup>36</sup> Yet he appears to reach a point when he recognises that the sharp distinction between performative and constative utterances seems to dissolve.<sup>37</sup> At the end of the day, Austin seems to be inclined to study particular speech situations rather than defining the conditions for performative speech acts.<sup>38</sup> Evidently, Austin's notion of 'performative' has generated a vast field of study, far beyond linguistics and the philosophy of language.<sup>39</sup> There is no need to cover all this here. It suffices to point out that studies of performatives need not be confined to technical analyses of various aspects of utterances. For instance, seeing performatives as not having an external reference but, rather, as characterised by the fact that they produce a situation or transform a situation,<sup>40</sup> makes it possible to talk about political language as 'performative'. This incites my reflection regarding political discourses as doing—having effects—rather than reporting—that is, being related to truth. Rather, performativity must be seen as a core trait in politics as activity.<sup>41</sup> This may shed light on post-truth politics. Or so I argue.

It is precisely this aspect of political discourses as doing, having effects, producing and performing that is an interesting tool. It has been pointed out that politics is about questioning the current situation and about suggesting some improvement; in other words, politics is about promising a better future.<sup>42</sup> The aim is to incite, persuade or convince 'hearers or readers to adopt some novel point of view', as intellectual historian Quentin

<sup>36</sup> AUSTIN, J.L.: *Performative-Constative*, in: *The Philosophy of Language*, ed. John R. Searle. London: Oxford University Press 1971, 13–22, here 13. See also ROSS, John R.: *Where To Do Things with Words*, in: *Syntax and Semantics III: Speech Acts*, eds Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan. New York: Academic Press, 1975, 233.

<sup>37</sup> AUSTIN, J.L.: *Performative Utterances*, in: *Philosophical Papers*, ed. J.L. Austin. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1961, 236, 238; *How to Do Things with Words*, second ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1976, 32–33. See also for instance CRARY, Alice: *The Happy Truth: J.L. Austin's How to Do Things with Words*, in: *Inquiry* 45 (2010) 1, and *Austin and the Ethics of Discourse*, in: *Reading Cavell*, ed. Alice Crary and Sanford Shieh. London: Routledge 2006.

<sup>38</sup> AUSTIN: *How to Do Things with Words*, 138–139, 148.

<sup>39</sup> FÉRAL, Josette: *De la performance à la performativité*, in: *Communications* 92 (2013), no. 1, 205–218.

<sup>40</sup> DERRIDA, Jacques: *Marges de la philosophie*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit 1972, 382.

<sup>41</sup> One may see a resemblance between my approach and the way Judith Butler speaks about 'performativity' in: *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge 1990, in particular in the sense that neither Butler nor I focus on technical analyses of various classes of linguistic utterances. For an overview, see also Féral (*De la performance à la performativité*), in which the author notices the very broad and multifarious uses 'performative' and 'performance' have come to have.

<sup>42</sup> LYOTARD, Jean-François: *Au juste. Conversations avec Jean-Loup Thébaud*. Paris: Bourgois 2006 [1979]), 63–64; cf. DERRIDA, Jacques: *L'autre cap*. Paris: Les éditions de minuit 1991, 66–67; cf. VOYOUS. *Deux essais sur la raison*. Paris: Galilée 2003, 51–66.

Skinner says.<sup>43</sup> I conclude that politics is in a sense about change, either moving forwards or backwards, or even about arguing for maintaining the status quo—which would mark a change if compared to suggested movement in one direction or another.<sup>44</sup> I stress this position, as the influential historian Reinhart Koselleck argues that since the French and Industrial Revolutions, the idea of progress has had such an impact that it has become impossible to defend the status quo and even more difficult to take a reactionary position. Is it out of the question to verbalise non-progressive attitudes or publicly defend them, Koselleck maintains, and a minimal measure of progress is accepted in all political camps.<sup>45</sup> I argue to the contrary because of what I perceive as the general condition for politics. It is not unlikely that Koselleck is right on a concrete and practical level, certainly to a large extent and for a long time, but less so now than in 1989 when his text was first published. Still, it is important that a preference for the status quo or a step backwards to a previous stage cannot be excluded in principle, as these are political positions or alternatives also requiring imagination to articulate as better. If politics is seen as an activity whereby a specific future is portrayed as better than the alternatives, then this future may be seen either as something *new* in a progressive sense or as a regression to something preferred but older or as stasis. What is crucial is that in order to argue for change, in whatever sense, it must be possible to imagine an alternative to what is seen and/or presently at hand.

Now, if a fundamental trait of politics is its enduring practice of suggesting something new and better, of promising a better future, and if the aim of a political discourse is to persuade others to ‘adopt some novel point of view’, political discourse must be seen as laden with values. Thus, it contains weighted terms and notions related to values, wishes, desires and so on. Skinner argues that these should be less understood as statements about the world, than ‘as tools and weapons of ideological debate’, meanwhile supplying a theoretical tool in claiming that the use of such loaded notions in politics comes from a desire to change something according to a particular vision.<sup>46</sup> Philosopher Jean-François Lyotard expresses this even more sharply when claiming that there is no politics if there is not a questioning of the institutions and a project of making them better; all politics is, therefore, about making something other than what is at hand.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>43</sup> SKINNER, Quentin: *Visions of Politics 1: Regarding Method*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002, 149. See also from a sociological perspective, BOURDIEU: *Espace social et genèse des ‘classes’* and *La délégation et le fétichisme politique*.

<sup>44</sup> Fritsch quotes Bourdieu’s saying that the political field is defined as a struggle to maintain or transform, to conserve or modify (FRITSCH: *Introduction*, 19).

<sup>45</sup> KOSELLECK, Reinhart: *Linguistic Change and the History of Events*, in: *The Journal of Modern History* 61 (1989) 4, 659.

<sup>46</sup> SKINNER: *Visions of Politics 1*, 177, 182. See also Lakoff and Wehling.

<sup>47</sup> LYOTARD: *Au juste. Conversations avec Jean-Loup Thébaud*, 63–64.



Moreover, if the political discourse is value-based—aiming to obtain something or change something ‘for the better’—the very idea must be to make this suggestion plausible by presenting it *as if* it were possible or true. Indeed, this is the conclusion that may be drawn about political utterances in general: they are made *as if* they were true, possible and real.<sup>48</sup> Following philosopher and political scientist Yonathan Listik, one could say that a truth about the world is produced in political utterances.<sup>49</sup> This has interesting implications. If a political discourse can be said to produce a truth about the world, one can also say that it *does* certain things through language.<sup>50</sup> It *does* rather than *report*.

It also has wider implications. It is not simply a matter of two verbs—produce or report. When it is said that a political discourse does not (primarily) report, and that its task is not to give a correct account of what is at hand, also being said is that no single vision of a good society is correct. Moreover, there is no scientific investigation that could show which vision might be correct. In other words, Lyotard affirms that there is no passage from true descriptions to just politics.<sup>51</sup> A political discourse is not theoretical, not about knowing and denoting.<sup>52</sup> This is important, as it contradicts the idea that a good theoretical description of a problem is what is needed for the Prince to announce correct orders based on wise decisions.<sup>53</sup> What is opposed here is the idea that political utterances denote a vision of the world that can be true or false. What is opposed is the idea that the mission of political discourses is to describe in a *constative* manner.<sup>54</sup>

I suggest that seeing political discourses as producing or creating ‘truth’ in this sense also means that they are irresponsible. Political discourses do not report what is, and they do not give an incontestable account of reality. Speaking irresponsibly means in a sense saying everything and anything or, in other words, expressing oneself freely.<sup>55</sup> Thus, being irresponsible entails uttering things that do not correspond to ‘a real world’.<sup>56</sup> Here irresponsibility must be seen in the light of ‘freedom’, ‘change’ and ‘acti-

<sup>48</sup> Cf. LYOTARD: *Au juste. Conversations avec Jean-Loup Thébaud*, 179–180, 189. FILIPOVIC, Zlatan: *For a Future to Come. Derrida’s Democracy and the Right to Literature*, in: *Journal of East-West Thought* 3 (2013) no. 1, 16; 19.

<sup>49</sup> LISTIK, Yonathan: *Derrida’s Performance*, in: *Philosophy Now* 107 (2015), 5.

<sup>50</sup> LISTIK: *Derrida’s Performance*, 5.

<sup>51</sup> LYOTARD: *Au juste. Conversations avec Jean-Loup Thébaud*, 63–64.

<sup>52</sup> LYOTARD: *Au juste. Conversations avec Jean-Loup Thébaud*, 65.

<sup>53</sup> LYOTARD: *Au juste. Conversations avec Jean-Loup Thébaud*, 65–66.

<sup>54</sup> LYOTARD: *Au juste. Conversations avec Jean-Loup Thébaud*, 129.

<sup>55</sup> DERRIDA, Jacques: *Demeure. Maurice Blanchot*. Paris: Galilée 1998, 29–30; LYOTARD: *Au juste. Conversations avec Jean-Loup Thébaud*, 35, 118–119, 43–44, 57–58.

<sup>56</sup> FILIPOVIC: *For a Future to Come*, 18. Cf. FRIDLUND: *Ambivalent Wisdom as the Fruit of Reading*, 177–181.

vity'. Hannah Arendt stresses that human beings are free to change the world and start things anew, which implies the mental freedom to affirm or deny the existence of certain things. Otherwise action would be impossible and, Arendt concludes, action is what politics is made of;<sup>57</sup> it is essential if change is to come about. A political discourse must be irresponsible because it does not conform to what is established as true; it speaks *as if* what is said were true and real. Therefore, it is irresponsible not by chance or mishap; indeed, in politics it is not only possible but also compulsory to speak irresponsibly.

#### RESPONSIBLE IRRESPONSIBILITY

Now, one may also say that this obligation to be irresponsible in politics—that irresponsibility is not something that is a matter of choice—constitutes an exaggerated form of responsibility. In other words, a political discourse has the responsibility to question what seems to be given in a particular fashion.<sup>58</sup> Evoking the duty to speak otherwise than in conformity with what is established as true calls for further explanation, however.

This argument is constructed within the framework of literature. The idea is that literature never deals with the world *as it is*; even the most realistic literature carries a form of virtuality that will always haunt the present and destabilise it simply by offering visions of alternative characters.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, not only does literature not deal with the world as it is, but perhaps it cannot and should not do so.<sup>60</sup> This irresponsible approach is required, at least in a non-totalitarian society. Literature must in a sense do something other than be in accordance with the law; in other words, in literature everything should be allowed and anything goes.<sup>61</sup> This, it can be claimed, lies at the very heart of democracy, generally

<sup>57</sup> ARENDT: *Lying in Politics*, 2.

<sup>58</sup> FILIPOVIC: *For a Future to Come*, 18.

<sup>59</sup> FRIDLUND: *Ambivalent Wisdom as the Fruit of Reading*; LØVLIE, Elisabeth: *Religiøse vendinger i kontinental teori og i Knausgårds En tid for alt*, in: *Tro på litteratur. Religiøse vendinger fra Dante til Derrida, Fosse og Knausgård*, ed. Elisabeth Løvlie and Drude Von der Fehr. Oslo: Vidarforlaget 2013, 33–34; *Litteraturen og kjærligheten til en kommende hemmelighet*, in: *Tro på litteratur. Religiøse vendinger fra Dante til Derrida, Fosse og Knausgård*, ed. Elisabeth Løvlie and Drude Von der Fehr. Oslo: Vidarforlaget 2013, 88; cf also Derrida on literature and truth DERRIDA: *La dissémination*, 252–253, FILIPOVIC: *For a Future to Come*, 19, and LØVLIE: *Leserens troserfaring, eller den konseptuelle tankes midlertidlige undergang*, 180.

<sup>60</sup> See Elisabeth Løvlie and Drude Von der Fehr: *Introduksjon. Tro på litteratur*, in: LØVLIE/VON DER FEHR: *Tro på litteratur*, 7–17.; for further discussion see FRIDLUND: *Ambivalent Wisdom as the Fruit of Reading*.

<sup>61</sup> DERRIDA: *Voyous. Deux essais sur la raison*, 43. See also *Passions*. Paris: Galilée 1993, 64–65; *Demeure*. Maurice Blanchot, 29–30; cf. FEYERABEND, Paul: *Science in a Free Society*. London: NLB 1978, 76, 86–87; LYOTARD: *Au juste. Conversations avec Jean-Loup Thébaud*, 35.

speaking.<sup>62</sup> My contention is that the same thing can and must also be said about political discourses. In a totalitarian society irresponsible speech cannot be permitted. In a totalitarian society only what is already established as true by the authorities can be said: a stamp that guarantees that everything is in accordance with what *is*, which is already the best and about which nothing else—nothing better, no alternative—can be imagined. Therefore, in a totalitarian society opposition is eradicated precisely for this reason. Philosopher Erica Benner hints at that when she writes that a society governed by absolute and extraordinary experts who know everything does not need any other perspective, cannot accept a variegated view and is thereby caught in the established dogma forever.<sup>63</sup> In the same vein, Skinner argues,

attempts to legislate about the ‘correct’ use of normative terms must be regarded as [...] ideological in character. Whenever such terms are employed, their application will always reflect a wish to impose a particular moral vision on the working of the social world.<sup>64</sup>

It could be claimed that there is an unavoidable play between being irresponsible and being responsible. At the very least, there seems to be an intricate relationship. An illuminating story on this theme is found in Genesis 22 in the Bible, in particular Derrida’s reading of this parable.<sup>65</sup> In Genesis 22 God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, his only son. Abraham is ready to do so. Thus Abraham is being irresponsible by not abiding by any moral law or rule of civilisation—and he has to be irresponsible. In a peculiar way, this is precisely because Abraham is called by God to be a responsible subject. Only Abraham can respond to this call. It cannot be given away, and it cannot be neglected.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, if Abraham made a reference to what other people think, or to the Law or some ethical rule—for instance, by protesting against God’s command or by asking God for a reason—he would be de-responsibilising himself. This would imply his saying, ‘come and give me a hand, please tell me what I ought to do’, or ‘I am

<sup>62</sup> FILIPOVIC: *For a Future to Come*, 20.

<sup>63</sup> BENNER, Erica: *Redan de gamla grekerna*, in: *Axess* 6 (2018), 38–39. One example of how the objective view of the Party cannot be wrong, as opposed to the subjective view of an individual can be found in Arthur KOESTLER’s novel *Darkness at Noon*. London: Vintage Books 2005 [1940].

<sup>64</sup> SKINNER: *Visions of Politics* 1, 182.

<sup>65</sup> Of course, Kierkegaard also works extensively on this story in KIERKEGAARD, Søren: *Frygt og bæven* (1843). København & Valby: *Det danske sprog- og litteraturselskab & Borgen*, 1989. Derrida’s reading is, however, particularly interesting in my view because he explicitly does not presuppose that God plays the role of God in any ontological sense. See FRIDLUND, Patrik: *Derrida, Abraham and Responsible Subjectivity*, in: *La revue philosophique de la France et de l’étranger* no. 1 (January 2016), 73–74.

<sup>66</sup> DERRIDA, Jacques: *Donner la mort*. Paris: Galilée 1999, 17–19, 86; *La littérature au secret. Une filiation impossible*, in: *Donner la mort*, 171–172.

asking someone else to decide and judge instead of me', or 'I am obliged to, because people say such and such'.<sup>67</sup> Following Derrida's reading, one can say that here is a test of whether Abraham is capable of not questioning the command by referring to some other authority; in other words, a test precisely of whether Abraham is responsible. In this particular sense Abraham is hyper-responsible, displaying an 'exaggerated form of responsibility'.<sup>68</sup> The two meet: behaving irresponsibly in not abiding by the Law, and being excessively responsible, given that no one else can step in and act instead of Abraham, and that he cannot rely on any existing ethical rule.

When responding to a call in this way and thus taking responsibility, the one who answers the call does not represent something that is there already; the responding subject cannot possibly just imitate something that has been. Rather, the response that is given forms an example for the future. The subject becomes someone to be imitated or followed rather than the one who imitates and follows. Precisely in this sense, the subject becomes a subject who acts and does something.<sup>69</sup>

This peculiar relationship between irresponsibility and responsibility is an important trait in politics, I suggest. Speaking irresponsibly about a future—a discourse born out of a vision of something that is not at hand—and speaking irresponsibly in terms of saying things *as if* they were probable, possible, real and true, imply producing reality. Thus, there is arguably an obligation to be irresponsible as an outcome of responsibility. There is an obligation to query all and every positive affirmation and law while launching images of something better.<sup>70</sup> One may conclude that this obligation is closely linked to democracy broadly conceived, in opposition to closed totalitarian societies.<sup>71</sup>

Yet the question of 'good irresponsibility' versus 'bad irresponsibility' lurks in the background. It is perhaps easy to see that a political discourse has to be—it is its responsibility to be—irresponsible, in the sense of not reporting established truth about what *is*. Its *raison d'être* is to talk about what is *not*. Still, such irresponsible talk must also be evaluated. The ques-

<sup>67</sup> DERRIDA: *La littérature au secret. Une filiation impossible*, 172.

<sup>68</sup> DERRIDA, Jacques/KEARNEY, Richard: *Deconstruction and the Other*, in: *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers. The Phenomenological Heritage*, ed. Richard Kearney. Manchester: Manchester University Press 1984, 119; cf. LYOTARD: *Au juste. Conversations avec Jean-Loup Thébaud*, 143. FILIPOVIC: *For a Future to Come*, 18.

<sup>69</sup> FRIDLUND: *Derrida, Abraham and Responsible Subjectivity*, 64–66. Cf. FILIPOVIC: *For a Future to Come*, 18.

<sup>70</sup> LYOTARD: *Au juste. Conversations avec Jean-Loup Thébaud*, 63–64. Cf. BOURDIEU, Pierre: *Champ politique, champ des sciences sociales, champ journalistique*, in: *Cahiers de recherche* (1996), 20. and *Espace social et genèse des 'classes'* and *La délégation et le fétichisme politique*.

<sup>71</sup> FILIPOVIC: *For a Future to Come*, 18. See also Feyerabend's chapter 'Science in a Free Society' in: FEYERABEND: *Science in a Free Society*, 71–122.



tion is how this can be done. Evaluating political discourses cannot be a simple or straightforward business. There is no simple facticity that can be taken as a measuring yard when evaluating performative language.

#### PRODUCING AND DOING GOOD AND BAD

Let me come back to post-truth politics, exemplified by the comportment of the Trump administration. President Trump's rhetoric is typical of any political discourse but it also brings it to its extreme. Obviously, Trump does not give a true account of states of affairs, and that does not seem to bother him or his administration. This is seen in the debate around his inauguration ceremony in January 2017, mentioned above. President Trump and his administration claimed that there had been more people than usual attending this ceremony, something that appeared to be obviously false, as people who had been there, TV coverage and photos all provided evidence to the contrary. The White House then introduced the device of 'alternative facts' claiming that there were simply divergent opinions—variegated facts—regarding the number of people in attendance. This particular manner—to state things that are evidently not true, and without being bothered by this—characterises post-truth politics.

Trump clearly does things by saying things. Different interpretations can probably be justified, but I would like to suggest that one thing that President Trump can be seen doing—what his political discourse performs—is making promises. Although not formally so and not explicitly directed at anybody, I suggest saying things like, 'I am strong', 'I will never give in to mainstream media and their attempts to destroy us' or 'Trust me, I am the master of the scene, even in the darkest moments' may be perceived as promises to the core electorate. Such promises are being made to a particular audience, about particular things in a particular context. Other people may be present—like mainstream media or people around the globe watching TV—but they are not the interlocutors at this very moment. They cannot see or hear the promises; the force of the speech act bypasses them. The promises may remain unseen, unperceived or neglected by these people, as they are not the addressed audience. They are not in the context of hearing or seeing what is performed.<sup>72</sup> They only see and hear the discrepancy between 'facts' and 'discourse', but that does not matter to the one who is *not* speaking to *them*. That does not matter to those hearing what Trump performs when speaking.

The terminology of 'promise' may be discussed. Other analyses can certainly be made. The point I want to make here is that Trump's utterances should not (primarily) be judged according to the parameter of true/false;

<sup>72</sup> Cf. RAI, Shirin M.: *Political Performance. A Framework for Analysing Democratic Politics*, in: *Political Studies* 63 (2015) 5, 10.

rather they produce something, they produce a reality—in this particular sense they are performatives—by proclaiming things *as if* they were true, according to something that is imagined. Therefore they are irresponsible, they do not report facts or alleged truths. They function simply as political discourses should function. What is particular is the provocative character of Trump's post-truth discourse. Even if one acknowledges that the very task of a political discourse is to be irresponsible in *not* simply reporting or giving an account of facts, it does not follow that everything can be acceptable or equally valid. At least some people disagree. The question—and this is perhaps the core of this text—is how to distinguish the acceptable from the unacceptable, how to evaluate and judge a political discourse, because, at some point, political discourses must be evaluated, even if the question of true/false does not apply, and lying is an inadequate category. Of course, a number of 'critical questions' may be raised: Who's talking? Who is addressed? For what reason? Who profits? Still, such questions remain *external* to the political debate, as they tend to be asked from an outsider's or observer's perspective. The question is how to argue regarding Trump's political discourse, for example. In principle! That is to say, not about individual arguments on specific points, but about in what fashion evaluative argument can be structured, if true/false does not apply.

What I suggest trying is an ethical approach. Now, many philosophers have argued that ethics and politics should be kept apart. One interesting voice here is Hannah Arendt who argues that morality is simply irresponsible, politically speaking. Contrary to commonly held ideas about morality as being about inter-personal relations, Arendt claims that its standard is the self, it is about the relationship I have with myself. A moral person is a person who does not accept living in contradiction with herself; thus, morality is not about relations with the world or the other. On the other hand, politics is precisely about governing 'the world' and about relations with others.<sup>73</sup> In Arendt's understanding, morality would then be politically relevant only in moments of crisis, not under normal political circumstances. It is only in an extreme situation, in a crisis situation, that morality has a role to play, functioning as the last line of defence. It is only when the threats become extreme—for instance, if somebody tries to subjugate all and everyone in a suffocating totalising structure by force—that morality has a role to play in politics, Arendt concludes.<sup>74</sup>

To me it seems that Arendt underestimates the character of conflicting values in 'everyday politics', thereby allowing her to distinguish moments of 'crisis' from ordinary political exchanges. A different approach would be to say that every time that everyday technical or bureaucratic labour re-

<sup>73</sup> ARENDT, Hannah: *Some Questions of Moral Philosophy*, in: *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn. New York: Schocken Books 2003, 100; 79.

<sup>74</sup> ARENDT: *Some Questions of Moral Philosophy*, 106.



quires a policy decision, there is a political struggle, there is a 'crisis'. Who is going to mobilise the force and whose view of the situation is going to have the upper hand? In this sense, 'crisis' is an inherent trait of politics. Indeed, it could be said that it is what characterises political discourse. It is precisely what defines the political field according to Bourdieu, for instance. If so, morality has political implications not only in particular times of crisis. A political discourse may then be evaluated—criticised and judged—from an ethical perspective. Morality functions perhaps as a line of defence, as Arendt suggests, but not only in extreme situations, not only as the last line of defence. This said, it is important to stress that this does not result in there being any easy solutions. Ethics here does not represent a codex to be followed.

Although Arendt's understanding of politics is questioned here (in one particular sense), she indicates one important aspect of ethics. Seeing morality as something pertaining to the relation I have to myself, an ethical approach cannot simply involve using a given matrix as a tool. In this field Lyotard is interesting—in several respects. He is categorised as a continental philosopher, and even typically as a postmodern one (although he claims to be a 'modernist' as opposed to a 'classicist' in *au juste!*). Many who blame postmodern philosophy for the horrors of post-truth politics list Lyotard as one of the front figures (see above), which makes it particularly important to read him here. Arguing that ethical evaluations cannot rely on certain rules or criteria or be regulated by categories or concepts, Lyotard is also interesting because of what he is actually saying:<sup>75</sup> imagination becomes important as a capacity to invent criteria outside or beyond established frameworks.<sup>76</sup> This has to do with Lyotard's understanding of ethical judgements as judgements that cannot be seen in terms of true or false statements about something that can be examined and investigated in order to obtain knowledge about it.<sup>77</sup> Consequently, such decisions cannot be derived from reason or controlled by knowing.<sup>78</sup> My suggestion of an ethical approach to evaluating political discourses, one not relying on true/false, thus has further ramifications. Lyotard concludes that ethics does not have any given particular content,<sup>79</sup> which implies, he argues, that the question why is unanswered and must remain so.<sup>80</sup> Lyotard finds a resource in the Jewish tradition in which God gives orders and demands to

<sup>75</sup> LYOTARD: *Au juste. Conversations avec Jean-Loup Thébaud*, 46–47; for a similar view, see DERRIDA: *Donner la mort*, 47.

<sup>76</sup> LYOTARD: *Au juste. Conversations avec Jean-Loup Thébaud*, 51–52, 171–172.

<sup>77</sup> LYOTARD: *Au juste. Conversations avec Jean-Loup Thébaud*, 65.

<sup>78</sup> LYOTARD: *Au juste. Conversations avec Jean-Loup Thébaud*, 50–51, 104–105., 57–58; see DERRIDA: *Donner la mort*, 109, for a similar view.

<sup>79</sup> LYOTARD: *Au juste. Conversations avec Jean-Loup Thébaud*, 109.

<sup>80</sup> LYOTARD: *Au juste. Conversations avec Jean-Loup Thébaud*, 112.

be obeyed, but not even God knows what is ordered, in Lyotard's reading.<sup>81</sup> Even if God knew, God could not share this with the one being commanded or ordered. What is at stake is the status of God's command. If the whole issue is perceived as a theoretical question, an issue of true and false: there would be one response that would be correct and others that would not be correct.<sup>82</sup> In that case, identification between the one and the other is presupposed, that is between the one who commands and the one who is commanded. This means that those receiving a command must place themselves in the place of those uttering the order and so re-make the theoretical discourse legitimizing the whole project.<sup>83</sup> The result would then be homogeneity or, in other words, one single subject. If so, there is no other, as other.<sup>84</sup> Therefore, to Lyotard it is important to maintain that the obligations cannot be deduced from any given ontology.<sup>85</sup> They do not follow from how things are. There is no simple test to establish the just or correct course of action.<sup>86</sup>

Certainly, this is self-evident to a large extent. It must also be said, however, that it indirectly contradicts the established view in which what should be done can be deduced from what is true.<sup>87</sup> A true theoretical description of a problem would thus be enough to indicate the decision which must be taken.<sup>88</sup> This also unmasks the way that different understandings of post-truth politics are anchored to different philosophical approaches. On the one hand there is an emphasis on truth, facts, reality and evidence. Above, I have argued that investing in 'facts' as a way to remedy post-truth practices in politics is conceptually problematic, as politics is not primarily about giving an account of what *is* but rather about *doing* or *performing*, as it were. Politics should not, in the first instance, be seen as reporting. Rather, politics is about projecting, and in this respect politics is irresponsible. It has to be irresponsible. With a mission to change or transform, politics has an obligation to project what is not, rather than reporting what is. Now, I have also suggested considering a displacement of the argument, a move to the field of ethics. It is important to see, however, that this im-

<sup>81</sup> LYOTARD: *Au juste. Conversations avec Jean-Loup Thébaud*, 117.

<sup>82</sup> LYOTARD: *Au juste. Conversations avec Jean-Loup Thébaud*, 48.

<sup>83</sup> LYOTARD: *Au juste. Conversations avec Jean-Loup Thébaud*, 63–64. See also FRIDLUND, Patrik: *Mobile Performances. Linguistic Undecidability as Possibility and Problem in the Theology of Religions*. Leuven: Peeters 2011, 133–134.

<sup>84</sup> See FRIDLUND: *Mobile Performances*, 134–137; Derrida, *Abraham and Responsible Subjectivity*. cf. DERRIDA: *Donner la mort*, 83–84, and FILIPOVIC: *For a Future to Come*, 19.

<sup>85</sup> LYOTARD: *Au juste. Conversations avec Jean-Loup Thébaud*, 129.

<sup>86</sup> LYOTARD: *Au juste. Conversations avec Jean-Loup Thébaud*, 143.

<sup>87</sup> LYOTARD: *Au juste. Conversations avec Jean-Loup Thébaud*, 59.

<sup>88</sup> LYOTARD: *Au juste. Conversations avec Jean-Loup Thébaud*, 65–66.

plies ethics without a given particular content.<sup>89</sup> This is not easy and the argument cannot be formulated lightly.

It appears that Lyotard here rejoins Derrida's reading of Genesis 22 in *La littérature au secret*. In this reading, the sacrifice Abraham is ordered to do is meaningless. It has to be without meaning. It is impossible to see the sacrifice as meaningful. Why? If there were an objective or a purpose, the sacrifice would be conditional, or in other words permitted and allowed under certain circumstances. The rightness of the act could then be evaluated. It could be an object for judgement made according to a law, a rule or a norm. Ultimately that would imply that God could be understood in the light of a shared rationality. If God gave reason and motive, if God were obliged to furnish reason and motive, God would be entirely understandable. That would ruin God's character being 'other'—the Other. Or so runs Derrida's analysis, I argue.<sup>90</sup>

Indeed, this reasoning corresponds to the thought of David Hume's character Demea simply brought to the brim and pushed all the way through. Demea's position in the dialogue with Cleanthes in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* is in favour of a non-rational or mystical approach to God. Accordingly, Demea opposes Cleanthes' rational theology and finds it indecent to peep into the essence of God. In this fashion, it is thus inappropriate trying to see God's nature. One may say that Demea's position is that God is 'other'. Therefore, human beings cannot possibly experience God's attributes in an adequate way.<sup>91</sup> Demea pursues the argument by saying that if a map of God's nature is made that implies understanding God, which in turn would imply transferring human emotions to God.<sup>92</sup>

In this fashion, it may be said that while Lyotard explicitly refers to the Jewish tradition as a resource and Derrida starts in the Biblical tradition broadly speaking, Hume's dialogues are clearly anchored to Christian thought. Nonetheless, a common thread appears to be the necessity to not let the rational overthrow the personal. The rule or the norm cannot take the place of decision and responsibility, as that would eradicate the other. In this respect, this discourse is not anti-theological and it cannot be said to be directed against God. On the contrary. In his book *Philosophy and*

<sup>89</sup> There is a paradox, Derrida points out. Insofar as decisions are simply perceived as an issue of knowledge, and if they are limited to following some rule, then they are simply the technical *mise en œuvre* of a cognitive apparatus, and hence not responsible. This said, it is of course also true, that responsible decisions cannot be made without knowing what one is doing, and without being conscious about what is decided (DERRIDA: *Donner la mort*, 43).

<sup>90</sup> FRIDLUND, Patrik: *Derrida, Abraham and Responsible Subjectivity*, in: *La revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 1 (janvier-mars 2016), 70–71.

<sup>91</sup> HUME, David: *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009 (1779), Part II.

<sup>92</sup> HUME: *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Part III.

*Theology*<sup>93</sup>, philosopher of religion John Caputo may help us see this issue in a different light. According to Caputo, René Descartes was not appreciated by the Church in spite of his ambition to prove the existence of the soul and the existence of God. The reason for the Church to be unhappy with Descartes was that he turned the order up-side-down. Philosophy takes the lead and philosophical reasoning justifies itself so to speak. Caputo points out that when Descartes states that God is his own cause (*causa sui*) instead of not having a cause (as opposed to all other things), this is not an innocent move. It is not a random choice of words, Caputo says. Descartes has to make this claim, as also God has to be understood rationally.<sup>94</sup> This illustrates what is at stake. Descartes says yes to God, but God is subjugated to rules of reason and describable in rational terms—that is to say being understood within the framework of human reason. This, I suggest, captures the weight ethics without a particular content has in Lyotard's argument. And in this very sense, Lyotard represents one side in a debate that has its roots in theology and philosophy since long.

Now, on the other hand, and this cannot be overstressed, if there is a responsible subject who makes an ethical decision, it is also inevitable that what is decided makes a difference. I maintain, informed by Derrida and Lévinas, that there is a call 'be just!'. Derrida and Lévinas formulate this in slightly different ways.<sup>95</sup> Also Lyotard refers to this strong and forceful claim to justice, to righteousness, to do good. In other words, emptiness—or rather the lack of content in ethics—must be qualified. From Lyotard's point of view, for instance, judgements cannot be absolutely undetermined. They have to be made from a horizon of some sort.<sup>96</sup> Lyotard underwrites the perspective according to which there is no knowing of the law, but that does not prevent us from trying to make the content of the law precise<sup>97</sup>—or, rather, the opposite: just because the law cannot be known, making the law and rendering it explicit is unavoidable. Furthermore, in spite of Lyotard's vision of the law as empty and impossible to see as an issue of true or false, there is a law of laws: Be just. We do not know what it is to be just—it is not merely a matter of 'conforming to this or that'; rather, one has to decide every time, make a judgement and then meditate on whether it is a just one. But the command is there: Be just!<sup>98</sup>

The emphasis on emptiness and the distancing from any specific 'ontology' as a basis of ethical judgement of political discourses may be felt as somewhat frustrating. It is tempting to seek structuring categories that can

<sup>93</sup> CAPUTO, John: *Philosophy and Theology*. Nashville: Abingdon Press 2006.

<sup>94</sup> CAPUTO, John: *Philosophy and Theology*, 25–26.

<sup>95</sup> FRIDLUND: *Derrida, Abraham and Responsible Subjectivity*, 71–72.

<sup>96</sup> LYOTARD: *Au juste. Conversations avec Jean-Loup Thébaud*, 182–184.

<sup>97</sup> LYOTARD: *Au juste. Conversations avec Jean-Loup Thébaud*, 189.

<sup>98</sup> LYOTARD: *Au juste. Conversations avec Jean-Loup Thébaud*, 118–119.



be used to evaluate and judge, something stable and something anchored to 'reality'. Yet perhaps the problem lies with the expectations. As philosopher Rosalind Hursthouse humorously remarks regarding ethical normative theories: '[...] a normative theory that any clever adolescent can apply [...] is guaranteed to be an inadequate theory'.<sup>99</sup> The thing is that we will have to keep our minds clear. Post-truth politics does not respect truth. It has been argued that in this sense it fulfils the task of a political discourse, namely, to speak of what is not as if it were, thereby being irresponsible. What is crucial, then, is how to evaluate and judge. I have suggested an ethical approach. Still, it is not an easy solution. Ethical judgements cannot simply be made according to the book. This makes them difficult, which is perhaps unavoidable. Nonetheless, I will end this paper with a glimpse of something that could be the starting point for further reflections. One possibility could be, perhaps, to identify two forms of irresponsibility, one—'responsible irresponsibility'—could be seen as being 'free' to 'say anything' in order to serve 'a free society', 'democracy' and 'human flourishing'—whatever these notions mean. The other form could be identified as 'irresponsible irresponsibility', one which is destructive in its *not* serving 'a free society', 'democracy' and 'human flourishing'. Whether that would be helpful or not remains an open question. The very point is that an affirmation—a 'yes'—is needed, reflecting value, desire, or perhaps 'truth' in a deep sense. The very point is also that in a way, this deep truth and profound affirmation cannot be but secret, unsaid and interestingly unknown.

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#### Abstract

*Post-truth politics implies dissemination of 'fake news' and claims that obviously false statements are 'alternative facts'. While postmodern theory is frequently blamed for legitimatising this, it may also be the most appropriate starting point for resistance. This essay proposes that politics generally is about campaigning for a different state of affairs using arguments stated as if they were true. This approach evokes the difficult question of how then to argue against what one believes is unacceptable. An ethical approach is suggested even though there is no simple formula to apply. The responsible subject is a key, and 'the call to justice'.*

<sup>99</sup> HURSTHOUSE, Rosalind: *Virtue Theory and Abortion*, in: *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 20 (1991) no. 3, 232.

